

Druid's Cave



Druid's Cave

a journal of the creative arts

Illinois State University 2000

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2000

Table of contents

Audrey Rosenblatt, ed.

Untitled

Words flow
streaming off the pen like amniotic fluid
giving birth to beauty.
To love the language is to feel it curl around your tongue
and slid out between your teeth.
Biting the sounds.
The patter falling upon ears like rain upon a tin roof.

Inscribe it.
Burn it into the paper, the air, the minds of those who listen.
Let letters tumble down the page like marbles rolling down the stairs.
Every word is irreplaceable, from lines to spaces absolute.
Dare to play chess with Mr. Webster tonight.

Tight and controlled
like closely counted pennies in the hand of a child.
Loose and disjointed
an extension of the confusion and cobwebs of memory.
Everything from the crisp crease down the pant leg of a Nazi soldier
To the dusty skirt of a gypsy woman.
Beauty in hieroglyphs.

You can hold it with chopsticks
Or twirl it around the tines of your fork.
You can sink your teeth into it
and the meat of it will bleed.

The puppeteer must work the strings
with soul and fingers,
mind and muses.
Pull it out of the intellect like one would coax a splinter from a finger.

Finished it becomes the shelter and sustenance of its creator.
Peelable as an orange
And solid, as the intent that created it.

Jennifer Yario, ed.

Title of Essay

Blah blah

Paul Alferink

Breakwater Waltz Dream

Crimson Balloons

hover and swirl on the parquet dance floor,
cracking and exploding into crimson mist
at intervals
undetermined.

Music:

one *two three*

two *two three* . . .

And yet, we sit here, all facing all,
everything circuitous,
myself and six women,
Silent (Pop!).

"Aren't we going to dance?"

(Pop!) I ask, sensing the ominous.

Myself and the girl with marmalade hair
and five women, phantom partnered,

twirling in circles (circles within circles) within circles.

one *two three*

two (Pop!) *two three* (underarm turn).

I can feel it against me, the telltale bulge

in her stomach (cross lead turn),

Her eyes desperate.

The partners rotate (spin turn step).

Each, now, I can feel (single twinkle)

with the new bulge discernible under crimson velvet dresses

three *two three*

four *two three* (open left box).

and their hands, tense

wait for a signal,

wait to follow my lead,

intent on me for answers (Pop!)

three (Pop!) *two four*

no, wait, three *two THREE*

Swollen feet crushed under soft shoes soles

as questions fly,
balloons (Pop!)
spin (triple twinkle?).

Jeffery J. Bergman

Farce

Every day I look around through veiled eyes
Concerned about trivial things that mean nothing to anyone but me
I see a person who's only concern is that they have a logo on their shirt
And others who bow to the almighty grade
Who is right I wonder?
The Jesus person down the hall who offers me pop if I listen to their sales
pitch about God
Or the people in the quad hitting each other with foam rubber fantasizing
about cleaving limbs from their opponents
Or are we all wrong and life is just a biochemical mishap, when 2.5 billion
years ago the right elements ended up in the same puddle and
had a party
There has to be more right?
I mean it can't be true that we are just skin, bones, blood and electrical
impulses
We have a soul and that can not be an accident, or can it
The concept of a soul was invented by people
Just as flawed as you and me, we want, we need for there to be more
But there is no proof, no mathematical formulas or universal laws to support
the idea of a soul
Just a group of smart animals who want to be better than the rest
A bunch of brand name wearing, grade whoring, Jesus loving, bloothirsty
motherfuckers trying to get through another day ignoring the
farce they call living

Jeffery J. Bergman

Bioluminescence

For all mans supposed accomplishments we still do communicate as effectively as a common bug. A beetle from the family Cantharidae never has to deal with mixed signals or chasing someone who is uninterested. Commonly known as the "lightning bug" this little insect we all caught as children on warm summer nights has it down. There are no mistaken glance or misleading smiles. No "he said, she said," just the facts. They flash to attract females; it would be like men carrying a neaon sign that said, "looking to Fuck." Simple right? I mean if you want him you walk up and go home.

So here's my proposal, we use our vast genetic research capabilities and work on making people bioluminescent. Think about it! No more wonderin gor guessing if they liked you. No one would ever have to be embarrassed or offended again. Common phrases like "are you mad" and "was it good for you" would fall by the wayside. There is no intrusive mind reading here just the ability to know someone's feelings. You could carry around a simple decoder chart, red for mad, blue for sad, maybe periwinkle for horny? Who knows but if I cant sell you on the communication aspect how about bioluminescence as a fashion statement?

Brian Budzynski

Excerpt from *100% Cotton*

Has it ever been this: Morning and you glimpse the moments to come before they arrive. There is a girl lying next to you, naked, breasts raised. Remember them begging your mouth: up-turned nipples and a faint, unplaceable smile. You are waking; the evening before still a shadowy reflection of what it must have been. You gaze around the room and do not recognize where you are. A small blue vase containing daisies; walls the color of strawberries; a chestnut night stand directly to your left—you see a green, aluminum wrapper torn in half, a clear liquid has run off it onto the wood, and a pair of silver earrings. She had taken them out.

—I don't want you to cut your lips on them, she'd said.

You'd spent the entire night in this girl whose name now escapes you. You fucked at least twice, perhaps three times. She was less experienced than the girl the night before. Constantly asking,

—Am I doing this right? Does it feel good?

What brought you here? Loneliness? Need or predation? No, no. It was none of these things—and yet all of them. As you slowly wake up, it occurs to you that you cannot recall the exact logical deduction you'd used to justify going home with this girl. You always had reasoned this out before. But apparently the mentality of your actions escaped you. It can wait, you think. Deal with it later.

Your eyes are now wide open and they dart frantically across the room for your clothes. You spy them on a raspberry plush recliner. You slip softly from the sheets and blanket and make your way over to the recliner, cautious toes on a hardwood floor. Belt-buckle rattling, keys on the floor. Must be precise in your movements or you will be having a very disquieting breakfast. You gather up your clothes, pick up the keys with the quiet palm of your hand, and exit the room in silence, into a hallway not yet brimming with life, and dress. Having left no number or any other remnant of yourself behind, you walk casually through the building to the front exit and out into the air and away. You'll forget about this girl in hours and the next one will replace her in the same diffident, momentary manner.

I'm sure that I am not the only person that can say it has been like this. I can't be. I am no different than anyone else, so by virtue of that, I am not alone in this uncomfortable and recurring circumstance. I am not called to selflessness. I do not care for any one person with whom I engage in intercourse more than another, or I, myself.

I am called to sleep with as many people as possible. What I just described was typical. I seem to keep doing that, and I'm far past blaming it on the booze or the drugs. I see it as a reaction to circumstance. I often wonder what affect, if any, I have on these myriad women. What do they think of me after I've gone? Do they expect me to be there? Are they, perhaps, glad that I've left of my own accord? What if I save them the pressure and discomfort of having to very politely tell me that it was a one-shot deal and that they 'really enjoyed' themselves, but that I need to get the fuck out? Or maybe they are all just crushed, used. Tricky word. Nothing to be taken lightly.

But what does it mean?

Amanda Beth Carlson

The Lesson

First, I plan
not my fault he's married
I like him just the same
 So darn cute with those brown puppy-dog eyes
 Build like a . . . Mmmmmmm . . .
can't live with hurting another woman like that
I'd want her to tell me
find out her name
 where she lives
 the little things
 what she likes about him
 her measurements
 her hair color
 her . . . oh, the little things drive me crazy
find out her--PHONE NUMBER--
tell him the obvious "I could give her one good reason why she should hate
you, but I won't"--or so I said
 --he never talked about her again
2 weeks pass, a month passes and still I wait
Mad, torrid, passionate sex--I know this is wrong
 But . . . Ah-ah . . . Mmmmmmm . . .
I call her
 we must meet
She sees me
I look at her
 mousy
 dull
he wanted some excitement in his life--which I *unselfishly* offered
I tell her
 dull the truth
 don't want to hurt her--Noooo!
She cries
I'm sorry, so sorry, I didn't want to hurt you, NEVER
Then, we plan--together
Let's get this lying bastard!

Hotel room
Him and me on the bed
 Oh, so good . . .
Sheets rumped
She walks in & screams (just like we practiced)
I laugh, she laughs
He knows
 horror
 he deserves this
She picks up the gun shoots--once, twice, three times
She laughs
Blood on the sheets
 Blood on the wall
 Blood on my face
Turns the gun on me
 "You thought wrong, bitch!" she spat
Ah-Ah-Ah---
JUSTICE . . . Ah, sweet justice

Joel Chmara

A Hell Pot of Honey in the Beehive State.

I was in a State
Of Depression,

Utah
To be exact,

When she
Lana Turnered
Past me.

Salt Lick City.

A sweet floral-scent
Trailed her
By two seconds.

Her skin was bronzed
And emitted heat.

Her hair was surely grifted
From a Fairy Tale Heroine,
Chemically Untainted.

F

L

O

Wing Follicles
That lassoed me in.

She caught my stare,
Gape, gawk,
And flashed a prom picture worthy smile.

It was the low
In her
"Hell-low"
that cinched it.

She placed her palm on my shoulder,
It felt like a fine Moroccan Tapestry.

Her glossy balmed lips finally
Declared through amaretto breath;

"I get sooooh...
hammered on Stone Sours.
Wanna see what I can do with a cherry stem?"

Suddenly The Harlequin Romance
I was hoping for
Tragically morphed
Through continuity challenged
Time-lapse photography
From black and white Wolfman movies
Into a Judy Blume character on uppers.

As our conversation ran its course
She was revealed as a
Heartbreaking 7-10 split of a woman
With a past that trembled
And a future that would tumult in a whirlwind
Of emotions.

Somewhere in the near distance
A Gong sounded,
And my heavily liquored bachelorette
Was disrobed from me
escorted off into the green room,
Handed a home-version of our game
And a blender.

The bartender asked me
If I wanted to play the speed round
Where drinks were doubled,
For the copious coquettes
waiting in the wings.

The barkeep was a drone
of a man with a brass knuckled nose,

wrinkles concealing regret.
The elasticity of his emotions
Worn out.

I walked gingerly out of the bar
And purchased an amulet
To ward off places
Like this.

I never returned to Utah,
I hear its called
"The Bee-Hive State."
I'll always remember it as
"The State of Emergency."

Joel Chmara

The potential of cinders

As the glow of the fireplace dulled
And the penitence of our 7 month courtship
Became quite clear,
She cocked her head
While clinging to me
Like cellophane in winter
and said,
"I love you."

My heart pattered a salsa beat
I looked into her dark green eyes
And replied,
"Olive hue.
Olive...hue.
Olivehue."

The weight of the moment
Collapsed on the two of us
An effusive exchange waited impatiently
On the pimento peppered fault-line.

Facing extinction,
I proposed...

that we
cut the strings
before it became a noose.
"No noose is good news,"
I said.
She said,
"I want to tie the knot.
For Christ sakes
neither of us know
how to make a noose,
that's good news!"

Her response became my lighter fluid.

“You don’t know
the horrible things
that cross my mind,
or the effort it takes
for me to be polite.
There are pieces missing,
synapses cut,
bridges out
and you can’t fix them.
This isn’t the game of Operation.
There’s no cure
for the common cold shoulder.
Feel these blades.
They are as sharp
as my senses are dull.”
I love you...
The way Vegas loves insomniacs.

I watched these words
flash out of my mouth
helpless
as they landed
and combined with her
hopes to form tears.

A normal person
could have
stopped
those words,
caught them
as they ascended
up the throat
and across the tongue.
A normal person
would have been
equipped with such things,
but
in the abnormal world,
innocent cheeks are bruised
tears are commonplace

doors are slammed shut
and we are left without a hand-stamp
ensuring re-entry.

As the fire in front of us smoldered
I saw seven months
Of kindling
Reduced
To indiscernible charred remains.

My words caromed off the walls
As the body next to me sat motionless
There are no words to describe
The next four minutes of silence
For the world
Once unanimously refused
To identify such pain.

Joshua Dvorak

Crackers

A full moon is a somber thing for most people, but for Ralph Jamoabo, who wore plaid pants his whole life, it was nature's representation of the way things were, the way things are, and the way things will always be. This night was like every other night in the life of Ralph. He returned home from the mortuary where he worked, which was around the block from his house, at the same hour that he always did five of the seven days a week; this day being the odd Thursday of the sixth month of the year. This may seem like a late hour for some, but twelve-midnight was the exact time Ralph would be walking into his house after getting off five minutes earlier; having walked, as stated before, around the corner to his humble abode, the place that he called home.

On this night, like all others, Ralph ascended the forty-two stairs that lead him to his second story loft; the second story of the elegantly white washed Victorian home that his parents had lived in when they were alive, but had been divided into different sections to be let, postmortem. Once arriving at his piece of his parent's legacy Ralph began the usual process that would end in his bedding himself by exactly 12:45. He placed the off maroon penny loafers that he had owned now for four and a half years, having been resoled twice, on the place mat that read "Welcome," and gently eased his feet into the comfort of the slippers that would take on the next shift of his night. He walked through the front foyer, which was lavishly garnished in Bob Ross paintings of the most uncerebral kind (usually serene scenes of solo shacks set silently along the shore of frozen solid lakes), to the one room, besides the bathroom, that constituted Ralph's living quarters. Here he sat the newspaper that he had been carrying with him the whole time gently on the one table that stood with its one chair in the middle of the room. Ralph made his way to the pantry where, of the variety of crackers he had stored; he chose one single graham cracker, as it was Thursday, which he ate on the spot. Ralph then walked to the refrigerator where he grabbed one individually wrapped Sunny Delight, of the twelve ounce variety; sat down on his one chair, which sat in front of that one table, and drank his beverage in exactly four gulps.

Ralph's loft was nothing too spectacular, and in truth, lacked the festive nature of his foyer, which he decorated for those Jehovah's Witnesses, and door-to-door salesman who might see it while making their rounds. In all, it was a dark room lit lonely by the light which hung from the ceiling

exactly four feet two inches above Ralph's head. Ralph slept on the day bed that rested on the Western wall. Its placement there contingent on the window on the eastern wall, which afforded Ralph a beautiful sunrise each and every morning. There were four walls, as there are in most rooms, each playing home to individual pictures that Ralph had taken himself. They were an odd assortment: one of an old Sunny Delight Bottle, of the twelve ounce variety, one of his penny loafers, the off maroon ones that he had now had for four and a half years, one of a random person garnishing a bible, and another of Ralph's bathroom. This picture, of all of them, was Ralph's favorite because it displayed his pride and joy, as far as his apartment was concerned. Ralph kept his bathroom in the most pristine of conditions regularly cleaning it on the odd Tuesdays, and one time for good measure, on the second Thursday of each month. Its white tile reflected any and all images that were above it. Ralph pleased himself by sometimes looking into the tile each morning, rather than the mirror, while brushing his teeth as if to congratulate himself on the cleanliness of his bathroom. There was no shower but rather an old tub which Ralph filled every morning to take his daily bath; with its eagle footed stilts it was a throwback to a time when people really, truly cared about what they bathed in.

After finishing his beverage, as was the usual circumstance, Ralph made his way to the bathroom that was thus spoke of and did the deeds that one does before they retire for the night. He returned from the bathroom clothed in the pajamas that he had left there that morning and made his way to his bed; after turning off that one light which hung exactly four feet two inches above his head. Before he laid himself down to sleep, Ralph eased off those slippers he had exchanged for his shoes earlier in the evening, as their shift was over, and said his nightly prayer. It was the prayer that many learned as a child, and though it spoke of death, Ralph knew that all was well and the next day would be much similar to the day he just had. Ralph worked himself into bed and within seconds of closing his eyes he was whisked away into that dreamland where he often found himself a Viking.

Ralph awoke with the sun exactly six hours and seven minutes after he had retired. A full night of sleep, Ralph thought to himself. He rolled himself out of bed and put on those slippers whose turn it was to once again grace his feet. He yawned aloud stretching his arms to exactly three feet below that light that was no longer needed to light up Ralph's one room home. He made his way to his immaculate bathroom where he began to draw that bath which would make up his daily bathing ritual. Closing the door behind him Ralph stripped himself of his pajamas and put them on the hook on the back of the door so that he might find them there later that night, when he would find himself again following his daily procedure. He added those bubbles and lotions to the bath, which would make this bath similar, if not

exactly the same, to every other bath that he had ever taken; easing himself in the water that always varied in temperature from 86 to 88 degrees, having been measured precisely with the thermometer he had purchased fifteen years ago. Ralph was once again in the place where he felt the safest, enjoying that which he enjoyed everyday; understanding how wonderful the repetitive nature of life really is.

Ralph had not been in the bath more than five minutes when he heard what sounded like a crash in that one room which made up the majority of his home. He also heard footsteps work their way toward Ralph, as he lay, quite startled, in his bath.

"Who is it?" Ralph said with an odd smirk.

There was a loud knock on the bathroom door and then a gruff voice said, "Who the fuck is in there?"

"Why it is me," Ralph said in a plain and clear voice so that the intruder might realize who it was, inwardly humoring himself.

"Who the fuck are you?" the voice shouted back in an even angrier voice than before.

"Why, it is me, Ralph Jamoabo, the tenant of this loft."

"I don't care who the fuck you are. Get the fuck out of my bathroom," the voice said.

"Well, this is my home, and I think you are sorely mistaken, sir, and if..."

Midway through Ralph's sentence the bathroom door seemed to fly off of its hinges with an explosion of that magnitude usually reserved for tornadoes and other natural disasters of the sort, and there in the doorway stood the embodiment of that voice which had thus accosted Ralph. The man, if he can be called that, wore nothing but black leather that seemed to have been weathered by many years of use, and, or, abuse. He looked as though he was cast in this leather form, as it was form fitting in every respect from head to toe, from armpit to that little nook in the back of one's knee. This personage was a hunk of human more than six feet eight inches tall, and probably weighing more than the Pinto that Ralph drove, when he had to. The man was foaming at the mouth and letting out monosyllabic grunts that truly frightened Ralph in the most savory way.

"Now I said, 'get the fuck out my bathroom!' pencil dick," the giant bellowed, and with that he grabbed Ralph out of the bathroom by that organ which the man had already drawn attention to, throwing Ralph against the wall with the force of a mid-seventeenth century Scottish cannon. As Ralph watched his ease himself into the bath that he had drawn with such anticipation and willingness, he reflected on how much the blood that now dripped from his nose to his mouth tasted like Saltines, reminding him, as if it need be, that it was Friday.

Michael Galassi

Glowing-go-blinking . . .

I should like to sit
 On the grass, and
Watch the show the fireflies put on for us.
 Glowing-go-blinking,
Lime- and- lemon lights like little
Lamps blinking
Sparks from a black flame.

However,
 Sifting through sultry night
with salty hands made when
 Wiping the sweat from your brown I
Reach, and
Am caught by starry eyes that dim
Starry- nights and
 Stifle fireflies.

Michael Galassi

COIN WASH: A twenty-four hour snapshot of a quarter

“So you think that money is the root of all evil? Have you ever asked what is the root of money?” -- Ayn Rand

maggie. *Cling-cling, cling-cling.* Maggie looked down at the quarters dropping into the tray of the change machine. She pulled a fist-full of cash out of the back pocket of her jeans. The jeans fit her so tightly she could hardly slip her fingers into the pocket without the cash getting crumpled in there. Fingering through the greasy wad of folded bills she searched for another single. “Shit-- justa five,” she murmured to herself glancing around the laundry mat towards the soap counter. It was about 5:30 am and no one seemed to be around except for two guys dressed in navy blue Dickie work pants and pin-striped shirtsleeves. *Nalco*, she thought to herself focusing on the embroidered patch stitched across their backs. Maggie didn't want to ask them to break her five. She wasn't stupid and neither were they. She didn't want to be hassled. She was tired and all she wanted to do was wash her little red dress and some whites she had accumulated throughout the week. Knowing she couldn't wash the two together she had to get more quarters. “Fucking dress anyway,” she said looking down at the dress draped over her forearm, hand raised clenching a five-dollar bill.

“Urgh . . .” Maggie groaned sliding the five-dollar bill into the change machine. *Cling-cling, cling-cling..* Looking down at her “jackpot” of quarters she stuffed the wad of money back in her pocket and scooped up the endless pile of quarters. She looked around the laundry mat again and saw a girl sitting behind the soap counter twirling her hair with her pencil and chewing nervously on her gum. Maggie considered whether or not to buy another box of detergent . . . *Mmm, no. I can't bring all that soap back home with me.*

Maggie threw the whites in one washer and poured some detergent on top. She dumped a few quarters in the slots and started the wash. Pulling the dress from her forearm, she poured the last of the detergent on the little stains inside her dress and began scrubbing fiercely under the sink. She did this for several minutes before throwing the dress in a washer all to itself and starting the wash cycle.

Forty-five minutes later all of her laundry was done. She finished folding her “whites” and the dress. Stuffing them into her duffel bag, she glanced at the smaller pile of quarters sitting on the counter. *Damn...* she

swiped them off the glossy counter and walked out the door.

Walking down Steele St. towards Loman's Drugstore, she grew irritated with all the quarters in her hand and decided that she could buy something to get rid of them. Inside, she looked around and decided on a small box of condoms. This'll *save me a trip later tonight* she thought. She dropped the box on the counter. There stood a tall man behind the counter with long wiry black hair who himself looked wiry with his thin white T-shirt hugging his bony body. An old red apron, that showed its age through the frayed edges, hid most of him. He took his eyes off the television to glance at the box of condoms and made no comment except, "That'll be \$2.47."

She dropped the quarters, sticky from being in her hand for five blocks, into his palm. "Keep it" she said grabbing the condoms and walking out the door once again.

* * *

autumn. "And--twenty-six cents is your change." Max had his arm extended towards Autumn pinching together a quarter and a penny.

"So when do you get off?"

"Well, usually every time you give me a hand-job. Not always though."

Autumn smiled, "You should be so lucky, Freak-boy." She grabbed his two fingers and the change they were holding and began to pull down as though she was trying to pull his fingers off.

"OK! Just kidding. In a few minutes, okay? How was work?"

"Ehh, it was all right I guess. I got some reading done." Autumn began to tear the wrapper off her Butterfinger. "I hate when these stupid things are warm and the wrapper takes all the chocolate off."

"Right..." Max said sarcastically. "Ha, just kidding! You better chill woman!"

"Yeah, yeah." Autumn was fiddling with her candy bar trying to scrape the chocolate off the wrapper with her teeth. "Hey, do you want to get something to eat or what?"

"Aren't you tired from work? What time did you get off, anyway?"

"8:00. I took a little nap after I got off so I'm good. Besides I can always take a little nap before we go out tonight."

"Geez, I don't see how you do that graveyard shit. How's the Coin Wash hold'n up these days anyhow?"

"Oh, it's there. Damn place anyway. At least I can do laundry, read and get paid at the same time. So let's eat, yeah? What time is it, anyway?" Autumn asked reaching for Max's wrist.

"4:36pm. I'm off. Let's go." Max began to untie his apron and

shouted to a man in the back of the store, "I'm punching out, Jim."

The old man called back from behind a stack of boxes, "OK, Maxi. I'll see you tomorrow."

Max stopped, "Tomorrow? But it's Sunday!"

"Right, the second Sunday of the month. Gotta stock, right?"

Max glanced at the Marlboro calendar pinned to the cork-board behind the register. His eyes scanned the calendar until he saw the words "STOCK" scribbled on the box labeled, respectively, Sunday. "Ahh. Okay, Jimmy. I mean Mr. Loman. I'll see you tomorrow, but you realize I'm missing church, right?"

Mr. Loman peeked around the tall stack of boxes exposing his bald head and near see-through white collar shirt. "Whatever, devil-boy. I'll see you tomorrow, all right?"

Max laughed, *devil-boy?* "Yeah Jimmy. I mean, Mr. Loman, tomorrow."

Max and Autumn started walking to The Blue Plate. It was a local diner they both had grown accustomed to. It was fairly slow for a Saturday afternoon but that meant quick tables. Max was tired anyway, and waiting to be seated was always an annoying ritual. He knew that Autumn had to be tired, so getting in and getting out would be a good thing. Within minutes the two found themselves sitting in a booth eating burgers and drinking coffee.

"Better?" Max said pouring sugar into his coffee.

"Yes, definitely. I don't know that I should be drinking coffee right now . . . I still could use a few more hours of sleep before we go out tonight.

"Yeah me too since I HAVE to work tomorrow now."

"Yeah, that sucks," Autumn said watching Max still pouring sugar in his coffee. "Hey Max, would you like some coffee with your sugar or what?"

Max continued to pour sugar into his coffee without looking up, "Shut-up, woman. It just so happens my blood sugar level is low, and this coffee is exceedingly bitter. So I add sugar."

Autumn began to laugh, "Sugar-level, whatever! And what's with all this woman shit today?"

Max began to laugh too, "I don't know. They had an *All in the Family* marathon on TV today. I had to watch something while I'm at work, right?"

"So what's your point?"

"Nothing, I just realized what a hip guy Archie Bunker was, that's all."

"Urgh, Max I swear you are the biggest goof-ball" she said shaking

her head but still smiling. "Anyway, these burgers are pretty good, huh?"

"Yeah, not bad... You noticed they jacked up the price though, right?"

"What?" Autumn said pulling the sticky plastic-coated menu from the under the napkin dispenser. "Oh yeah, thirty cents. Big deal."

"Thirty cents . . . Big deal," Max said mimicking Autumn. "That takes it over three dollars now. \$3.15 to be exact."

"And-you're paying. So like I said, big deal." Autumn started laughing again.

"Yeah, it's all fun and games until it's your turn to buy lunch." Max started to look around the diner for the waitress. "I need more coffee."

Autumn looked up and wiped her nose with the sleeve of her hooded sweatshirt, "I thought you didn't want coffee."

Max was still looking for their waitress, "I know but I have to compensate for the thirty-cents so that means another cup of coffee."

"Oh my God! Let's go, you are seriously retarded. It's time to leave," she said grabbing her burlap purse slipping a dollar bill under her coffee mug.

Max looked at the tip, "That's it?"

Autumn couldn't help but laugh in frustration, "Damn. So you're generous now, huh?"

She reached in her pockets and emptied the twenty-six cents she got for change at the store.

"Twenty-six cents? That woman has children to feed and all you leave her is a dollar twenty-six for a tip?" Max said trying to be serious but failing.

"Dude, shut-up."

"But,"

"Shut-it! Just shut-up and let's go." Autumn reached for Max's arm and pinched his side with her other hand.

* * *

Waitress #47. The waitress picked up the tip left on her last table of the night and slipped it into her apron pocket.

"Hey Marty, I'm gonna buss this last table I forgot, and I'm taking off."

Marty was dressed in a white T-shirt and pants that seemed to have turned to a sort of yellow brown from all the grease accumulated flipping eggs and burgers all day.

"What time you off?"

The waitress looked up with her hands full of coffee mugs and plates, "Two hours ago. Julie never showed up, so I stayed on."

Marty took his paper hat off and began scratching his head. He

looked at the clock on the wall and asked, "You was supposed to be off at five?"

"Yeah, then we got the dinner rush, and I forgot to buss this table, sorry."

"Hey, that's all right. Go ahead and take off."

"Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow, OK?"

"Yeah, tomorrow."

She set the cups and plates back on the table and grabbed her sweater from the coat rack. She had been on since the breakfast shift and was supposed to be back with dinner for her husband.

Oh, I still have to get groceries, too. She walked out the door and started making her way to the Kroger down the block. *What should I make?* She thought to herself fiddling the tips around in her apron pocket. She felt all the folded bills in her hand and thought how thick it was for such a slow day.

Crossing the street, she saw a homeless man sitting against a brick wall. He had a dirty green coat that looked like it was from the army. He just sat there "Indian-style" rocking back and forth. His stocking cap was filthy and napped up with fuzz that resembled his little Afro that was bulging out on the sides. She just stared at him as she stepped onto the curb. "Spar' anything?" he said still rocking back and forth.

She thought about how all the bills folded up in her hand felt and decided she should give something. She knew it wouldn't do much good. She had walked by him so many times in the past and never once gave him any money.

"Sure, here." She pulled all the loose change she could fit in her hand out of the apron and dropped it into his cupped hands.

"Oh bless ya ma'am. You's a good woman, you know that? Yessir' you's a good woman all right. God bless ya, God bless ya!"

* * *

spar' anything. The bum pulled the few crumpled dollars he had out of his pocket and began to add up the coins that the woman gave him.

"Oh shit yessir'ee." *Damn near eight dollars.* The bum began to laugh in excitement and raised himself from the pavement. Still holding the coins in his hands, he began to shake them like a pair of die. Not wanting anyone to know he had money, he quickly put the money back into his pocket. He looked around and didn't see anyone coming, so he started walking towards the liquor store. It was about a twenty-minute walk, but the thought of the Peppermint Schnapps running down his throat made his old legs feel young.

As he was walking to the store he saw the people he passed by looking at him and whispering as they passed as they always have. It

frustrated him, but it wasn't something he hadn't come to know. He knew just a few more minutes it would be over; the anger would go away with the Schnapps. Just another block and he'd be on Steele Street. His stomach began to turn with excitement so he pulled the last half of the Newport he saved from earlier in the evening. He lit it with his Zippo lighter. It was his one "real" possession, a gift from an old buddy in the Army.

The bum stopped at the front door of the liquor store to pull his money out. He knew that if he walked in and didn't have money in his hands he would be running into trouble. Walking through the door he looked at the cashier smoking a cigarette. He had a red flannel on with his sleeves rolled to his elbows. It was the same cashier the bum bought Schnapps from every time he was able to pull a few bucks together.

"Back again, eh?" He said leaning on the counter. "So whatcha need?"

The bum looked at the liquor stacked on the shelf behind the counter. "Gimme some of dat' Peppermint Schnapps."

"Small or tall," the cashier said turning his head towards the bottles of Schnapps lined up on the shelf behind him.

"Small, I only got about eight dollars."

"Well it'll be \$6.28," the cashier said ringing it up on the cash register. He reached for a small paper bag when he noticed the bum dropping all of his change on the counter. "What's all this? Don't you have any paper money?"

The bum threw down a couple of dollars on the pile of change. "It's all there, you can count it. I know you want to."

"Want to me arse!" The cashier yelled back in a fit of surprise.

"All you people are the same. My ass was in Vietnam and now looks at how ya'll treat me. We thought we had it bad back then, but now lookit. Ya'll always talk'n shit behind our back callin' me nigger-this and drunk-that. Ya'll weren't say'n shit when I was in Cambodia shooting gooks for The Man. You ain't got nothin' to say . . . to me or any of the other vets working the streets."

The bum snatched the bottle off the counter and started walking towards the door glancing back only for a moment.

* * *

frankie. "Fecking bums anyway..." He mumbled to himself. Frankie was fortythree and Irish. He moved to the United States when he was a teenager. For the past fifteen years he had been running the Liquor Store. He generally had a good relationship with all his customers but often got fed up with all the deadbeats that wandered in time to time.

"Smelly arse bums, and then they bring all their stinkin' change with them." Frankie started sorting all the change and tossed them in their

respective bins within the cash register.

* * *

tom. "Oy, Tom I thought you put the bottle down?" Frankie said handing him his change. He could smell the whiskey on his breath already. Normally he wouldn't have sold Tom the bottle, but he didn't look like he was in bad shape or anything.

Tom grabbed the change and put it in his pocket. "Yeah, I've been having some tough times lately." Tom picked up the bottle of Black Label wrapped in a paper bag and began to tap it with his thumb.

"Oh yeah? What's been goin' on?"

"Ah, it's just a little bit everything, I guess."

"Anythin' you want to talk about?"

"No . . . Thanks though Frankie. I just need to get going that's all."

Tom nodded and smiled, then left. On the way home, he couldn't help but think about how Frankie was right. He *did* put the bottle down. He was almost six years sober, and now he finds himself half drunk and buying another bottle of Black Label at eightthirty in the evening. He just kept thinking, *they're making me. They aren't home, are they? No, no they aren't.* Realizing that no one would be home when he got back from the store pressed on his mind. He grew in frustration.

It was about nine o'clock when Tom finally got to his small three-bedroom apartment. The apartment was in a seven-story building bordering the older downtown area. When he walked into the apartment building the hallways had a smell of cardboard and old leather. The scent was light and it created a sense of familiarity for Tom every time he walked in. The apartment was very drab inside with old brown carpeting. Wallpaper was peeling at the comers of the walls and the tiny green flowers had long since faded. There were newspapers and magazines scattered all over the coffee table and next to the La- Z- Boy chair.

Tom pulled the bottle out of the bag and refilled his glass. He flicked on the television trying to keep his mind busy. He sat, drank, and stared at the television. Once his glass went empty he would pour another glass. And when that glass went empty he would pour another. He carried on this ritual for several hours until he gradually passed out.

Tom lay unconscious for several hours until he was waken up by the door shutting. Tom's stepdaughter walked in and saw Tom passed out on the chair. She looked around the apartment and saw the television was still on but the screen was filled with fuzz and static. She looked at the nearly empty bottle sitting on the table. Her heart sank and she remembered how familiar that scene was five or six years ago. *Every time mom and Tom got into a fight it was because he was drunk.* She would lay down on the floor

by the door and watch her parents' feet shuffle around listening to them fight. She would stay up and watch their feet until Tom left or passed out so she would know he wouldn't come into her room as he used whenever her mom was gone for the night.

Tom was drunk hanging over the arm of the chair mumbling to the floor.

"Who's there . . . Maggie?" Tom's speech was heavily slurred and she was hardly able to make out what he was saying.

"What?" she asked back wishing she would have never came home.

"Where've you been dressed like a little whore? D'ya know what time it is? Damn't anyway." Tom started to pull himself up from the chair. His shirt was hanging out of his pants and his belt was undone. "Wherr-the-fucks yer' mother?"

"I d-don't know." She began to tremble slightly and considered running out the door.

"Yeah! Well, I don't either." Tom started walking towards her. "What the hell you doin' wearing that dress with yer' ass hanging out, dressed like a little . . . slut . . ."

She tried to pull the door open but he slammed it shut with his hand looking down at her breast showing through the dress. "Yup, you's a slut . . . just like your damn mother."

The smell of liquor surrounded her and her eyes started to sting. Her eyes were filling with tears and her mind couldn't shake the memory of him breathing on her and the weight of his body crushing her.

"Please . . ." she was crying now. "Please, no." She tried to run out from under his arm but he lowered it and pinned her against the door.

"Where the hell d'ya think yer' going?" He was squeezing her arms.

"Please, please . . . don't . . . Not again . . ." she was sobbing hysterically now shaking her head left to right trying to fight the smell of alcohol and him pinning her against the door.

"Shut-up, God damn you!" Tom smacked her across the face so hard he cut her lip with his wring. Blood flew across the wall and dripped down his fingers. She fell to the floor. Her eyes were wide open but she stopped crying. She just lay there with blood dripping from her mouth. Tom pulled her dress off over her head and started wiping up the blood. She just lay there limp in her strapless bra and mismatching panties.

After Tom finished wiping the blood he threw the dress on the kitchen floor and walked over to her. He picked her arms up and dragged the girl to her bedroom. Once he got there, he threw her on the bed. He came out to the kitchen one more time to lock the door. He walked over

to his chair and before sitting down, emptied his pockets looking for his handkerchief. Change fell all over the floor and his keys as well. He pulled off his wedding band and wiped the blood from it. He poured the last of his drink into his glass and took a big swig.

Tom looked back at the girl's bedroom a few times, finished his drink, and then proceeded back. He closed the bedroom door behind him and remained there for several hours before walking to his own bedroom and passing out on the bed. Sometime around five o'clock in the morning, Tom's wife came home. She unlocked the door with her key, and trying not to wake anyone up, she slowly closed it behind her. Once inside she saw drops of blood. Scanning the apartment with her eyes she noticed the television left on with nothing but static, the empty bottle on the coffee table and the short red dress she just washed the day before laying on the floor. Maggie shook her head and began to cry.

Josh Gulick

Slick Stick's Love Ghazal

Her lipstick comes off in streaks of red stickiness. He strokes her hair and remembers red eyes in pictures, reaches for his camera.

Lightning always makes him want to be God. Standing naked in front of the window, he watches the sky tear and plays with metaphors.

Lightning always makes him think of cat scratches. She has zigs and zags under her palms from a previous relationship. He wants to break up.

Ones and zeros on his computer screen don't make sense, but they have to by class tomorrow at ten. When she pulls off his pants, the seat is cold.

Homework has become a problem. It weights him down, like a bookbag
full of
concrete. It gives him no time for grocery shopping, so he breaks tonight's
date.

Philip Harms

**A Tragedy
(in five acts)**

I. Introduction

A bloated pink womb
bears a single parent's child
to a cold, grey earth.

II. Rising Action

Broken toys cover
the hard cold floor he slept on.
Mom serves hate for lunch.

III. Climax?

Hollowed out by pain.
Trudging through the muck of life.
he sank down too deep.

IV. Falling Action

Fifteenth floor swan dive.
His gruesome suicide case
breaks through the windshield.

V. Resolution

An empty graveyard.
A cracked tombstone with no name.
No one cries for him.

Philip Harms

Cancer

A bright red strobe light. The loud alarm refuses to slience. Screams of panic in suffocated compartments. Droplets of fear bead upon their brows. The sick stink of their own deaths plays upon what air remains. Hope rots away, their made noise buckles against the inevitable silence.

A soft white light. Machines with bouncy beeps play in harmony. Soft feathers hug my head. A cool breeze trips across my salt-crusted skin. The yellow flowers smell beautiful.

The submarine spirals down, toward the end. As it sings, the men inside plead for life. Trapped, they close hatches in vain attempts to lock the water out. With each lock, they condemn friends to gasp away into death. The lost struggle to breath air, they soon struggle to breath water.

The disease reaches my lungs, the air supply dissolves. My organs slam closed in desperate efforts to preserve the body. Life abandons all but the bare essentials. Blood floods the main compartments, I can't feel my arms. My brain cuts the power, piece after piece, each more important than the last. The final switch flipped, the lights to oug. I can't see.

One room left, and the water doesn't stop. Air gone, life gone. Everone on the ship dies.

I can't get off the ship.

Philip Harms

Used Up

I hate this place,
being stuck here all the time.
I was ready to start living, but the kids decided my time was up. They
turned my world upside down and stuck me here.

As Stiffness sets in on my once young and supple body,
I still have my memories. I remember . . .
. . . I grew up in the sticks, my peers and I, all pushed through the system,
we came out as mirror images of each other.
. . . my first day of work, my new suit. Being all packaged up, nice and
tight.
I was lucky, some guys get chewed up and spat out like nothing. Others
spend most of their career on the bubble.
I spent my time going through the grind.
Like most, my life ended too soon.

Forgotten by the world, we sit, avoided by everyone but the orderlies.
People don't want to look at us, much less touch us.
The orderlies come through on their cleaning runs. Scrape up the
remains of my friends and neighbors, and haul them away.

New guys come in, still with plenty of life in their bodies, and sweetness in
their hearts, but the children determined they are of no more use.
So under the table they go. How sad.

I just wish there were some way they could experience this. To get
gnawed on by "the man," and thrown away without a thank you. If
only people could experience, being a used up piece of gum.

Jedediah S. Karban

Fright and Flight

As I sink further in Hell,
down many levels
and several pages,

I realize that not one word
rings more hallow than my own thoughts.

I have sought truth,
and it has brought me unsubtle answers
of thickened clouds.

Such that in my discourse
I sought comfort in an angel's hand.

Which fell softly from my forehead
as I noticed the clouds break
and her fly away.

Jedediah S. Karban

Lonely Daisy-10/26/99

I a Daisy
in the sun,
my leaves reaching
to the pyramids of time
where they are
transformed,
realigned with
the earth
stretching
to
the
eye
of
the
world
to watch love sailing away.

Jennifer Katehos

Autumn Boy

I see he's just a shell now,
shrouded in a green hooded sweatshirt,
sitting alone at the stone benches curved into half moons under the turning
Maples.

He is perched at the edge of his world,
back straight,
hands placed on the knees of his brown corduroy pants,
intensely watching leaves falling
with frighteningly serene black hole eyes.
Sorrow on the wind seems to have gotten caught
in his scruffy, college philanthropist beard,
because he can't even appreciate Autumn anymore.
Tepid rain has stopped making him smile,
and the usually soothing thought of approaching Winter
and her inevitable heavy coats and fleecy sweaters
fails to make him glow.

The green hood falls softly around his golden face,
and with a terrifying calmness
he hums melancholy songs to himself,
all the while letting his mind dwell on The Girl.
I don't know her name,
but I know she must be magnificent,
because it's clear she has control of him,
makes him numb because he can't have her
any more than one can hold water in clammy hands.
Still, he aches for her as he stares blankly into the sinking orange horizon,
sitting in his mind,
letting shadows spread over him
and leaves bury him at his post.

Matthew Kerwin

museum of art DIRECTIONS

electric nothing words
post modern red body paradox

RED paint
shaved
shavings
distopia weather distortion
a flat—dry
yearning strawberry tongue
biting her island of nails
I want to be her prince
not the prime mover

red paint . . . fantasy lecture
GO green
Refusing SUNDAYS malign WINE
TALES of waiting
thoughts are not a STONE structure

a boy—billfold closes momentum
a playboy—billfold opens easy street
I FOLD HINDISIGHT and no bills fold

democracy tears . . . TEARS
FREE food for an empty psyche
FAITH is strumming under an
acoustic HARVEST MOON

jasmine, jazzmen, green blossoms
blue bag trashed

THEY are in line to EAT order

Matthew Kerwin

NO CALLOUS

my digits have no callouses
BLEEDING
empty water bottle
jean pocket stores the last
lavender of summer #99
weeds are an illusion
soon their desultory stay will meet
a methodical ruin

she wants to become airborne
only i have the parachute
TRUST THE B SIDE

RUSHING away on a one way street

Time vanish
time VANISHED
in the mirror pink
eclipses yellow

afraid of drowning in the OCEAN
I vanquish by diving in the cold
RED replaces the observer

to break the compass is to exit
from pathos

near your home awoke a LOCUST
from over a decade of sleep
though
i was a child
TONIGHT
the summer of the locust sleeps
dreaming with wide eyes 6:06 a.m.

Zach Kuhn

Dream Six (My Night at the Oscars)

Times, long since past, through hour
glass now spent, when hearing a song
or a sound serenaded (segregated)
meant flutters near butterfly kisses.
Lost (meaning suddenly off the well
worn path) lately in Man, in finding
a mirror filled with the feelings you
should bring, that your voice should do.

Her smell, the wetness of her practice.

The neatness of opening car doors
after ninety minutes of long beams
reflecting on canvas. Watching you,
watching you. Twice my size in sound
and sight, kissing my cheeks,
leaving remnants of lips long
after your face has disappeared.

I would trade everything to simply
touch your reflection, hear the echoes
of your voice against these walls.

You act as if the stars don't effect
you, surrounded as you are.

Zach Kuhn

Merelix Falling

Your handwriting.
When pressured I love and
miss most the way your pen owns
the paper, how you make letters
take control of misunderstood words.
I can still taste your lips.
When you fall I reach out my arms
to catch you, an involuntary reflex
brought on by these simple
photographs: restrained and
well-intentioned.

I can see you through window pane,
all shadowy and heavenly peace
encompassed in jealous stares,
resolved to isolation. Somehow
oblivious to the effort I put forth in
securing your attention, to the fact
that language has lost its meaning
since you have captured my voice:
I cannot breathe in this place.

I can see you in my bed, hair
sleep-caressed and not quite blonde,
covered in blanket yet still naked,
clavicle and narrow shoulder angling
out against dust-charged morning
light, wind circulating the sound of
drawn breath, telling more about air
than I could ever express.

I can see you leaving, in a caravan
of temperamental cars, all heading
in the same direction yet seemingly
out of sync, you in the first car, chased,
as in death you were even more

influential, even more essential
to my survival.

I can see you and yet cannot help
feeling there is something
that has been withheld, familiar space
not to contain gain, drawing me in.

I'm dying for the rain, I long for
a good read, pages and pages
of fingerprints in penmanship.

Zach Kuhn

Requiem Five South

She drinks tea because she thinks she's
complicated: the Portland wind leaves
traces of rain long after the sun shows
Itself. Along Interstates I sing long-
lost love lullabies to memories of girls
whose names escape even the sharpest
of sentiments. She lets me put the
top down through Embarcadero and I can
feel the sea in my skin when we
arrive, on time, surrounded in waves
of Old Motown Soul-punctuality meaning
the loss of each others company.
"I've been here before" through her
forthcoming tears.

So have I.

I've never known when to allow
myself to fall; so many times
I've heard her voice in midnight
prayers that when I first heard it
in life I shuddered, afraid to meet
the physical form of the sound of
my longing heart. Putting a face
to this feeling makes it all seem
real, the sock-piled resilience of
This heart cannot fight off the
vision which is she, lighting cigarettes
against the desert sun, sleeping
silent on vinyl pillows
through hours of California coast.

This is all so new to me.

This feeling of departure, of losing
someone who (in such short time)

has built a temple inside of this chest;
has made life seem to reverse itself,
made promises long and drawn out in
reserved whispers which barely survive
her lips to disappear in cloudless sky.
As if even the slightest portion of her
would help fill up the already forming void.

Robert Lewis

I saw

An old man sweeping a street,
Wide across and endless in length,
Side to side moving forward, a few feet at most
As if dancing a grinding waltz,
A staff of wood feathered with straw his partner
Swaying in time to silent music,
No expressions smile of frown escaping his weathered visage,
Eyes and head downcast to the task below,
The endless road before him he moved from one side of the street to the
 other and back again,
Taking no breaks to pause his feet shuffle forward with minds all their
 own,
Arm and muscles pushing wood pushing straw pushing dirt,
To the side,
Bent back in resignation,
This is his life

I watched this old man with the bent back sinewy arms and legs dressed
 in rags weeping to keep the street clean, never looking back
 to notice all the people making a mess of the once clean street.

I walked on.

Christian B. Long

An Impersonal Room Full of Naked Bodies

A recent Friday brought a letter from my friend Frank. Enclosed was an article from the entertainment section of the Sunday paper, "Porn stars get wider exposure" with a note pensiled in under the accompanying photo. Frank found a good deal of humor in the caption which identified the woman in the photo as "former adult film star Traci Lords." "Never forget the former part," he joked. Ignoring the final notice on my phone bill, I gave Frank a call. We argued through the night about the infiltration of the adult entertainment industry into the mainstream.

If not the mainstream, I offered, at least some sort of grudging acknowledgment. Let's face it, images from old cop shows and detective movies are ingrained in our minds: old men in trench coats, beat-up cars cruising past peepshows, hookers asking passerby, "Lookin' for a date, honey?" Frank shot back with the argument that movies like The People vs. Larry Flynt or Boogie Nights (he dared not go as far back as Star 80) could not be made unless there was at least some acceptance and tolerance of pornography. I reminded Frank of the retribution laid on the characters in his examples. Larry Flynt is the victim of an assassination attempt, Buck Swope can't get a loan for a legit business because of his past, Little Bill ends up killing his wife, her lover, and finally himself. The only way to make the characters palatable, even a real life figure like Flynt, is to accentuate the suffering. The most likely cause for the suffering would be involvement in porn. Porn might be a growth industry, but murder scene cleaners and biohazard disposal companies get invited to career day once in a while, never the triple-x performers.

The next morning I went to the Bloomington, Illinois Barnes and Noble to read magazines for a few hours. Major chains like Barnes and Noble carry soft-core like *Playboy* (sometimes *Penthouse*), and I was curious about how patrons behaved around that particular section of the newsstand. I pulled a copy of *Maxim* off the rack to skim while I waited for something interesting to happen. After five minutes, I realized *Playboy* and *Penthouse* come shrink-wrapped for general interest outlets. Wrapping a magazine in plastic is meant to discourage browsing and encourage buying.

I was about to call it a day when two teenage boys with backward University of South Carolina hats and ridiculously baggy jeans paused in front of the *Playboys*. The taller of the two reached up, grabbed a *Playboy*, looked left right left, then gently made an incision with a Boy Scout pocket

knife. The shorter one strained to look over his friend's shoulder. After flipping past the articles, the boys arrived at the pictorials. They couldn't help but voice their extreme appreciation for one particular photo, which rankled one of the male patrons nearby. He left and was replaced, in a matter of moments, by a store employee who politely but firmly asked the boys to leave.

Later that night, I called Frank and told him about the two teenage male perps. I voiced my dismay over their dismissal, people are always sneaking peeks at the plastic wrapped magazines like *CMG* or *Modern Drummer*. "Nonsense," Frank snorted, "was anyone drinkin booze in the cafe section of the store?" I had hardly said no when Frank yelled, "There was no one drinkin beer in the cafe because it's against the law, just like the underage kids you saw were breaking the law!" But it was another guy who had ratted them out, a guy who had looked through the rack for an opened-plastic-sleeve himself. Frank let out a theatrical sigh and said, "He just didn't want the kids to ruin it for him. If customers complain, then there's no *Playboy* at Barnes and Noble. That means one more stop when he's out running errands -- he'd have to go to an adult bookstore." As I absent-mindedly hung up, I realized the man at the store didn't want to go to the adult bookstore, so he squealed on the kids. I wanted to know what the deal was with the adult bookstore.

Tuesday at three in the afternoon I wandered over to the adult bookstore, hoping to hang out in the parking lot and soak up some of the building's aura. I changed plans once I saw the sign prohibiting loitering -- a vestige of the old theory that prostitution runs rampant outside of adult bookstores. Judging by the drawn-in arms and slouchy postures of their double-time departures, human contact is the farthest thing from some minds. Others have sufficient companionship for the night, be it an accompanying human friend, a pictorial, or something else from the store's shelves. Their calm, almost leisurely walks through the parking lot, as well as the head down half-sprints of the uncomfortable, do quite a bit to prove working girls would have a great deal of down time. I was able to accomplish, in my short stay in the parking lot, a search of the dumpster -- you can tell a lot about a person or place by their garbage. The dumpster held what looked like a metric ton of cigarette butts mixed with various fast food bags and wrappers. A few plastic bags and disassembled cardboard boxes rested at the bin's bottom. The adult bookstore does not recycle.

As I climbed the three concrete steps to enter the store, I realized that building was not handicapped accessible. Outraged, I walked the perimeter of the building. I found a ramp leading to a door at street level. A permanently locked door. Most adult bookstores don't have windows. And this Midwest college town example was no exception; a squat rectangle

of brick set off by pastel interior latex painted wood sections where the windows should have been. I walked back to the front door and paused for breath. Like many patrons entering the store, I pulled hard and the door swung open too quickly, knocking me off balance. I tried to play it cool, but not a lost soul was watching as the sun shone in on the only potential witness, a clerk who looked up with zero interest and said, his head already falling back down, "Dollar to browse." I reached in my pocket, pulled out a dollar, and placed it on the counter in front of him. The clerk simultaneously opened the drawer and said, through the filter of a Dean Koontz book, "Counts toward anything you buy." My first transaction, like every other I would see at the store, was performed in the same manner as a Las Vegas bet: money on the table, never hand to hand.

It was not the crowd I had expected. A couple in their mid-twenties stood together in front of the video selections. The lady, the taller of the two, was in jeans and a gray sweatshirt, her Columbia ski jacket still halfway zipped. Her mail friend appeared to be using her as a human shield. Each time she stepped forward to grab a box, he stepped forward as well, obscuring him from my view. The couple kept their backs almost completely turned to the other patrons. A man in a dark gray suit set off by a pair of Nikes, his hairline obviously receding, perused the videos as well, yet still yielded the couple ATM-line space. A blond young lady in a leather police jacket was paging through one of the bondage fetish magazines on my right, pausing occasionally to push her hair behind her ears. In the far right corner was the most curious of the bunch, someone I couldn't help but to see; a man so obviously trying to hide that it drew attention. I headed toward the Hiding Man, passing the young blonde en route, hands instinctively in my pockets. There are three positions hands assume in the store. The accompanied fellow across the store was in Position One, as was the young lady nearest me: manipulating stock. Position Two I acted out: shoved in pockets, usually pants pockets, although jacket pockets are not uncommon. Mr. Position One's lady friend was in Position Three: arms akimbo, hands underneath biceps. The casual observer may note an occasional itch or hat pull-down, but for the most part are in only one of the Three positions.

The man who wanted so badly to hide was running through the positions in succession, cycling through what seemed to be twenty reps. First he'd look at the magazine, then put the reading material under his arm -- like a businessman about to catch a train -- then moved his hands pocket-ward. He checked each pocket as if he were victim to invisible pickpockets every time he looked at naked bodies. I was hypnotized by this man's inhuman discomfort, yet from the back he looked like many other middle-aged man; germ of a bald spot in becoming-more-salt-than-pepper

hair, jeans, leather jacket and worn out hiking boots alternating the job of holding up what seemed to be one hundred seventy-five pounds of matter held in by supremely uncomfortable skin. He must have felt my stare on his back after a minute or two, he abruptly turned and left empty handed.

I picked up my cover (a copy of *Barely Legal* in front of my face -- James Bond style -- to more easily observe the room) and moments later four college-age girls burst through the door, all volume and energy. I had a feeling they'd never been in a store like this before. They were loud, they giggled, and they *touched* each other, someone was going to have to tell them the rules. The (for what it's worth) authority figure/clerk had noted their browser-fee-free gender and went back to his book; he would be no help. After a moment's eavesdropping, I learned the girls were on a mission; they needed a gag gift for a sorority sister's birthday. They gave cursory glances to the video section, breezed past the magazines, then froze in front of the "Marital Aids" section. They debated the merits of pink versus glow in the dark, I sensed they were close to making a purchase. In a stroke of incredible luck, the couple from across the store moved toward the register, merchandise in hand, laughing just a bit (was it at the breach of decorum by the girls?). The man placed a video box on the counter and the woman put down a slightly larger box, one with black and white schematic drawings on one side. Since I wanted to see post-buy behavior in the open air, I left. I had only been inside five minutes at most, yet I felt like I had just emerged from an afternoon movie, surprised to see the sun.

In the parking lot, I noticed the four parked vehicles were all newer models with personalized plates and no rust or garbage accumulation in the cabin. It was no shoddy collection either, a red Camaro, a blue Audi, a black Buick, and a brand new screaming yellow VW Bug. The couple walked arm-in arm to the Camaro. What struck me was not only how casually they walked -- not a hint of guilt or shame -- but how excitedly the lady began ripping open their purchases as soon as she sat down in the car. Before she had even put on her seat-belt she was smiling like it was Christmas and she had just gotten her number one wish from Santa, right there at the adult bookstore. She kept the recently purchased toy below window level, and before I could sneak close enough to identify it, they pulled out of the lot.

Not long after, the four girls exited -- still quite animated, laughing up a storm -- only now in pairs. Each pair had a package in an opaque black bag. They shuffled their feet as they waited for traffic to clear, then crossed the street half-skipping half-running. They weren't the tiniest bit ill at ease; a gag gift must have absolved them of any real reflection or guilt. Half a block away from the store, one reached into her bag and pulled out a magazine and burst into laughter before she even opened it.

Amazing. I had come looking for and expecting debauchery and had only seen . . . What had I seen? I was beginning to think I had fallen into some kind of wormhole and was stuck in some parallel univers where porn is not so nasty. I had expected to see more nervous guys hiding in corners, breaking heavily through their compulsions. But that one guy was the exception among the others. The others were people I had seen at McDonalds in the last few months. Where were the sex fiends? Where were the people my mother had warned me about? Seemingly on cue, a late seventies Ford pickup, maroon with healthy patches of oxidation, bottomed out as it turned into the lot and screech-braked to a halt. A man of about fifty in faded blue jeans, a Nebraska sweater, and baseball hat pulled himself out by the door frame and walked with a great sense of purpose to the entrance. He had a limp and a bad back by the looks of his gait. He reappeared a minute later, black bag in hand. Back at the vehicle, he flung the door open, gave a quick look at the bag in his hand, then flipped it to the passenger side. Before he got into the truck, he took a deep breath, spun at the waist to crack his back, stretched his arms overhead, and then in one motion ducked back into the truck and put the key into the ignition.

I turned for home as he tried two, three times to get the old thing started, and was well down the street before he blew by me, the voices of talk-radio leaking out his cracked indow. Disappointed by the decorum and normalcy of the day's visit, I planned a weekend trip, one in which I would stay longer. Maybe it was just a one-time thing, this calm specialty boutique aire the store had.

I returned to the store after a few day's rest, and in contrast to the queer sampling I had witnessed earlier in the week, things had turned into my estimation of "normal" with the arrival of the weekend crowd. Only one woman was in the store, accompanied by a man, who, like her, was probably in his early thirties. She wore a fringe leather jacket and black leather boots. The man wore a Carhartt work jacket over a faded Megadeth t-shirt and acid-washed jeans. The two spoke the only mumbled words heard in the entire store as they debated the merits of the all-girl marathon versus the classic works of John Holmes and Seka. The rest of the store, seven men ranging from eighteen to what looked like mid to late fifties, milled about in near silence.

The store was well-lit, if well-lit means you can see a video box or magazine from arm's length without more than a little glare. There didn't seem to be a method to the organization of the video section. Boxes were simply staked spine out on wire rack hangers, from floor level to about six feet high, along one wall. There was a display island, opposite the video racked wall, taking up about as much space as the three pump array of a filling station. On the island were various previously viewed videos for

purchase and what would most likely called manager's specials at other stores: sexual knickknacks. Magazines get re-shelved through the course of the day, willy nilly by browsing customers who don't want to get too close to the guy in front of the original location of any mag that doesn't make the cut. The courtesy patrons extend to each other in non-violation of personal space does not generalize to the store's periodicals classification system; on the Tuesday night of their arrival, magazines are grouped according to predilection, just like at Barnes and Noble.

The Friday night I visited, the store had a distinct smell of stale nervous sweat mixed with beer breath topped off by the slightest hint of tobacco and pot smoke. The beer smell grew stronger due to the compulsion of many to cough to non-verbally break the eerie silence. I fought off the odor with the help of a cough drop. Most stores give you a headache with their piped-in music, antiseptic odor, and harsh fluorescent lighting. The adult bookstore gives you a headache by marinating you in human desperation, especially at a time like Friday midnight. The only smiles you see at the racks are either nervous or far too demonstrative for comfort. I might have been slightly uncomfortable in the close-to-genial atmosphere earlier this week, but I was on edge and twitchy in the par-for-the-course gently menacing air of the late-night porn-run crowd.

I inched over to the video section, picked up a box at chest level. I turned to the couple who were still on the fence about their choice. "You seen this?" I asked, careful to make eye contact and smile. They looked at me, at each other, at the box, at me again, "No." Their eyes returned to their potential viewing pleasures, a clue to back off. I tried again. "Hey, I've seen that Holmes one, it's good, you'll dig it." The man looked up and said, devoid of any feeling, "Thanks, now fuck off."

Undaunted, I went back to the magazine rack. Barely out of my peripheral vision, another patron reached for the same *Swank* as me. Our hands collided, and he pulled back so fast he stumbled into the man behind us, whose only crime was looking at a *Juggs* behind us. The magazine was knocked out of the innocent man's hands; I took it upon myself to right the wrong I had indirectly caused. "I'm sorry," I began to say, but before I could get out the apology he snapped the periodical from my hands and turned away from me to continue his reading, nose to the page, facing the wall.

Unfulfilled, I decided to talk to the clerk. There was a woman of about forty behind the counter. She smoked a cigarette wrapped in brown paper; "More" is the brand, I think. She inhaled with her head tilted back slightly, and as I approached the counter she looked down at me and exhaled through her nose. I asked where the Pamela and Tomme Lee video could be found. The male clerk, it wasn't the guy from Tuesday, never looked up.

only pointed in the direction of the video boxes. "Video section," he said as he dunked what looked like the oldest, coldest, soggiest fries in creation into a pool of ketchup. I turned to the video racks and saw the couple had finally come to a decision. I eased away from the counter to watch the transaction unfold. The clerk looked at the box, went to the floor-to-ceiling stacks behind the register and began to scan for the identifying number he sought among the thousands of videos. Once found, the tape was tossed onto the counter and as the clerk banged on the register's keys he said, "Three dollars." A receipt was placed on top of the tape's case as the clerk sat back down to his fries.

I made my exit, first tapping the checkout counter and then saying "Good night," half-turning to wave as I followed the couple outside. The clerk looked up incredulously, and the woman behind the counter let out a surprised, mocking chuckle. The male clerk simply said, "Yeah, sure, asshole." The man in the Carhartt jacket let out a laugh as he failed to hold the door for me. Once outside, I had to stop and take a breath, regain my cool. I needed a beer; I double-timed it to the closest bar.

I made it to the bar five minutes before last call -- on my watch. I haven't even made a request when I heard the bartender say apologetically, "Sorry pal, last call was ten minutes ago." My head dropped to my chest and tears must have welled in my eyes, because I raised my head to say thanks anyway, a full pint was pushed toward me. "Next time make it here on time, OK buddy?" He smiled and returned to counting down his register, changing tip-jar singles for fives.

I reviewed what I had learned as I relaxed with the kind gesture of a beer. One: Do not make eye contact. Two: Do not start conversations. Three: Do not touch another patron. Four: When another person passes by you, do not stop looking at your merchandise. Five: Never ask for help when locating anything. And six: Expect an ill or disinterested treatment from the persons behind the counter. That's-when it hit me; the porn shop clerk has both the best and the worst job in the world. What most people hate about service sector jobs, the service, the adult bookstore has no worry or concern about. The customers don't want to stay any longer than necessary. There is no need for a fulfilling capitalistic experience when you buy *World's Biggest Gang-Bang Part 4*. The cashier saying, "Thanks, come again" is not what interests you. And what kind of person complains about the service or selection at an adult bookstore. In the adult bookstore game, the customer is the sap, and if the clerk is rude, it's a necessary evil. A bartender asks you to come back soon, the adult bookstore clerk knows you'll be back. To the clerk, you're invisible, just a cash transaction. If you wanted sincere human interaction, what are you doing in an adult bookstore? In a store based on idealized image, objectification and illusion,

the clerk is the cold shower of reality. You can only feel mistreated as long as you distance yourself from the purchase you just made; once you cop to the porn buy, that impersonal human treatment is what you deserve.

I finished my drink, and while the bartender cleared up the far end of the bar, I left as extravagant a tip as I could afford. Walking out, I hollered, "Thanks man, g'night" and the bartender turned and waved back, smiling. It was the clerk from Tuesday night.

Brad Lyons

I Prefer the Wine

I was once over to dine at
Cliff Klingenhagen's. Where we sat
He poured two glasses equally good:
One wine, the other wormwood.
Then took the wormwood all
Leaving me wine—the gall.

Wishing the happiness Klingenhagen had
I smote him once for I was mad;
“Why would I want wine?” I thought
But he set me my way right with a fist I caught.
And, as I lay here with this black eye of mine
I realized I would much rather prefer the wine.

Brad Lyons

Sloppy Seconds

Minor points of contention in relations
Insignificant in their individuality
'Til they mount to a whole,
And become a crushing burden
Upon the camel that bears them;
Now your last audacity the straw—
The mess refused cleaning,
The dishes left to mold,
The garbage generated.

I want to kill my roommate,
But that

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Tom O. McCulley

HIV 1: This Is Where It Begins

Her skin is brown, not chocolate
But the tenuous color of a near perfect roux—
Gumbo File—

So mister,

You been poking around! Huh!

Oh Creole, heavy and sweet, our first porno film
Feet sticking to the chipped and painted brown floor
? Maybe we were eighteen...

New Orleans

Graveyards above the ground
Rotting kudzu, every stone crazed and oozing
Tilting toward the sun,
Air thick and clinging like a lover.

*Honey, you still with me then?
No passing out on Mathilde now!*

The needle feels fine sliding into the vein,
Her fingers are cracked, my Creole Queen
Has the touch, a gift for knowing how to ease the pain
I wrap around the cool metal, feel the throbbing of life
At first, no blood

And then it flows filling the tube

And another,

And
One
More,

Then done. She slides the lover from my arm,
My mind rages against the cotton ball.
*Put the arm up then! There, now hold,
You got nice muscles for such a nice*

Man. Now go home!

Mathilde will see you in ten days

And keep your poker in 'til then, huh?

The room becomes her sweating smell, cracked fingers
On my arm, her breath rich and heavy,
Damp...
Thick like ten long August days.
I am ready for the wait.

Bryon Nicoson

methylenedioxymethamphetamine or the neverending race of the smartestthingintheworld

eyem chemically imbalanced to begin with so its not like the smartestthingintheworld that i take any kind of amphetamine let alone methamphetamines which areofcourse synthetic and being made by humans typically fraught with more drawbacks and imperfections then your natchly occurring stimulants heroin cocaine etcetera take x for example methylene dioxy methamphetamine only thats not always what you get cuz they just slop this stuff together eclectically speed heroin coke lsd ketamine mescaline overthecounter ephedrine nodoze you have absofuckinglylutely no idea what your putting in your system and some people die from that shit allergicreaction bam dead designer drugs how bout designer death cuz i mean hell its rushin roulette and it aint natchral is whatimsayin but jeezus check out the tits on that bimbo speakin of unnatural that shit drives me absofuckinlutely up the wall i mean women today with their wonder bras fake nails fake lashes colored tinted contacts dyed hair cellulite reduction therapies make up push up this tuck in that and then the one thing they want from a guy in a relationship is honesty its unfair unnatcheral do you mind if i smoke thanks anyway yeah so i just dont believe in all that unnatcheral crap thats why i stick to the organic stuff cuz nature dont make mistakes cuz everything out there is there for a purpose the key is just not to abuse it cuz moderation in everything iz lifesbigsecret friend but yeah i know im imbalanced i mean i cant prove it i cant like show you some kind of litmus test or anything cuz brain chemistry is a still prettymuch a mystery but still ive taken tests and they all seem to indicate the lack or presence of anomalous quantities of certain neurological substances cuz you know i mean my mmpi2 scores pretty much tell the story have you ever taken the mmpi2 its really tedious lots of empty circles needing to be filled itsa whaddyacallit a standardized test yeah im usually awesome at those good test taker acem allthetime offthefuckincharts but the mmpi2 is one of those tests where there are no wrong or right answers just differences its spozetabe your initial response only thats hardtodo when your thinkin about how your expected to respond so that ewel seem quote normal unquote and how ewel be perceived cuz you dont wanna come off like some kinda wacko even if you are a little bit imbalanced ohmygod and the questions on this thing fucking hilarious shit like oh man what was thatonequestion I justabout died laughing and like everyone in the waiting room just kinda

stared as though expressions of joy werent welcome but yeah my psychiatrist was really cool cuz he let me take the test home and bring it back only i just did it ryethere in the waiting room and it only took about an hour but he lemme take it onmyowntime cuz hes a friend of my stepdads whos also a doctor and he was cool like that but i dunno how much i believe in seein a counselor whos like a family friend yaknow cuz it didnt make me feel so open withim even though i mean i know theres like medical ethics and shit whaddyacallit doctorpatient confidentiality n all and this guy is like the best head doctor in town and eye only got to see im onaccounta my stepdad but still he did let me do a personality inventory as a takehome and i mean i coulda given it to someone and said hey fill this out or betteryet i coulda given it to multiple someones and said you fill out one through fifty please and you do fifty-one through onehundred and man thatted been fuckin hilarious yeah another cup of coffee would be great thanks jeez between the caffeine and nicotine and all the little eens i got goin issawonder my friggin chest dont explode but hell my bodied prolly keep walkin around anyway and peopled be like come see the man without a heart have you ever read cs lewis thing about menwiddout chests i think it was in abolition of man or maybe mere christianity i dunno but anyway great stuff really deep but simple critical analysis of like our whole postmodernpredicament antiscience as all hell cslewis atleast thass my take on the man cuz it seems like heed prolly prefer that thewholerace be back in the caves or atleast the agrarian life preindustrialization preurbanization and i guess i kinda agree widdim i mean iss got its prosncons yaknow cuz science does somuchferus now that i dunno if ide rather go back to prereformation europe or not vatican runnin the whole show holdin down science and burninem as heretics n lockin up poor ol galileo n compellin tycho brahe to rite some ludicrous heliogeocentric compromise model of the universe but boy kepler sure showed him anyway ayem gettinofftrack and what were we talkin about oh yeah youd haveta agree that science has caused a whole heckofalotof problems too but the thing is it always seems to stay just one step ahead always creating a new solution which generates new problems necessitating new solutions and the wheel of progress as balzac might say keeps rolling forward slowed by not even the largest or strongest hearts in its path like a continual spiralling outward from the garden or farm or whateveryoubelievein tedious like that damn mmpi2 which iznt suprising since the elements of a system typically follow the rules of the system itself just replicated on a smaller scale but does that seem absolutist cuz eye believe in absolutes eye guess absolute limits but yeah a perpetual spiral outward away from center away from origin like some neverendingrace to get back to the beginning invisible carrot dangling from some cosmic stick and we just keep chasing it faster and faster with everincreasing speed but ya know that speed is just distance over time and

like velocity is not the same thing as speed cuz velocity is displacement over time and ide havetosay that velocity is a lot more important wouldnt you agree and maybe like the speed of the humanrace is increasing and weer really flyin along but like were just going in circles so our velocity is seemingly ultimately zero just chasing the ever elusive karat right weer just racing like a packa rabbits tryin to get back to the garden but theresonlyone way to go so we go dat way asfastaswecan a continual spiral no end no absolutes no victory and lewis rites about that too about how science can never conquer nature cuz even when we do finally figure it all out and can like engineer a whole next generation and man weer gettin close cuz did ya here about the smart mice what er they called shit cant remember but like from that book flowers for algernon or charlie or whatever but anyway these genetic engineers have added a gene to mice which produces some chemical which makes the mice smarter and theyre sayin theyre gettin close to making smart human children too which seems really spooky cuz i mean those changes were inherited by the offspring of the smart mice ya know cuz the shits not even recessive it doesnt go away its like contagious almost and to boot this chemical not only makes em smarter but also increases the likelihood of stroke but eye guess theres always a tradeoff just more prosncons but yeah when we can even determine like what qualities we want our kids to have like even their personality traits cuz eyem not just talkin about physical attributes here or even cognitive capacity but like the wholedeal emotional issues n all i mean sure itted be great to eliminate cancer or downs syndrome or adhd or whateverelse we decide is undesireable but didgea ever think that maybe all those quote diseases and abnormalities unquote were maybe natures way of experimenting with our evolution and that like nature was trying new forms hit and mostly miss and that by eliminating cancer and adhd and whatnot that we are actually stifling the evolution of our species cuz ultimately wheel get to the point where we can chose the kind of goodness we want our children to exhibit and wheel go and like eclectically pick out the parts we want like options on a car but ultimately wheel have to make a decision and what makes us decide that what we believe is good really is good cuz eye believe we get to a point where we realeyes that theres somethinginside us that makes that distinction and its nothing we have any control over a soul or whateveryouwannacallit and did you know that the human body has been known to suddenly.lose a minute but measurable amount of weight immediately following death but theres no real scientific answer for what that weight is but anyway theres all those youknow all those universalunderlyingtruths of the tao and we just believe them because weer like prewired to cuz like its part of our root program and lewis enumerates all those shared beliefs and values with examples from various cultures religions philosophies and so on and he pretty

well documents the fact that at some internal level we all are basically the same man i really should quit these things

POTENTIAL ENDING #1

And with that, professor Nassani clicked off the tape and explained that, "albeit an extreme one, this case does provide several excellent examples of the symptoms of amphetamine psychosis: schizoid traits are evident, including compulsions, stereotypes, paranoia and hallucinations; behavioral abnormalities are also apparent such as hyperactivity and oral stereotypy. It is important to note that amphetamine users can show behavioral symptoms but not become psychotic. However, residual symptoms can occur and, with long-term usage, a single small dosage can lead to a full psychotic episode. Antipsychotics can block the symptoms but these treatments have to date been much more effective in rats than in humans. Are there any questions?"

POTENTIAL ENDING #2

"Yeah, so um do you want the stuff or not?"

POTENTIAL ENDING #3

Meanwhile, over the expanse of shiny wooden tables, through the tall, clear plate glass windows of the coffeehouse, across the sidewalks and street, behind a smoky, tinted, neon-cluttered window, his complete antithesis sipped from her fourth double vodka martini and, looking up at the bartender, concluded, "Yeah, I guess I just don't get it. I mean, why would anyone want to feel any *more*."

The bartender, wiping a glass with a white bar rag (as they always are in these films), replied with a characteristic brevity of wit, "I hear ya. I thank God every day that my senses are as limited as they are."

POTENTIAL ENDING #4

And just then, unnoticed but felt by everyone on some internal level, all of the clocks ticked one stroke back. Lifting the spoon from the cup, returning it to its saucer with a reassuring "clink," he watched as the milky froth resumed its slow outward spiral.

POTENTIAL ENDING #5

The "L" came to a stop at Clark and Lake. The doors swung open and Clarise and Janelle stepped out onto the platform, leaving the cars lone occupant, homeless, to ride the rest of the night alone.

"What the fuck was that crazy ol' man talkin' 'bout?"

"About?! What I wanna know is who the hell he was talkin' *to*."

Michael P. Sapiro

Of Course Mama's Gonna Help Build the Wall

When I turned sixteen I played "Mother"
off Pink Floyd's The Wall for a fair
amount of that lonely day. Inside me
was a small child calling for silence.
I clenched my jaw and wanted to believe
she could hear my soft cries for help.

Before dinner I was called down to help
set the table with the silver tableware mother
bought, with my birthday money, believing
she was doing me good, treating me fair
by making herself happy. I cried in silence-
hiding my tears inside-but knew she loved me.

Eating her steak, bloody rare, she lectured me
about school and asked if a tutor could help
"bring up those low B's." I screamed in my silence.
She was only playing the concerned mother
wanting me to grow up smart and rich and fair
(with my money), so I held my tongue. I believed

the only way to grow up content was to believe
that the love my mother tried to give me
was real, like her emerald eyes and her fair
skin soft and smooth as gold. She wanted no help
from anyone and asked none from her mother.
Spending her youth in a house of silence,

no talking at dinner, she ate in silence,
consumed her thoughts and hoped her child believed
in the love she gave. I gave my mother
my adolescent heart hoping she heard me.
Her ears forgot how to listen. She didn't help
when I asked, but I never thought her unfair.

She didn't share her time with my, that was fair;

after living in a house filled with silence
why would she want a son to be loud? I helped
myself when she was tired and believed
the best gift she could receive from me
was never letting on that I didn't love my mother.

I still tighten my jaw a fair amount and believe
being made from silence and spite ruined me.
My son calls for help but I have the ears of my mother.

Tim Vogen

The Way We Dream

Into the depths of self
Through the darkest halls
And rooms
Of our memory.
Played and replayed
Is an endless cycle of reverberating thoughts.
Often senseless
But we understand
Always free falling
And yet we are confined inside
We look around
But cannot see
We scream
And cannot hear ourselves
We touch, and yet
We feel nothing.
An illusion of being lost,
Of being loved
Of being left
Alone.

Who can say the way that we dream?
Who can define
The confusion
And helplessness
That sends us tumbling through the night?

Jennifer Witt

Critics

As I sit here with their owl eye injections in my art,
it occurs to me,
that doves seldom wear raincoats
and there never will be
asbestos bursting in blackberry skies;
except for possibly
in this planet
residing upon my shoulders.

As I spread my legs for their amusement,
I begin to realize
the bullet sandwich
I served at tea
was nothing more
than a slippery dream
I will always forget
Just before dawn.

As I speak these words,
their blue paint spills from their eyes
onto my thighs
and saturates my cells
and suffocates the stained glass angel
living in my leg hair,
as well as the iron devil in my bones.

As I sit here with this yeti they placed on my hand,
It suddenly occurs to me
that the fly on the wall
sees nothing at all
thousands of times;
and I truly believe
he may be
the world's most perfect critic.

Jennifer Witt

Natural Born Elephant Charmers

You and I are always sneaking around because your parents are Indian and Indian parents are some of the strictest parents. Their rules guard you like a pack of Indian Elephants, which are the meanest elephants. Lucky for us you are a natural born elephant charmer.

You and I are always sneaking around because my roommate has a regular sleeping pattern not like us insomnio-narcoleptics.

You and I are always sneaking around because in the ears of the neighbors, quiet sex is the best sex.

You and I are always sneaking around because The Man owes you free food and marijuana is nature's Prozac and I have yet to find any evidence otherwise.

You and I are always sneaking around because it's fun and because we're both a few bananas shy of a bushel; and because I have learned that when you're a coo-coo bird surrounded by vultures it's best to lie low and watch your back.