

poictesme

an anthology of literature and art

2008



Virginia Commonwealth University

poictesme (pwä-'tēm) *n.*

1. fictitious medieval French province created by James Branch Cabell (Richmond writer, VCU library patron) in his *Biography of the Life of Manuel* (18 volume series), made most famous in *Jurgen, A Comedy of Justice* (1919) because of its immediate denouncement by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, making Cabell and *Jurgen* internationally notorious throughout the two year court battle that Cabell eventually won. **2.** a portmanteau (see Lewis Carroll) of two actual city names; originally thought to be an anagram, a specialty of JBC **3. fixed law of P.** that all things must go by tens forever **4.** the literary journal of VCU, replacing *Millennium*, whose outdated name was deemed irrelevant by the surviving and new staff as irrelevant by the irreverent new staff. **5.** a name that alludes to the spirit of Richmond through the memory of JBC; an invocation of the arts through its literary roots; **6.** a literary revolution and a way of life.

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2008
Richmond

masthead

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Sepia Graffiti, AUDRA WRISLEY

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KELLY JEAN CAMPBELL

Portrait of the artist, withered

I have seen how he waits:
he waits all night, vigilant
for the dawn, shivering steadfast
in the dark, barefoot
by a drafty window.
And when light seeps through its dark gauze,
he ladles it in;
a little spills on the floor.
The rest he pulls, taffylike, into threads,
makes a sheet of it on a great glass loom.
This time, he folds it, wraps it, and stores it
on a dusty closet shelf.

Fly the Coop

Me, Sam, and Timothy were in New York City and it was summer time and I was waiting for them outside of a Dunkin Donuts somewhere in Manhattan. It was late, maybe around midnight, and they'd followed some girls in there. I stayed outside. I hated awkward situations that weren't of my own creation. Also, I was very high. They weren't in the Dunkin Donuts for too long and when they came out with the girls, the girls started walking away. Sam and Timothy came back over to me.

"Nothing?" I asked.

"Fuck 'em," Sam said.

"Sam bought them a donut," Timothy said.

"Aw. That's sweet..." I said. Timothy laughed.

"Fuck you," Sam said and put a cigarette in his mouth. We started to walk the opposite direction.

Sam and Timothy were both a lot more drunk than I was. We wanted to find a bar but had no idea where we were going. We took random streets and laughed over nothing. There wasn't anything I cared for very much waiting at home so I was all there and in the present.

The next block we went down had a large tree that had fallen down into it. There were branches and leaves everywhere. Instead of crossing the street, we decided to walk through all the branches and leaves. We laughed and tripped forward and onto each other and soon we were in the very thick of it and we could barely see anything except for the big fallen tree we were walking through. It came up all around us.

"We're in a goddamn rainforest!" Sam yelled.

I don't know how far in we went before it felt like close to winter. The branches and leaves began to thin out and soon we were in an alley and the walls and sidewalk were no longer a dull yellow from the streetlights but a grayish blue. The lights were very high above us and, higher up than the moon. None of us thought to walk back the way we'd come. It seemed like we were somewhere else altogether, or some time else. I saw my breath come out of me.

Sam turned back to us. He didn't say anything but we all felt at that moment we were all thinking the same thing. When he turned around, at the end of the long alley we had found ourselves in, stood a stag, staring back at us.

It was a big animal, with a crown of horns. Its eyes were black, like a tunnel you just begin to walk in, and its chest drew in such a breath that I felt if it were to exhale it would blow us all onto our backs. It stood there and we stood there and no one said a word, no one made a move. We only breathed — us very quietly, and the stag, so that the whole alley seemed to shiver.

A couple of months later when I would be leaving for Europe, my mother stood in a very similar fashion at the top of the stairs in our house in Newport News. I had my bags packed and was ready to go. She'd protested the entire summer and used every excuse to deter me. I didn't listen to any of them. I was like her, in that way. My dad had given in some time ago and was even giving me a ride to the airport. I asked her if this was how she wanted to leave it. It would be a very long time before I saw them again. We were very close but not in a way that you talk about. Her answer was to walk into her bedroom without a word. I slept the whole ride up to Dulles. When my Dad walked me to the gates, all he said was "Be careful with your money."

In the alley with me, Sam, Timothy, and the stag, it wasn't so much a matter of time. We were all just there. It wasn't until the stag took its first step that I could reference time, because it felt like it had been a long time since I'd heard a real sound. That click, the stomp. It brought all three of us back. We could feel the blood in our veins again. And then it disappeared. I mean, it walked away. We could hear the hooves on the concrete.

When we got to the end of the alley, we didn't see anything. The alley just turned and went out into the street. And it was summer again. My breath was no longer visible. We came out onto the street and looked around and then looked to each other and Sam said, "What the fuck?"

We knew how to find a bar then and did and ordered some drinks. Sam had to buy me a drink cause I'd spent all my money the first night we'd gotten into the city. My last buck went to Bukowski's *Women* that I got from a street vendor at 1:45 A.M. Or around then. The bartender was a kind old Greek who wore rimless glasses and worked alongside his wife, who had very long black hair, wavy like my mother's when she was young and smiled often.

I went outside to have a cigarette. A skinny, greasy haired guy wearing an army jacket that swallowed him followed me out. I knew he was going to ask me for a cigarette. He asked me for a cigarette. He had his own lighter.

"Do you like the sound of broken glass?" he asked me.

I thought a long time before I answered, "Sure."



Transcend, SEAN KUHNKE

photography, 4" x 6"

Smoke Rises, Trees Gasp

Just below in a small sandy valley
is a grotto
hunched over
where a racoon hordes rotten fruit
and a crow hunts late worms
encircled in trees,
bare
and crawling with fungus.

A man makes ash from the oak and hawthorn
while a woman tears ivy off the roots
in search of snakewood.
Burning wood hisses and screams.
The sap pops. The smoke is thick.
The fire continues to cackle.

Crenshaw's Fault

Crenshaw woke up with a splitting head.

It began the night before as a tiny, almost unnoticeable fracture, but as his brain burred and churned through frenzied dreams, the fracture turned to a fissure and, ultimately, a split.

Crenshaw felt only the slightest pain, an itch really, before his pillow was besotted with cranial fluids and tallow. He felt the stirrings of alarm upon waking and rushed to the bathroom to assess the damage. Holding a small mirror behind his splitting head, he was vaguely horrified to see a breach in his skull measuring almost an inch wide at its apex. The hair around the opening was moist and matted, and in some places the fluids had begun to cake and crystallize. Crenshaw scratched at an uncracked part of his head and wondered what to do. He was due at the office in forty-three minutes.

He turned a wary eye at the shower and thought of skipping it altogether, but he'd had six Scotch and sodas the night before while thumbing through some briefs and memos. Surely the reek of liquor was on him like over-cooked rice.

He bolted to the hall closet and pulled down his box of sporting goods. He tore into it and tossed an old deflated football this way and an unraveling tennis racket that way. He stumbled on a fencing trophy from his college days. He smiled and sighed and thought of when he was illuminated and sporty. His splitting head itched anew and he pulled out a bathing cap from his days as an amateur diver. He pulled the bathing cap gingerly over his skull. The taut latex pulled the crack closed.

Crenshaw scurried to the shower and lathered himself vigorously. He sang snatches of "All Shook Up" while he

scrubbed at his armpits, torso, and nether regions.

Showered, Crenshaw chose his brown suit, beige shirt, and pumpkin tie. He still wore the bathing cap.

He tied his leather oxfords and returned to the hall closet. "No one wears hats anymore," he thought, "but I'm caught in a pickle here." (He wasn't aware that people had long since stopped using the phrase "in a pickle"). His church hosted a yard sale a few years before, and he wasn't sure if he'd offered up his derby or not. Finally, he rested his clammy hand upon a crumpled felt object behind his bowling ball bag.

After much unrumpling and remolding, and after a thorough go-over with a lint brush, the hat was presentable. Crenshaw pulled the bathing cap from his head in one quick jerk, the way one might remove a hair-bound band-aid. He sat the hat upon his head and tilted it back, Bing Crosby style, to cover the crack in the back of his skull. He appraised himself in a full-length mirror and was resolutely pleased. As an afterthought, he grabbed a cane. Smartly assembled, he heaved a heavy sigh and stepped out of his apartment to make his way to the office, looking like he'd just strolled out of a James Thurber narrative, with the exception of the slow trickle of fluid seeping out of his skull under his derby hat, making its way to his beige shirt collar.

. . .

Crenshaw was on his lunch break. He sat in a diner on 47th and Camellia sipping black coffee from a dingy ceramic mug. His club sandwich sat untouched on a plate with some cold, picked-over fried potatoes. A woman with a large mole on her left temple sat at the table adjacent to his, working fitfully over a crossword puzzle. She was using a fountain pen, and both the puzzle and her fingers were blotted with blue ink. Occasionally she looked up from the bruised puzzle to summon the waitress to refill her coffee cup.

Crenshaw lit an unfiltered cigarette and took a tentative drag. He instantly heard his dead mother's voice echoing in his (cracked) head. Those things'll kill ya. I didn't think I raised a complete numbskull. Keep it up, and those things'll put you into an early grave.

In answer to his mother's diatribe, he absent-mindedly uttered, "If I love them, they can't hurt me."

He thought the same about his wife and children, but they'd been gone for over a year. He'd arrived home from the office one dreary night to find a note from his wife. "I've taken the children back to Des Moines. We will live with my parents until I can find a decent job. If you love your children, you'll make no attempt to contact them."

He pulled deeply on his cigarette and held the smoke in his lungs for a few long seconds. When he released the gray-white plume through his pursed lips, he did so with remorse. He watched the cloud of smoke sail stoically to the ceiling fans, where it was assailed and spliced and dissipated with brute force. His breath caught in his throat, and he let out a little groan as though he had just witnessed an infant being mauled by starving tigers. He took notice of how diminished the shaft of the cigarette already was, and he hesitated to take another drag. It anguished his heart to watch the red-hot tip eating its way through the tender white paper, working hungrily toward his yellowed fingers. He took another deep drag and his slate-grey eyes brimmed with tears. The lump in his throat ached like a stiff joint, and he knew he would have to smoke this cigarette to its completion, until the cherry greedily ate white lightning into his fingers and his trembling lips.

He took his ketchup-stained napkin and surreptitiously dabbed at the nape of his neck, where the split in his skull had begun to weep.

. . .

On his way back to the office, Crenshaw stopped into a bar for a quick libation.

The jukebox played Moon River. The establishment was dimly lit and so short on patrons that Crenshaw could almost hear the buzz of the neon beer logos mingling with the ghostly music of Henry Mancini. He stepped up to the bar and perched upon a creaky stool.

The bartender was working halfheartedly on a crossword puzzle at the other end of the bar. He was busily cramming two or three letters into one blank square when he realized he had a customer. He tossed his ballpoint pen onto the tortured puzzle and ambled over to Crenshaw's side of the bar. "What can I get for ya, bud?"

To Crenshaw, the man appeared to be constructed of knuckles, calluses, and potted meat. He had an ugly scar coursing through his right eyebrow that, to Crenshaw, looked strikingly like a fault line, or a crack. "I'd like a Scotch and soda," he answered.

Wordlessly, the bartender went to work making Crenshaw's drink. Crenshaw grew a little nervous as he watched the man pouring the single malt over the ice cubes. The Scotch was rising impetuously in the highball glass, and Crenshaw nibbled at his lower lip in trepidation. The liquor rose to the summit of the ice. The bartender poured half an ounce of club soda over the top of the Scotch and carried the drink to his patron. He rested the glass on a new cocktail napkin and retired to his crossword puzzle.

Crenshaw stared at the drink as though it was the severed head of an infant prince. He heard the sizzling and cracking of ice in the glass, and his heart grew cold, crystallizing his blood. After a few moments, the bartender took a bored glance at his customer. Seeing that Crenshaw hadn't touched the beverage, he hollered, "Well, are ya gonna drink it or not?"

"I—I'm afraid it's, um, not *right*," Crenshaw stammered.

“Whadda ya mean it’s not right? It’s a Scotch and soda, isn’t it?” The calloused heap of a man walked solidly over to Crenshaw.

“Well, you see,” answered Crenshaw, “I like for it to be the color of boiled sugar, just before it turns to caramel.” Crenshaw’s mother used to make the most delectable hard caramel when he was a child. She put a pot of sugar water on the stove every Sunday after church and simmered it until it turned to bubbling gold. At the last moment, she swirled ribbons of melted butter into the sweet, hot lava and poured it over a greased sheet pan. The candy went into the freezer to harden and crack.

The bartender was glaring menacingly at Crenshaw. The split in Crenshaw’s skull began to throb and perspire.

“Whadda ya want me to do about it?” the bartender finally growled.

“Could you just pour it into a larger glass and add a little more soda?”

The man snatched the highball and slopped its contents into a large water glass. He threw a few more ice cubes over the top and added another ounce of soda. He stirred the drink recklessly with a long spoon and thrust the new glass in front of his solitary client. “Is that better?”

“It’s perfect, thanks,” Crenshaw responded nervously.

“I don’t know why ya don’t just go home and make your own damn drink,” the bartender mumbled. He shuffled away fuming and returned to his crossword.

Crenshaw sipped his drink and glanced at the television hanging over the bar. In the upper right-hand corner, he could just barely discern a small fracture in the screen. It may have been his imagination, but he was sure there was something—some liquid ozone or Technicolor ooze—seeping from the fracture and trickling down the dusty surface. He fought the urge to climb up on the bar and dab away at the seepage with his cocktail

napkin. Instead, he tucked the damp swatch of paper under his derby hat and drained his glass of boiled sugar.

. . .

That night, Crenshaw's sleep was wracked with nightmares. One dream was so vivid that he remembered it in great detail when he awoke.

He was standing naked in a field of old wrecked cars and motorboats. He could hear several car alarms in the distance, but they were bereft of the intensity that made them alarming. Crenshaw closed his eyes and soaked in the music of incessant, yet somehow muted, horns and sirens. Somewhere a dilapidated ambulance was trapped nose-first in a sand dune. The stifled caterwaul of its siren fell upon dead ears, as none of these immobile vehicles was about to defer to the land-ensconced emergency vehicle.

The symphony of sirens was interrupted by the rather ominous growl of a six-cylinder engine. Crenshaw opened his eyes to see a large Buick sedan deftly snaking its way through piles of automotive carnage. The Buick was approaching him head on, yet Crenshaw could not see anyone operating the vehicle. The car came to an abrupt stop within an inch of Crenshaw's knobby knees, and the driver's side door swung open with a creak and a crunch. In the space beneath the door, Crenshaw watched as two tiny feet swung to the side, as though the world's smallest jockey was dismounting his steed. But these feet were encased in a pair of red Mary Janes. The tiny feet hit the ground, and the driver of the Buick stood up. Crenshaw could see just the top of the driver's head through the window of the car door. There was a tight part in the honey-blond hair. A pudgy pink hand reached around the car door and slammed it shut, exposing the driver of the beastly Buick in full profile.

"Hi, Daddy," Dooley said proudly as she dusted off the seat of her red corduroy jumper. Crenshaw's six-year-old daughter stood before him, swinging her arms and shaking her pristine

pigtails.

"Hello, Dooley," he answered, choked with profound emotion. "How are you, honey?"

"I'm good, Daddy. I miss you terribly, though," the little girl responded. Her expression was so earnest and pure, yet her tone was matter-of-fact, almost deadpan.

"I miss you too, Dooley. I miss you so much it hurts." By now, there were tears streaming down Crenshaw's cheeks and dripping soundlessly into his chest hair.

"I know it hurts, Daddy," she responded blankly. "I can see your boo-boo."

Crenshaw reached up to touch his cracked skull, but he found that the breach was gone. He frantically combed the back of his head with both of his hands, whimpering as though he'd lost his car keys.

"Your boo-boo isn't there anymore, silly," his daughter chided. "It's been relocated." Crenshaw looked up to see his daughter pointing soundlessly at the center of his bare chest.

Crenshaw stopped searching his skull and caught his breath. He tentatively moved his gaze to where his daughter was pointing. There, coursing up the center of his chest, was a crevice spanning eight inches or more. He was split open through the sternum, and he could see his heart muscle working laboriously against all odds. He felt a dull mixture of fascination and fear.

"It's alright, Daddy. It doesn't hurt," his daughter assured him. He thought she was referring to the crack in his chest, but when he looked up at the little girl, he was horrified to see that the perfect part in her hair had become an ugly crack in her skull. Crenshaw gaped in fright.

"What's happened to you, Dooley?" he asked. He wanted to inspect her wound more closely, but he found his feet were

frozen to the earth.

"It's simple genetics, Daddy," she answered. "You've passed it on."

Crenshaw began wailing in abject misery, reaching for his daughter in vain. She had already opened the door to the Buick. The door slammed shut and he could no longer see his little girl. The engine coughed and sputtered and raced into life. The Buick was working its way back through the infinite piles of junk, and Crenshaw stood naked, screaming and crying, wishing he had some garments to rend.

He awoke in a panic and peeled his head from his pillowcase. He stealthily reached the back of his skull and found that the crack remained. He ran to the bathroom and surveyed his image in the mirror. He grimaced at his haggard appearance and immediately noticed a great change in his yellow teeth. His canines, bicuspid and molars were run through with a map work of tiny cracks and fractures. One of his large front teeth was chipped where a fragment had seceded and sailed across the tundra of his tongue to the contracting channel of his esophagus.

In his bedroom, on his nightstand, his alarm clock began blaring.

Crenshaw sighed and grabbed his bathing cap, preparing for his shower.

. . .

Crenshaw sat in the diner on 47th and Camellia.

The woman with the mole on her temple was at a different table than last time, but Crenshaw could see she was fussing over a crossword again. She wore a ludicrous straw hat with a stuffed bird perched on the crown and a wreath of laurels around the brim. The bird bobbed back and forth with the woman's efforts. Her fountain pen scratched out messy block letters, and the indigo ink soiled her fingertips and even the

backs of her hands. She paused momentarily to order a slice of key lime pie, and Crenshaw could see a blue thumb print on her left cheek.

Crenshaw sat in his booth, remembering. He hated to remember, because remembering caused his brain to swell and expand beyond its borders. Today however, he felt he was on the verge of something, and remembering was his only mode of preparation. He ordered a cup of coffee and lit a cigarette and allowed the first glimmers of memory to trickle to the forefront. His brain trembled into life and began to pulsate like some kind of breathing apparatus. The crack in his skull dilated and recessed with each labored breath. Within a few moments, Crenshaw was inundated with the past, and he was somewhere else entirely. The din at the diner faded to muffled murmurings, and the murmurings became the voices on a talk radio program. The men on the radio were discussing the rise in oil prices and the climate in Afghanistan. Crenshaw wasn't listening. He never listened to the radio when he was driving.

He was on his way to pick up the kids from school. He was twenty minutes late because he had sat at a stop sign daydreaming, waiting for the stop sign to turn green.

He pulled up to Herbert Hoover Elementary School and his children were sitting on the front steps, waiting patiently. Charlotte, the oldest, was clearly in charge. Dooley and Toby sat one step down from her. The three looked like they were posing for a photograph. Dooley's pigtails were so symmetrical that Crenshaw gasped with emotion. Toby, the youngest, was wearing his aviator's helmet, but the faceplate was up so that Crenshaw could see his son's rosy cheeks and his tiny pug nose. Charlotte looked like a schoolmarm, although she was only nine. She was straight-backed and stern just like her mother, but beautiful nonetheless. Crenshaw jumped from the car and ran to meet his children on the steps. He hugged each of them,

ending with Charlotte. She looked at him disparagingly, and said, "Daddy, your hair is an absolute mess!" She motioned for him to lower his head, and she began flattening his hair with the palms of her lovely hands.

"Of course it's a mess," Crenshaw responded. "What do you expect, when I've just flown in on a *comet*?" He gestured toward his rusted Ford Taurus, and the younger kids giggled with delight. Charlotte looked at him suspiciously. "I wouldn't be surprised if you found particles of moon dust in my hair," he exclaimed. His oldest child scrutinized her hands with a raised eyebrow. Dooley and Toby were already caught up in the game. "I want to ride the comet," shouted Toby. "Me too, me too," Dooley bellowed. Crenshaw looked at Charlotte. She eyed him warily, silently pleading with him to cease and desist in whatever scheme was about to unfold.

"Alright," Crenshaw responded, "let's take an interplanetary trip on my celestial showboat!"

They all ran to the car, with the exception of Charlotte, whose steps were heavy with dread.

"All aboard," Crenshaw called. "Now the seats may be a little hot. You pick up a lot of friction at eight-million miles an hour!"

Dooley jumped into the front passenger seat, where she always sat, and Charlotte and Toby climbed into the back. They all buckled their safety belts and looked eagerly ahead while Crenshaw pulled the Taurus onto Greeley Street, heading into town. The younger children shouted with joy, even though this interstellar voyage was punctuated with stop signs and traffic lights. Crenshaw worried that his kids would lose interest, so he turned onto Broad Street and headed for the first interstate exit. "Daddy," Charlotte called, competing with her younger siblings. "Daddy, this is not the way home!"

"I know, honey," he called back. "I've got to get this puppy out

where we can really get up some speed!" Charlotte nibbled at her lower lip.

Before long, the Taurus was sailing down I-71 at around fifty-seven miles per hour. (The old car didn't go much faster than that). Toby and Dooley squealed with glee, but after three minutes or so, Crenshaw felt their interest was beginning to wane. He abruptly veered off onto an exit ramp and found himself on a country road, where the speed limit was marked thirty-five. He was coasting at about fifty miles per hour when a local sheriff's deputy passed in the opposite direction. The deputy made a U-turn and headed for the tail of Crenshaw's comet.

Charlotte fretted in the back seat. The Taurus flew past an old farm house where an enormously fat woman was watering her azalea bushes. The hose was wrapped loosely around the woman like a hula hoop. "Look, Daddy," Dooley said, pointing to the woman. "It's Saturn!" Crenshaw laughed heartily, beaming with pride at his clever daughter. By now, the deputy's cruiser had caught up to the Taurus, and the siren began to wail. Charlotte looked back in terror and shouted, "Daddy, it's the police! You have to pull over!"

"It's not the police, honey," her father reassured. "It's only a meteorite! We'd better get out of its way!" Crenshaw cut the wheel sharply to the right and the car bumped off into a field of dead corn stalks. Dooley looked back with excitement. "Daddy, the meteorite is following us," she warned.

"Don't worry, Dooley," Crenshaw said. "It won't be with us for long."

Up ahead, just over a small hill, was a man-made pond. Crenshaw spotted the little body of water and was moderately alarmed. The deputy was in hot pursuit, and Crenshaw knew it was all about to end. He couldn't allow it to end. For his beautiful children, he *wouldn't* allow it to end. Now Charlotte could see the pond, and she was struck with a new terror.

"Daddy, please stop! We'll crash into the water! Please stop!" "Charlotte," he answered, "*meteorites* crash! Comets *sail*!" Charlotte saw her father's wide eyes in the rear view mirror, and her flesh grew cold. She knew he wasn't going to stop. Toby began banging his helmeted head against the half-open window. Dooley's head was oscillating vigorously, her pigtailed cutting the air like propeller blades. Charlotte wept silently. Crenshaw looked determinedly ahead, preparing to sail weightlessly over the black water.

The Taurus hit the water hard and immediately began to sink. Cold, stagnant water came seeping in through the dashboard and the cracks in the doors. It poured in through the windows, soaking Crenshaw and his children, snapping them back to reality. The car's tires settled heavily upon the muddy floor of the pond. The pond was shallow enough that all of their heads, including Toby's, were above water. Toby began to cry and announced that he had peed his pants. Charlotte was still weeping. Crenshaw looked at Dooley, and she was smiling peacefully at her father, although her bottom lip had begun trembling with the cold.

The sheriff's deputy had called for backup. The little hill above the pond was illuminated with flashing blue lights.

A few hours later, they were all home, freshly bathed and wearing dry clothes. They sat around the dinner table, silently picking at meat loaf and mashed potatoes. Crenshaw's wife hadn't eaten a bite. Her full plate sat before her, and she stared blankly at the display of silk flowers at the center of the table. Her lips were pressed tightly in anger. Crenshaw hazarded a glance at her, and she made eye contact with him. Finally she spoke.

"You told me this would never happen again. Last time, you said you'd never do something so careless and stupid again. Now you've gone even further. What could you have possibly been thinking?"

Charlotte was using her fork to line up her peas like infantry on her plate. Toby was wearing his Spider Man pajamas. He ate his peas one at a time. Dooley had no peas. She refused to eat anything green. Ever since she was an infant, nothing green had crossed the threshold of her lips.

"Speak to me!" his wife shouted.

"I don't know what I was thinking! I don't know why I did it! I thought the kids would like to have a little fun, and I just got it into my head to take them on a little drive. My head just gets so full, and I don't know what to do, and sometimes I just don't do anything. It just gets so very full, that sometimes I think it might burst. And sometimes I wish it *would* burst, because then everything would be out in the open where I could see it, and I could maybe make head or tail of it all. As it is, I can't make head or tail of it, and it takes over and I lose myself. But I'll try harder. I'll do my best. I promise, I'll do my best to make sure I don't do anything like this again." He looked at his wife in desperation. She looked back with no apparent emotion. He couldn't read her like he used to.

"Oh, I know you won't do anything like this again. This time I'm going to see to it," she said.

"What do you mean," Crenshaw asked. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet, but you can be sure I'm going to do something. I have to protect my children."

Crenshaw looked fearfully at his children. Toby was still munching peas. Charlotte had moved on to her potatoes, where she was attempting to fashion a pyramid. He looked at Dooley, and she was looking back with a reassuring smile. Although she had had a bath, Crenshaw could still see traces of moon dust in her pigtails.

The next evening, his wife and children were gone.

. . .

Crenshaw was back in his booth at the diner.

He was sobbing loudly, and inky tears poured down his cheeks. His cigarette was burning blisters into his fingers, but he felt no pain there. He had removed his hat and was clutching at his head, wailing with bitter remorse and banging his forehead against the table. The silverware rattled noisily on his uneaten plate of food. The other patrons in the diner began to take notice of the disheveled gentleman crying like a distraught child in the booth by the window. A waitress got the manager and they were whispering about how to diffuse the situation. The woman in the bird hat turned in her seat and stared openly at Crenshaw in bewilderment and frustration. (She was forced to give up on her crossword puzzle because her fountain pen had cracked open and spilled its indigo entrails across the Formica table top).

All conversations in the diner ceased. The cooks in the back kitchen had left their posts to come witness the spectacle. No one was chewing. Few were breathing. All were watching and listening to the misery of the lonely man in the brown suit and pumpkin tie. Snatches of Moon River drifted from the jukebox in the corner and mingled with the man's sorrow.

Crenshaw looked up to meet this sea of eyes. He mistook their confusion for horror, and it was then that he realized that they must all see the split in his skull. He scanned the booth for his hat, but it was nowhere to be seen. (It had slipped to the floor and rested on an empty ketchup packet and some fingernail clippings). Just as the manager began to approach him to try to kindly remove him from the diner, Crenshaw jumped from the booth and panned the clientele. He gave up looking for his hat, for all of these people had already seen the crevice in his pate. He turned and locked eyes with the bird perched on the woman's straw hat. The bird's glass eyes were run through with cracks, and they registered a keen sympathy for Crenshaw. He smiled at the bird and whispered a sincere thank you. Then

he rushed to the front of the diner and pushed his way out onto the sidewalk.

The sky was clouded over, but the sun peeked through a small slit in the black thunderhead. A beam of light descended upon the length of Camellia Street, and Crenshaw knew what was coming. His throbbing brain knew what was coming as well, for it pulsed eagerly, spewing cranial fluids from his skull. He heard a quiet rumbling, but it wasn't coming from the clouds above. It was below him. It was only a sound at first, but it became a dull vibration. The vibrations worked into Crenshaw's feet, cracking and crumbling his loafers. His knees grew numb and his thighs grew weak. His belly turned over and over and his heart began to quake. He looked around him at the buildings on either side of the street, and he saw that they were similarly affected. Their foundations were littered with little cracks, and the storefront windows began to pop and split into channels of fissures. The rumbling in the ground grew exponentially until Crenshaw felt the earth undulating like waves in a great storm.

Crenshaw looked on in pure exhilaration as a long crack appeared in the center of Camellia Street. The crack descended down the block until Crenshaw saw it disappear over a hill. The crack opened up like a gaping mouth and a bicyclist rode right into the center of it. A Subaru wagon tilted on its side and, driver and all, fell into the crevice. Crenshaw could see down into the depths, where groups of people were waiting for the Northbound subway to take them into the city. The Subaru hit the subway tracks with a crunch, and no one seemed to take notice. The crack in the earth had widened to nearly ten feet, and up ahead, at the crosswalk, Crenshaw could see two nuns leading a group of school children straight for the opening. He watched as the first nun stepped into the crevice and fell soundlessly into the abyss. The next nun followed, her robes flapping on the way down. The entire line of children

poictesme

descended into the darkness, one by one.

His brain was throbbing now, and with each throb he temporarily lost vision. He was suddenly seeing the world in a series of flashing frames of life and light, alternating with inky blackness.

A little girl with a blue balloon walked into the crevice.

Blackness.

The balloon sailed up out of the crack in the earth and ascended toward the dark thunderhead above.

Blackness.

A dog barked after its owner, who had just walked off the edge of the opening.

Blackness.

The dog jumped in after its owner.

Blackness.

Two young boys clasped hands and jumped into the gaping earth.

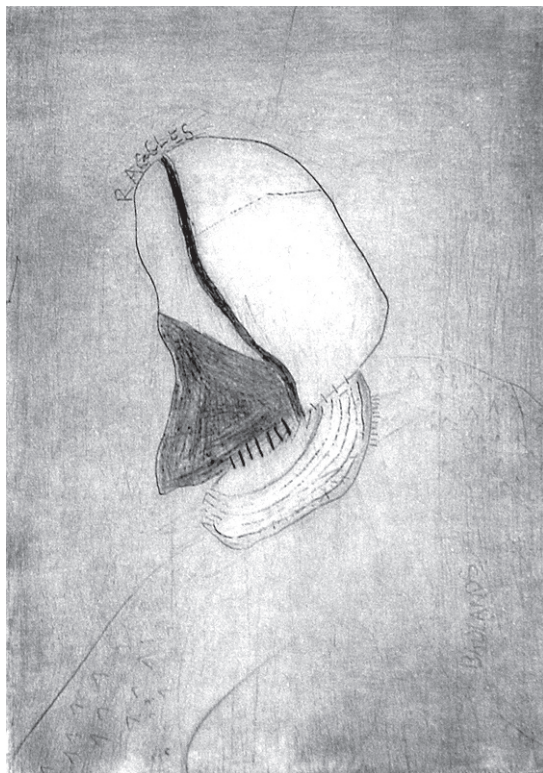
Blackness.

Dooley stood before Crenshaw. Her pigtails were tight and symmetrical. She beamed at her father with love and pride.

Blackness.

Dooley was gone. Crenshaw felt himself falling backwards. He felt no fear, as he was sure there would be a great plume of grey-white smoke to catch him. He smiled peacefully, and then...

...blackness.



Raggles, KATHERINE DUCKWORTH

etching, 4" x 6"

Pieces of Norman Mailer

I heard it on the news.
It was kidney failure that got him at 84.
God bless his curmudgeonly little heart.
A day later, people were already
 selling their signed first editions, photographs
 magazine articles, on the internet.
Old stuff, from attics and garages,
 on bookshelves, displayed in living rooms
 and corner offices.
Old stuff, promised to children and grandchildren.
Until then, most everyday people had forgotten about
 him, but before he was in the ground,
 they were digging him back up.
They may have despised you alive,
 but the moment you croak,
 everything you touched
 goes up in value, and
 everything else is merely
 clutter.

KEITH GURGICK

Fulton County, Georgia

I remember in one neighborhood, there were
houses and houses
with trees that looked
as if I had drawn them when I was five.
Some of them had playgrounds or pools in their backyards.
Some of their parents asked them
why they wanted to go outside so
we sat and played Super Nintendo.
My friend's mom covered the couches in plastic
and covered the shelves in stuffed animals,
and apologized for what a mess her house was.
Her son Eric's hair was shaped like a mushroom,
he had warts on his knee
and stole things from my brother.

I spent hours in summer at the community pool,
or played in cool red clay around construction sites.
I got sucked down waist deep
and my brother had to get my dad to get a branch,
and I was afraid of my lungs filling up with copper glop.

In Georgia we had an acre with an ice cold creek.
We would walk down and feel the slime on
rocks and watched pools of
oil run-off or that toxic looking foam which bubbles up in
eddies.
They built there too.



Enigma #3, Scott Horner, clear PVC, 11'10" x 23'8"

CARL FORREST

*Letter from Aguinaldo,
to a loved one*

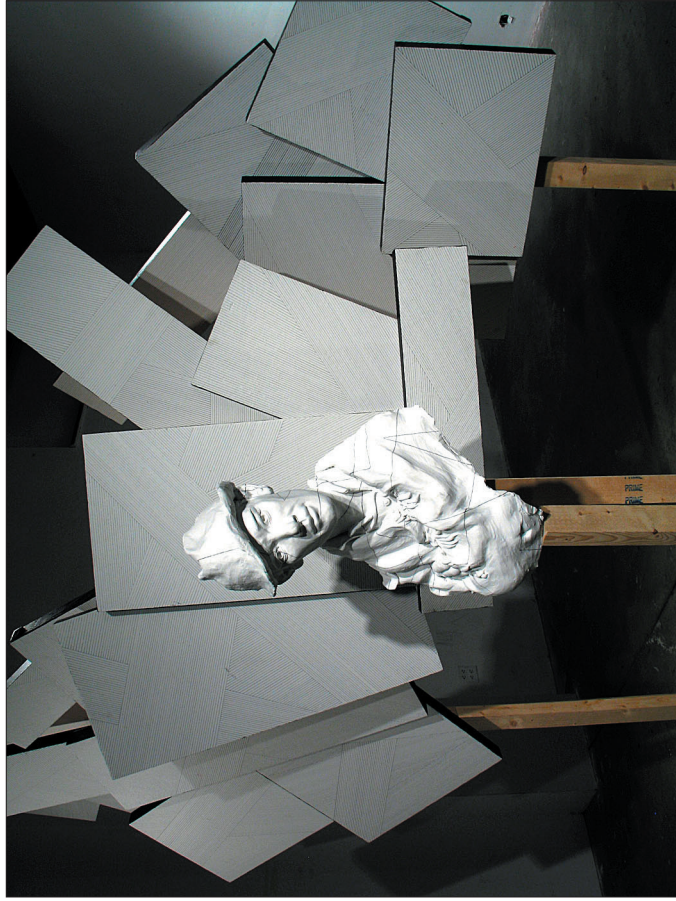
I walked a silk road
with heavy eyes
and a smile,
combing the wind for knots
and painting delirious landscapes
from memory.

At the center is beauty,
of all things,
Perfection is in the river swells.
As a boy, I once rushed out into the yard
to greet you with shy glimpses.
Performing clumsy acrobatics
to gain your attention.

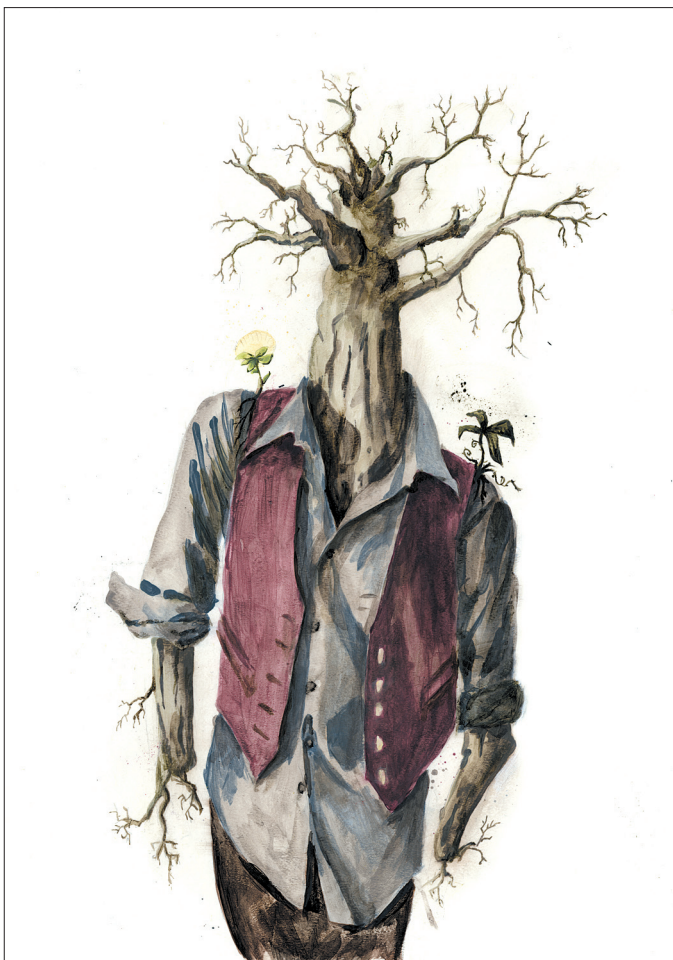
As a man I kneel kissing your feet,
the earth,
combing your hair, the wind.
Searching for knots,
To maybe sleep in.

Amorous in Indonesia

In the marriage
of flesh and river I hide
behind a beard in a village
next to marsh and Tao,
where naked children
splash one another in the water
as mothers wash their clothes,
and afterwards they return home, and
the temples, religions, and
rain fall on
my little hut
where I stare into
the falling water,
staying dry.



Untitled, TIMOTHY RUSTERHOLZ, 9' x 10' x 5' plaster wood latex paint



Opinion on Each Shoulder, JARED BOGGESS

acrylic on paper, 16" x 24"



For the Sapling, JARED BOGGESS

acrylic and ink, 8" x 10"



Trailerland, MARLEY KIMMEL

photograph, 6" x 4"



Dishes, RAVEN HERRERA, oil on canvas, 18" x 24"



My Space, KATE KISICKI
marker, spray paint, oil on canvas, 58.5" x 48"



Untitled, KAITLIN VAUGHN

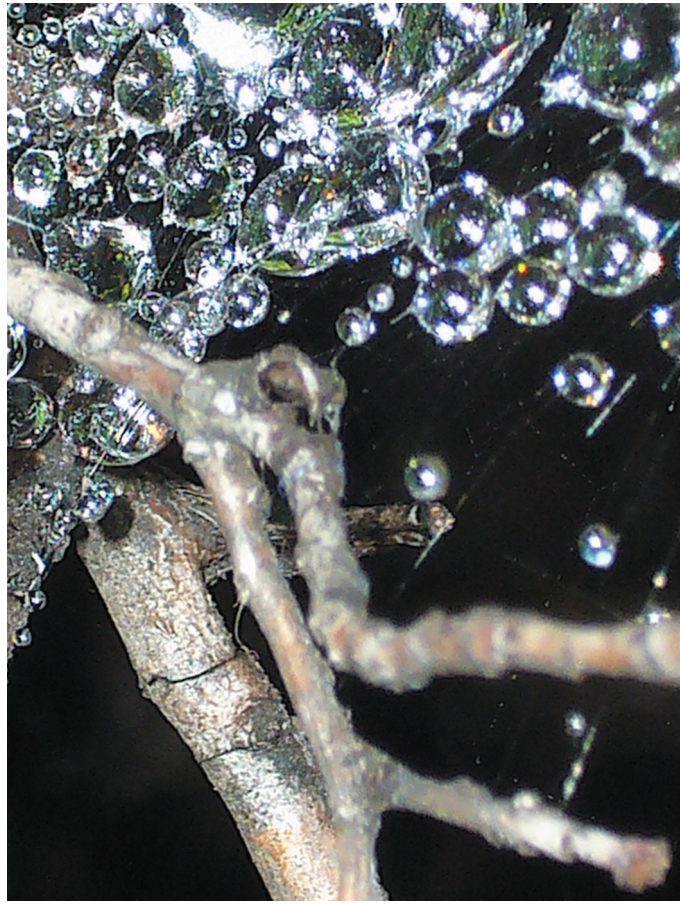
silver print, 11" x 14"



Monument to Dead Text, ELIZABETH CHANEY
mixed media installation



4'33" of Imaginary Sound, ELIZABETH CHANEY
mixed media installation



Odyssey, HEIDI ORTEGA

digital, 30" x 40"



Sequana, AMY ROBERTS

digital, 14" x 8"



Wrong Turn, DANIEL HAYMAN

oil on board, 18" x 19"



The Usual Source, DANIEL HAYMAN

oil on board, 16" x 17"



Portrait of a Kenyan, TIMOTHY C RUSTERHOLZ
plaster, wood, latex paint, 8' x 8' x 4'

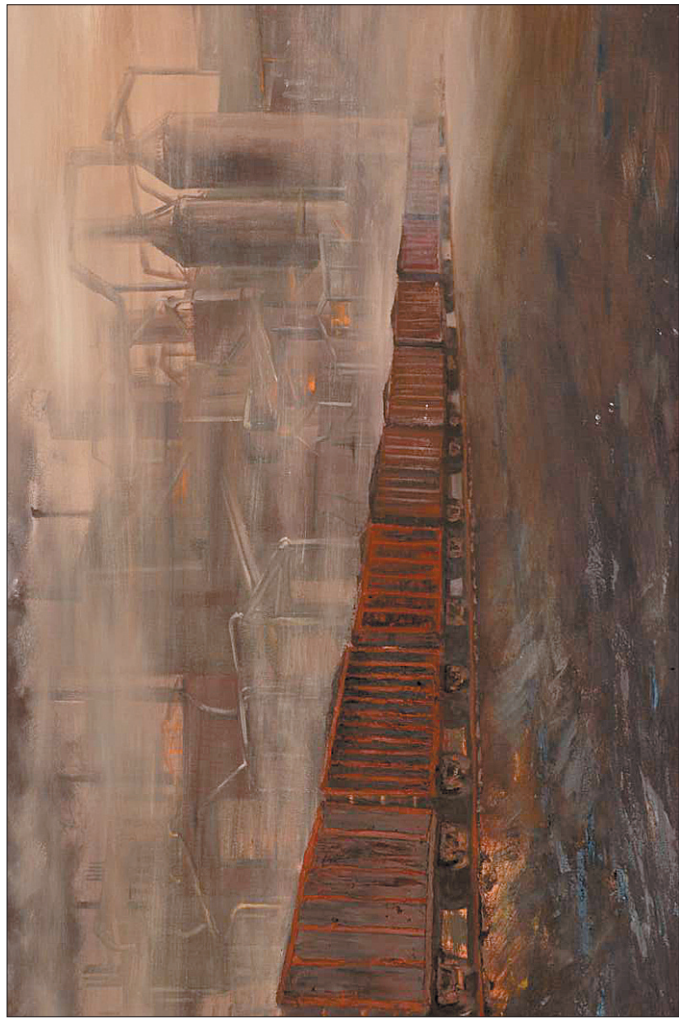




Witchdoll, MICHELLE ROSS
earth sculpture, 6" x 12"



Bonsai Tree, KATHY SHIN
mixed media, 26" x 18" x 16"



Problems and Possibilities II, JEFF LASSAHN, oil on canvas, 12' x 6'5"

The Walking Dead

I sweep crisp leaves off the street curb,
Into black plastic bags,
As an old man drives up beside me,
The wheels of his car halt.
He shows me a copy of his Irish bagpipe music.
Smiling wide,
I see a yellow fang on the top left,
Of his rotting gumline.
“Only 49 people got this hat,” he says.
It reads “The Walking Dead,”
Ho Chi Minh’s name,
For the Marines in Vietnam.
Then changing subjects,
He starts talking about cell phones,
“Back in Vietnam, we had no cell phones!”
I glance down the street,
A car comes toward us.
“I saw a young Marine the other day,” he says,
“He walked into the library with a laptop under his arm,”
“And he was a rifleman!”
I can see it in his eyes,
The Napalm and LSD.
The Walking Dead.
He takes off down the road,
So turning back into the yard,
I pick up my rake.

poictesme

Feet slowly crunch the dry leaves,
Eyes gaze downwards as the sun sets.
And resting on the mulch,
Lay a fragile snake skin.
I stick it in my pocket,
I've heard that Napalm melts the skin off its victims
Burned alive on a beautiful Saturday morning
When American children watch cartoons.
The dead skin of this snake,
Can't walk by itself.
So I carry it along
Before it withers away into the ground.



The Tell-tale Heart, AMY ROBERTS

digital, 3" x 5"

Old Jake

Emmett found the coyote pups hiding in a corrugated metal culvert in a ditch that ran alongside a road adjacent to their farm. His mother had sent him out to do some chore around the dilapidated property. Instead he found himself walking along the road, watching the silhouettes of turkey vultures circling against the cloud laden West Virginian sky.

“Must be something dead around here,” he thought to himself as he dragged his feet over the gravel pot holes.

A car rolled past, and Emmett heard the exhaust rattle as it bumped along the washboard road.

“Ain’t seen Old Jake in a while,” he thought.

Old Jake was an aged hound that belonged to no one and was known to frequent the Drouin family farm with regularity. Emmett had not seen Old Jake in a week or two, and had begun to wonder if the dog had finally gone off to die the way his father had said old animals do.

“They can feel it in their bones and I suspect right many humans can too. It’s just that dogs an’ such ain’t got no concept of dying so they ain’t scared like humans are,” Mr. Floyd Drouin had said. “If humans didn’t have no kinda concept of death, they might just go off all peaceful like into the woods somewhere and die with some damn dignity instead of cryin’ like a stuck pig.”

Emmett cringed. He had been on countless hunting trips with his father and had witnessed the last breath of many creatures and remained stoic. But slaughtering the hogs on the farm was something he could not bear to witness.

“That boy turns white as a sheet and his pupils get so tiny

I don't think he can see anything at all, June".

"Well Floyd, he's a good boy with a good heart an' those pigs make an awful ruckus when you kill 'em. I swear I don't understand why you gotta hang 'em up and cut their throats to butcher 'em. Why can't you just shoot 'em first?

"Goddammit woman, you know damn well why you can't just shoot 'em first. It'll spoil the meat. We already got one spoiled animal runnin' round here. How's he ever gonna feed a family?"

Emmett's gaze was finally broken when his shoe caught the edge of a fist-sized stone and he fell into the ditch alongside the road. He banged his chin hard on the ground. Looking up, Emmett noticed movement in the culvert about ten feet in front of him.

There were three coyote pups; two male and one female. They were tiny didn't look old enough to be without their mother. Emmett's gaze reverted to the buzzards circling in the sky. He decided to move the pups to the family barn, where he could hide them from the buzzards who were just as likely feeding on their mother as feeding on Old Jake.

The next day Emmett woke early to go out to the barn to check on the pups. As he passed the kitchen, he heard his mother and father.

"Dammit, I told you already, the boy's gonna help slaughter the hogs. That's all there is to it."

"Well, at least have the decency to shoot the hog first. I was talking to old Mr. Williams over in town and he said it don't spoil the meat none if ya shoot 'em in the head and kill 'em clean."

"All right, June, all right. But the boy's gonna be the one that shoots 'em. He's gotta learn to toughen up."

Before June could reply, Floyd was out the back door,

pistol in hand, heading to the barn.

Emmett ran past his mother and bolted out the door. By the time he reached the barn, his father was standing over the pups.

"Well I'll be. That damned ol' bitch had some young tucked away."

"Leave 'em be dad!"

Floyd Drouin turned around, startled.

"You bring these bastards in here, boy?"

"They're just little babies, dad. Leave 'em be."

"Their bitch and her pack killed Old Jake, boy. I seen 'em eating his carcass out by the woods three days ago. I shot a female I reckon was their mother and nicked the leg o' another one. Coyotes are bad animals boy. They'll kill the livestock. Best to kill these before they can cause any trouble."

"No! I won't let you ki-"

Emmett's words were cut short by a backhand across the face.

"Dammit boy! You straighten up. We ain't runnin' no kinda halfway house for poor li'l animals here! The sooner you learn that the better. Now you take this pistol and you shoot them pups and maybe I'll let you shoot them hogs instead o' just stringin' 'em up and letting 'em scream."

Floyd Drouin thrust the pistol into his son's hands. Emmett had never shot an animal before. He always missed the mark intentionally when a deer or turkey wandered across his path, until his father decided the boy wasn't fit to carry a rifle any more.

"Can't miss at point blank range, boy," Floyd Drouin's sneer disappeared as Emmett leveled the pistol at his father. In the second before his shock became rage, the bullet destroyed Floyd

Drouin's frontal lobe and exited the top of his head, lodging in a roof beam of the old barn. He buckled and collapsed to the floor.

Emmett stood over his father, watching him like the animals that died at the hand of his father for the sake of feeding the family. Emmett remained stoic as his father's last breath came and went, and he felt proud that his father didn't squeal and scream like the pigs, but died with a quiet dignity like an old dog that went unnoticed into the woods.

the lampworker's daughter

my father made a point of it, to work on his universe each
night.

first the propane, then oxygen, then lining the walls with
flame-proof boards, all
in preparation to mold a galaxy from a square inch of blue
dichroic glass.

the trick, he would say, is to lose sight of individual stars
within the even rotations,
to remember your steady hands, never exposing the mirrored
side to the flame.

in the mornings there were galaxies turning in the bed of his
kiln.

the doctors said that there was something turning inside his
chest,
that the dark meat was bloodied by a series of snares: fiber
glass, metal fumes,
and a punty rod, rotating slightly slower than its twin.

this is the work of fathers, nurturing the tubes draining stars
from his chest.

the right time was the hour of guilt, me, just a daughter
standing in the hallway for hours outside his workshop, and
retreat.

so i was a shivering crescent, the wet circle like the dark
outline of a waned moon,
against a bed of sky, knowing the unfinished universe
collecting around me.

MATT STANGEL

Cinching sunned wire
"the clarity of twos and sub-par duality"

There are two bats, wings veined yellow, and a man cutting a lane of quick traffic — sharing quality with a fist of dirt or a hanging cloud, the way breaking glass can look soft before it settles. Simple. Their wings folding in the barn loft, or the carriage of an ambulance.

Crisp morning. White. Park washed warm. We are speaking, very casual, about retroactive healthcare. I wish to die under a shine sunned white, there will be no medical bills, only a revolver and something to make me feel nice. Two children steal an old man's wig, two benches down.

You could be a styrofoam mannequin, submitting to a scalpel, or a piece of salt waiting in a shaker. There are times when the cold blanket urges you to shy into a spine of grass, to go like a cat under a porch. Under the winter wind. In the winter barns burn yellow, the air is skinny, the cars sound louder.

This man wrinkling into a hospital bed. So many stitches, the rails, tracks start and tracks end, always cinching the soil. A handful of soil and a handful of brown rice together, billow of specks into the honeymoon pyre, the wire of memory bridging through hospital-bed morphine-drift.

The two bats living off the blood of a sleeping cow, this permanence in minnows falling forward in the stream, always, the old man chasing two boys for his wig.

Untitled

New year, don't break beautifully
Over trickling melancholy dawns,
When savage echoes sear our ears
And lick the lace of curtains drawn.

The twilight hour, bearing weight,
It feasts on all we borrowed,
People come when it seems gone
And kiss a new tomorrow.

Brick by Brick — Part I

James stood naked behind a podium. Behind him were the remains of the United Nations Headquarters. In front of him was the largest assembly of humans in recorded history.

“I never expected it to take us this far,” he said. The crowd was rapt, but they did not respond. They could not hear him. There was no electricity in New York for a microphone, and only a small segment of the mob spoke English.

Only the two figures at his side heard him. They were also naked, a man and a woman. They had no names, had never spoken. They understood what James said, and translated it for the mob. They did not speak.

They were survivors of the fall of the Tower of Babel.

. . .

Years ago, James committed what should have been the most lethal public shooting in recorded history. He covered himself in Kevlar body armor hidden under a Santa Claus costume. He filled the red velvet bag with an XM8 Carbine Assault Rifle, nine 30-round cartridges and three M-67 hand grenades.

He walked into the middle of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade and opened fire. There was mass panic. He tossed a grenade on the Muppets float. He shot at reindeer. He shot at children. He shot at balloons. James himself was shot nineteen times before he surrendered.

No one was hurt. The bullets James fired were blanks. The grenades he tossed were duds.

The survivors went home and ate the best Thanksgiving dinner they had ever tasted.

. . .

James was taken to a hospital and interrogated. He answered honestly, in great detail and with exceptional politeness. The authorities were startled by the affection in his voice. The last question they asked him was, "why?"

And he answered, "Every time a gunman attacks a mall or school they think they're martyrs, willing to die for a cause that they themselves created. But really, it's their victims they have martyred, dying for the gunners cause.

"What I did was the opposite. Each person I aimed at felt more alive than they had at any other point of their life. I wanted them to live, not die, for my cause."

And they asked, "What exactly is your cause?"

And he paused, then answered, "I'm not quite sure yet. But for now, I'd like everyone to know that I love them."

And they did not reply. But for some reason they truly wanted to say, "I love you too."

. . .

James was sent to a psychiatric clinic for a day, then to prison. He was charged with disrupting a public assembly.

Meanwhile, the international media was enthralled by the shooting. The video of Santa Claus ho-ho-hoing in the center of pandemonium was broadcasted in every major country. People found the whole episode quite hard to understand.

But it wasn't the violence that left them confused.

They could understand that.

It was that someone had committed such a violent act completely out of love for his victims. Violence they could handle. But this was foreign.

They craved answers.

James was released from prison. He served six days. He spoke to a mass of reporters and it was broadcasted live in every

major country. They all wanted to know his true motivation behind the shooting. They argued that he was a lunatic or just after attention. And in the end, he held true to his original purpose. He did it for love.

. . .

The day after his interview, four events took place. Two men in their late thirties walked to the center of a mall food court and opened fire with semiautomatic weapons. A teenage girl ran up the center bleachers of her high school shooting a pistol with each hand. A museum security guard shot his weapon at a gift shop checkout line. And an elderly woman fired a .22 rifle at her granddaughter.

The bullets they fired were blanks.

. . .

A month later, James was being prepared for execution. No one could have guessed how quickly his idea would spread. It was as if the world was waiting for it. He was declared a terrorist and convicted of treason. He was sentenced to death by firing squad. It was to take place at night, in public, and it was to be broadcasted live on international television.

A crowd of witnesses had assembled and they were ecstatic. All of them were screaming, and several of them held guns. Those with guns fired at everyone and no one, and those without laughed and cheered.

James' hands were cuffed behind his back. His feet were chained together. He was blindfolded and propped against a wall. The five members of the firing squad took their positions. The cameras zoomed in, and the crowd began to count down as one.

They shouted, "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one! Happy New Year!" and the gunmen pulled their triggers.

James was not hurt. The bullets they fired were blanks.

Pages from a Journal

My name is James, and there are two things you need to know about me.

I love you, as wholly and completely as a man can possibly love, and I am dead.

The reason I love you would be difficult to explain. The reason I died? I haven't the slightest idea.

I probably choked.

We spend our lives consuming and consuming. We are Renfield, Dracula's zoophagous maniac, forcing down as much life as we can. Feed flies to spiders, spiders to birds, birds to cats, but what then? Do we eat the cat and rub our bellies, or do we feed it to the dog and continue the cycle?

I don't know. I was not a wise man. But one thing I learned in my lifetime was this—once we establish ourselves in a land, after the initial conflict with nature is resolved, we turn our weapons against ourselves. We must move on to new territory or fight to stay where we are. But what will happen after there is no earth left to discover? After we have ate and fought and bred and pushed our dirt past its limit?

My love, I fear this is when God will show himself.

The earth will rumble and we will stare upward from our wreck in awe and instead of the sun we will see his jubilant, radiant face. And he will say, "Well done, my children." He will open his mouth, and seeing the plate is full, bring us to his lips and consume.

But I only suggested the possibility of choking because I was a careless eater.

In my last will and testament I left my best friend a single demand. Don't judge me too harshly, darling, I know I'm a bastard for that. Everyone else leaves behind money or

a house, and what does my lifelong companion get? A chore. I hope he forgave me.

Where I grew up, there was a busy intersection not too far away. Four lanes on all sides, it was a dam in the crushing flow of traffic. The drivers that coursed through every day were usually good people. But they had to see something, not to shatter their utopia but simply to shake it. They would appreciate it so much more.

And so, after I died but before the funeral, my friend was instructed to toss my naked body into the middle of that intersection. He was left with no further instructions, no mention of how to steal me away, what to tell my family, or how to retrieve me after my vacation was over, but I have absolutely no doubt that he accomplished this.

My love, I would have given my entire earthly existence to see its execution. I'd like to believe he drove into that junction and stopped right at its heart. The horns would start blaring and people would shout, furious that their current had been halted. Then he would rise through the sunroof of his car. He would lift me into the air and roar, blending with the yells and honks until they surrendered under his voice, and all would be calm.

He would be Moses, holding back the sea. He would be Moses, and I the staff.

Babel

The circadian rhythm of the Earth as a whole was tainted by
a catastrophic vibration.

This shattering tremor was caused by the destruction of an
unfathomably large mass

That was, at one point, the nesting roost of all humanity.

Regarding how the nest was destroyed,

It appears a quantity of bricks fell from a great height,

And provided a man with several phalangeal fractures.

He then let loose a noise that was the first of its kind.

And the humans around this man mimicked this noise,

For they appreciated the threat it contained, and wanted to
sound threatening as well.

And this great threat spread throughout the nest,

Until they realized they too were being threatened

And they began to kill each other.

And thus the nest fell apart,

And the humans scattered.

They made new nests, and lost bigger bricks.

To this day, they still make that sound.



Carnival, SAMUEL FORD, photography, 4" x 6"

Eleven Children Sans Charles Stephens at 1920

He built a wooden egg,
his arms and legs strapped
out like da Vinci's Man,
an anvil for a ballast lashed to his feet.
The plan was his shell would
protect him from the impact,
its buoyancy bobbing
him to the surface
unharméd.
The anvil would keep him upright.
But when he tipped like a scale
over the edge of the falls,
his egg shattered like a Christmas
ornament on the dolostone,
and his limbs went with fragments of hull
weighed down to the bottom
of the water.
Some broke free and red churn
bubbled up body parts.
A leg, an arm still cuffed to the Russian oak,
his head lost somewhere only to resurface
weeks later without eyes, soft gray, nibbled on.
Recovery teams picking his litter
up from the banks of the Niagara.

STACEY R. HAMMAN

For All You Don't Know

The spitting will start
on the tin roof of a front porch,
a steady cadence that builds and tumbles to batter your
sunken face
and fills the streets and saturates the lining of your rubber-
soled shoes.

If you can see this shelter, you'll take it
to wait out the thick of the storm,
wringing your hat with frozen hands,
the knuckled spines aching and blue.

When the day dies, your feet will trudge home,
the feeling gone from your ankles down.

If you can see the road before you,
the puddles show rain falling again.
Yet, only the streetlights flicker down.



Dandelion, MARLEY KIMMEL, photography, 4" x 6"

RICKEY FOUGHT

Simon

Simon bit into the apple. It was mealy. He thought about eating the entire apple, but threw it at a tree just past the wood shed. The apple hit the tree and made a wet mark on the bark. Simon looked around and sighed. He was restless and it was beginning to rain.

In the house it smelled like dirt. Simon liked the smell. It reminded him of the day he had helped his neighbor bury his dog. The dog had been hit by a car. The driver hadn't stopped. It was difficult to get the dog in the hole because he was stiff and was in a weird position. Simon was pretty sure he had heard a bone snap.

Outside the rain had become a steady downpour. Simon could see the water was beginning to flow up over the driveway. The culvert was blocked with dirt and rocks and didn't work so well anymore. There were deep ruts in the drive where the water had cut away the gravel and dirt. When he drove his car over the ruts he could hear his exhaust rattle.

Simon went upstairs in the old house and noticed how the humidity had made the door to the guest room swell so it would no longer close. Everything was beginning to show signs of the dampness.

He went to the bedroom. It had large windows and looked over the back of the house. Simon could see the wood shed, and he wondered if any of the wood would be dry enough for a fire. Maybe if he split it, he thought, the inside would be dry. He sat down on the bed and looked at the phone. She hadn't called. He wasn't the type to worry, but she should have been back hours before. Maybe

she ran into a friend in town and was having a drink. He decided that must be it.

The house was dark. Simon hadn't been aware of his sleeping. He hadn't dreamed. For months he hadn't had a dream that he could remember. He was convinced that he didn't dream anymore, but he couldn't tell her that. She was always talking about her dreams and everything about them. Sometimes he wondered if she made a little bit of it up to be more interesting.

Simon got up and looked out the window. The rain had slowed to a drizzle. He went downstairs. In the kitchen he opened the refrigerator and took out some bologna. He put some butter in a skillet and fried the bologna. He sliced an onion and put some mayonnaise on the bread. He cut the sandwich in half and went to the front porch.

He looked out at the driveway. He couldn't remember what she had been going to town for, or when she had said she was returning. A mosquito landed on his right arm and gorged itself on his blood. Simon swatted the mosquito and flattened it, leaving a blood smear on his ankle. He thought again of his neighbor's dog.

The drizzle stopped and the wind began to pick up. The trees all around the old house swayed and Simon liked the sound of the leaves. He sat on the rocking chair for what felt like a long time. He became restless and went in the kitchen. He washed the frying pan he had used. When he turned off the water the faucet dripped and he knew she would want him to fix it.

A car turned in the drive. Simon heard the exhaust rattle. He was glad she was back. The door creaked as she closed it and he thought that he should oil that door. She walked in with two plastic bags, one in either hand.

"I was beginning to wonder if you would ever make it

back,” Simon said.

“Yeah, sorry I took so long. I ran into a friend and had a drink.”

“Lemme give you a hand with those bags.”

He watched as she put the groceries away. She placed the cans in the cabinet with all the labels facing out. He liked the way she paid attention to details like that. “You hungry?” she asked.

“I had a sandwich.”

“Well, if you decide you want something, there’s some of those apples you like.”

She didn’t know the apples were mealy. He really only liked granny smith apples, but she always bought the red ones. They were always mealy. He looked at the faucet dripping.

“I’m glad it stopped raining,” she said absently.

The couple went upstairs, Simon following, and watching her. In the bedroom Simon lay under the crisp sheets while she brushed her teeth. She climbed into the bed next to him. He looked at her as she lay next to him, and he was happy to have her there. They both slept.

The house was bright when Simon woke. He wondered where she had gone. He got up and wandered to the kitchen. He took a mason jar from the cabinet and opened the refrigerator. He poured himself a glass of orange juice. The faucet was dripping. He looked out the window at the driveway, where the blocked culvert held countless days of rainwater. The wood shed stood alone in the yard. Simon liked splitting the wood. She liked to watch him split the wood. Simon looked at the phone. He tried to remember the last day it hadn’t rained. He couldn’t remember. He tried to remember the last time he had a dream. He couldn’t

remember.

He decided to shave. Simon hated shaving, but she liked a clean face, so he did it every two or three days. His razor was dull and pulled at the hairs when he dragged the blade across his skin. When he got to the part above his lip, he cut himself.

Simon went back downstairs and got an apple from the kitchen. He eyed the apple and squeezed it to feel if it was mealy. He took a bite. He threw the apple in the trash. A car turned into the driveway and Simon walked out onto the porch.

The deputy got out of his car and put on his hat. Simon noticed the plastic rain cover on the deputy's hat, and it reminded him of her shower cap.

"Mornin'," the deputy said to Simon.

"Mornin'. What brings you out here?"

"There's been an accident. The car was registered at this address..." the deputy broke off.

"What?" Simon asked.

"The young lady driving the car was killed," the sheriff said slowly.

Simon told the deputy he would drive into town later. He went back into the house. Simon looked out the window at the wood shed. It was pouring rain and he wished it would stop.

He lay down on the bed. When Simon woke it was dark in the house. It wasn't raining. He hadn't been aware that he was sleeping. He looked at the phone and as he reached for it, he stopped.

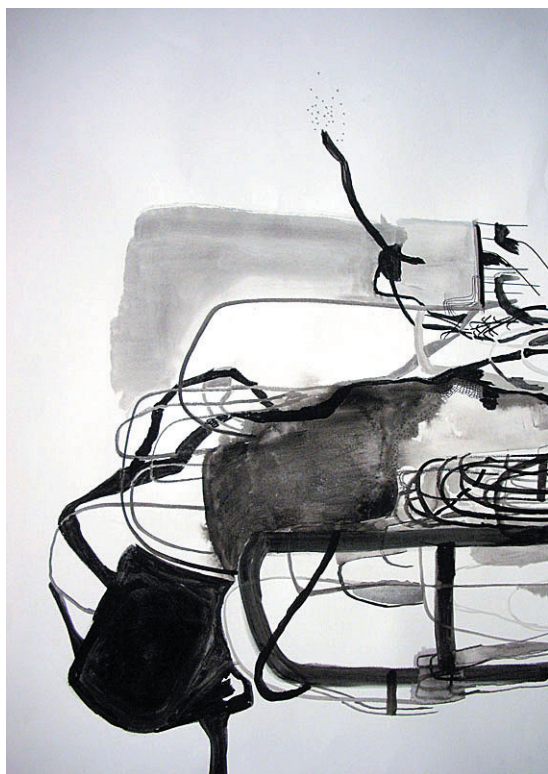
Simon remembered his dream with great clarity. He had gone down to the hospital. She was stiff with rigor mortis. After he identified her, they had released the body to him.

He had brought her home and was digging a grave for her behind the wood shed. When he tried to place her in the hole, she wouldn't fit. Simon had to get on his knees and push her in. He heard her spine crack as he pushed with all of his might. As he pitched the last of the dirt on her grave, it began to rain.

Light Rain

The popping sound that the rain
makes against the sill reminisces
gunfire heard in the French
countryside during World War II.
The nighttime moisture soothes
itself into skin.

Staring through the decrepit
window, I see faint light roaring
from the city, welting
thoughts that make one feel
as though they
are old, and
ghosts in this world.



Untitled Landscape, KATHERINE DUCKWORTH

Why Ninety-Nine Red Balloons

*are an incredible burden, and
completely un-symbolic, rather
than some variety of messiah.*

➤ Let's say that, yes, there are actually ninety-nine red balloons out there. You're probably lying face down on the bathroom floor right now, so let's say that ninety-nine = *red balloons just float on in. You know what you'd do? You don't, but I do. You'd fucking scream and go to Peking Buffet or wherever it is you get off and tell the woman behind the counter that you never fully understood the meaning of life. But this was not because of the balloons. The scream is, yes. But the meditation on life—completely coincidental.

➤ So you're at the beach. Your wife just showed you her cleavage, and you're feeling pretty good, but then all the sudden, ninety-nine fucking red balloons traipse on in. What do you do? I'll tell you what you do. You get a divorce. Now it's late Friday night, you're in Pasadena, and you just got kicked out of your favorite laundromat. You could really go for some cleavage right about now. But you fucked up.

➤ Some dullard at a party has you trapped in a corner, detailing the prospects of his life. You want to leave so you tell him about the ninety-nine red balloons. You wait, and you prick up your ears and keep your eyes peeled, but they never come. So the nerd just keeps talking to you about Microsoft PowerPoint. You pretend to pay attention so hard that you actually contract his disease. Now you're "married" and live in Celebration, Florida. Every morning he gets up super early and tends to his bonsai trees. You wake up three hours later

in a cold sweat. But he's there. Standing at the foot of the bed. You look closer. His fly is down, and you can detect the faint smell of helium on his breath. You demand to know what's going on. He doesn't answer. But then again, he never answers.

➤ You're getting old now. You live in a retirement home called Kingdom's Point. It's tomato soup day but the chef has called in sick. With extreme difficulty you pull the nurse in closer, closer, and ask what has become of lunch. She doesn't answer immediately. She hesitates. No. It's too late. You know what she's going to say. You try to turn away, but you have to confirm it for yourself. No. Slowly, through the open door, ninety-nine red balloons bob across the carpet toward you, their rubbery skin shriveled. You want some sort of confirmation. But the nurse tells you she never loved you, despite what you've done to her. With what must be your last ounce of strength you wheel yourself toward the bay window. Careful now, it's covered in blood.

Details

The young boy
walking hand-in-hand
with his mother
at night,
stomps
down
the
sidewalk
just to see the lights
in his spider man shoes
flicker red.

flash fiction



flash fiction

flash fic-tion - *noun*

1. spontaneously-written fiction characterized by its extreme brevity as measured by its length in words (between 250-1,000).

Catch, Caught, Release

Catch, caught, release. Catch, caught, release. Catch, caught—

The football hits a singular train-bound girl on the back between the shoulder blades and she turns. Baily from Michigan runs over to the older girl, whispering an apology too tiny to hear, the vulnerable kind of sincerity only a thin blonde kid with one braid in her hair could. She puts one whole hand on the traveler's back and the air goes thick with the warmth between them — she, a quiet black-clad girl sitting against the station wall, and the other, just a hand on the back of a stranger. She picks up the football and runs back to her even smaller brother, whose four-year old hands work in complicity to contain all of the rubber between them.

They continue, catch, caught, release, while I say nothing.

JOHN BOWERS

Story of My Harp

I decided to take a walk. I walked into the city, downtown, where I never walk. My aim was aimless and my time was timeless.

I'm not much of a shopper, but I saw an antique shop full of antiques. I went in and saw a large, mahogany harp. I told the shopkeeper that I wanted to buy it but had no way of getting it home. The shopkeeper told me that that was okay. He would deliver it to my door. I said okay. The next day the harp was at my door.

I've never played a harp before. I learned to play that one. In a harp playing contest I won second place. The girl who won first place played the same tune as me. It was my favorite tune. Afterwards we played together and I thought we would harmonize but we didn't.

I thought the way she played the tune was just fine, but I felt so close to the tune that I should have won first place. Instead she won. I'm not sure but I'm pretty sure that she didn't play that tune with everything I played with it. And when we played it together it was not in harmony.

Debra & the Pony

Champ was my first friend, Debra thought, as she stroked the cool, gleaming barrel of her shotgun, with a sense of duty and fear. The graceful creature whinnied and blew hot gusts of air out of its nostrils. The poor guy, trying to get a little buzz the only way a horse can. Deb smiled as she remembered the harness they put on him when he was younger, to keep him from ruining his lungs.

The waves of the ocean crashed, and water slid up around her heels. The fire from the engine felt warm, even from ten feet away. Deb took some time filling up empty sandbags at the beach before she started the engine. She saved the business with Champ for last.

The bite wasn't bleeding, but the infection had spread noticeably. Champ's skin was all ready decaying. The poor thing. Debra gripped a shotgun shell between her index finger and thumb, and slid the shell in. There weren't too many shells left: she'd have to make sure Champ was put down in a single shot. She might need the shells later.

Champ lowered his massive head, and nudged Deb in the stomach, pushing her back a bit. Maybe he was trying to tell her that he still had strength, still had fight left in him. She couldn't imagine how much strength he would have, when he became one of *them*.

She lifted the heavy barrel to just under her horse's jaw, and hesitated. The guy at the store had mentioned she wouldn't have to aim very hard to get a kill. Debra teared up a bit as she thought of overweight Dan, full of comic relief and pick-up lines. She remembered how he guaranteed even a horse would fit (somehow) in the basket. How the balloon would

be their way out, and how if he had just aimed a bit to the left, those things wouldn't have torn him apart. Champ can't become one of them, Debra growled.

"Damn you all!"

She pulled the trigger.

Champ's head popped up a bit, and then his legs tipped out from under him. He fell on his side, kicking up sand from the shore. Deb couldn't cry.

Debra brushed the sand from her blouse, took a last, wistful look at the now putrefying horse, and stepped into the basket of the hot air balloon.

Editor's note: the above story was conceived using a prompt borrowed from the article "Thirteen Writing Prompts," written by Dan Wiencek of McSweeney's Internet Tendency. The full article can be found at:

<http://www.mcsweeney.net/2006/5/4wiencek.html>

St. Anthony

"I can't do this anymore! This war has taken my soul! I can't think, I can't sleep, I can't eat, I can't fucking breathe!" exclaimed exclaimed Lt. Bertin. At just that moment something blew upstairs. He then proceeded in undressing in front of a statue of Saint Anthony and declared himself his pig.

Now, there were a few events leading up to Bertin's abrupt mental breakdown. They say war will take a man's life, even if he walks out alive. Bertin had seen some shit in his day. The fragile soul awoke every night to mortars and grenades blasting all around him in the French countryside. He held his best friend Johnny in his arms while he bled to death, screaming for help. He personally shot and killed three men, simply because they wore a different uniform than him; because they were born in another land than his own. Bertin didn't choose to spend the days of his fleeting youth on the edge, pondering his mortality with every breath. He didn't ask to carry a loaded rifle in his arms from sunrise to sunset, praying that he wouldn't have to pull the trigger ever again. He didn't ask Uncle Sam to send him on an all-expense paid trip to Hell. But Hitler laid the Blitzkrieg Bop on Poland, and the Japanese blew a hole through Pearl Harbor, and off he went.

Bertin came home, but he wasn't the same. He might as well be catching up on his eternal sleep. He spends most of his days pushing his shopping cart, having conversations in his mind. They say war will take a man's life, even if he walks out alive.

The Depths of Charity

Johnny Love broke the rubber band, welting his palm with the snapback, and threw another wad of hundred dollar bills at the group of dirtied survivors. Misty was in the back seat, tossing another bucket over the side. His right leg started to cramp up, he was pressing the gas so fucking hard. He loved that word, fucking. Made him feel warm and fuzzy inside. That's why he went into this business. But he had found a new meaning in life.

When that strange old man talked to him earlier, he never expected to be so grateful. But when the beggar, smelling of piss and beer belted out the most passionate karaoke of "It's Not Unusual" he'd ever heard, something came over him. Johnny found new meaning in his life. He immediately threw a fistful of twenties into the homeless man's face, and then unzipped his pants.

He dropped acid to spark his motivation. Ideas formed in his head, then fucked each other, procreating and fucking, some giant incestuous orgy. Money no longer mattered to him, so long as he did this one great deed for the city! God, it made him horny just thinking about it.

Why couldn't he have thought of that before? Why had it never occurred to him? After all, the porn industry doesn't do enough for the common people, and what better way to donate charity to them?

Snapping open his cell phone, Johnny Love called up his best girl, Misty Sunshine, and snapped wonderful promises and seductive one-liners into her ear.

"Charity?" Misty asked.

“See, it would be like a money-shot, only with real money, and then a free golden shower! We’ll just drive around, looking for groups of homeless people, and shower them with green and gold!”

“That sounds so deep. I love it when you say deep things. I’ll do it!”

A few hours later, Johnny Love had withdrew half a million dollars – money earned from movies like “Fucking in the Rain” and “The Sound of Porn Music.” In the latter he played a particularly passionate role as a Nazi soldier. He was dashing to pull buckets of liquid gold into the car, even splashing some on his leather seats. He didn’t care anymore, and Misty was used to it. He could hear the sound of liquid bouncing off metal, reverberating in his ears, and Johnny licked his lips in anticipation.

“This will be the pinnacle of all the good deeds I’ve ever done in my life! We’ll be remembered for ages! You ready, Misty?”

“Yeah, this’ll be my last bucket!” Misty shouted, chugging a gallon container of water and squatting over a tin bucket, until the urine splashing against her thighs let her know: this bucket was full.

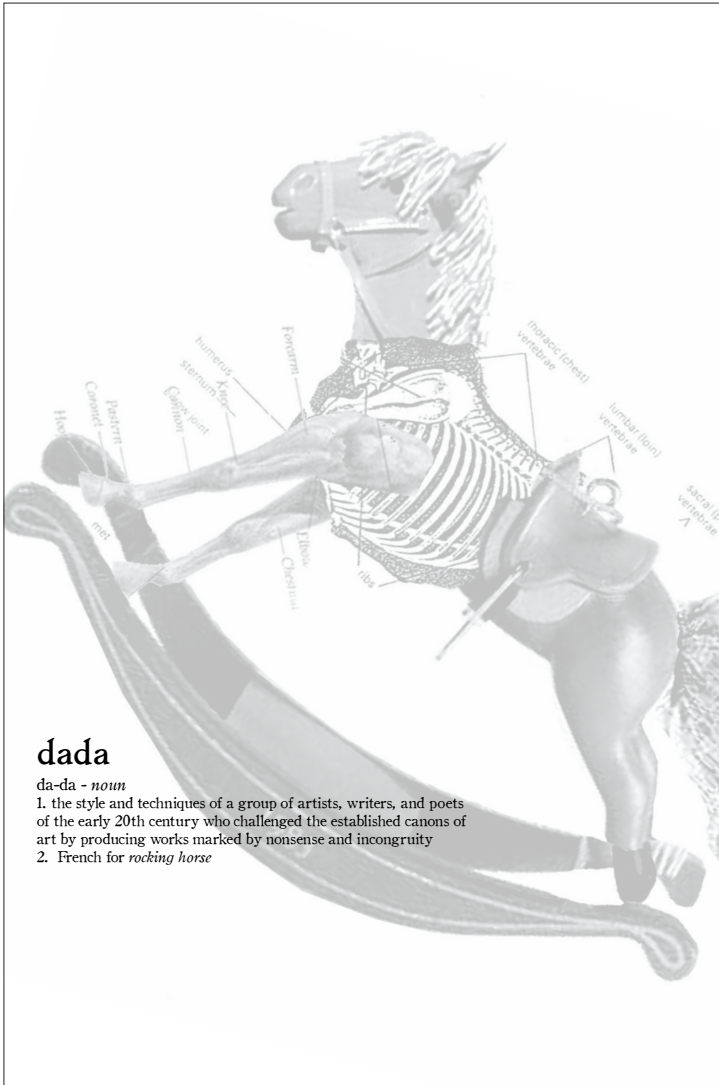
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Story without E

That willow was a bastion of his history. So many thoughts lost in its canopy. Hours lost in its shadow post-school doing awful things within public sight. Playing truant from school and almost flunking biology, in favor of fooling around at Nottoway Park. Months after graduation, Alan had to allow thoughts of days past to push him back to autumn. Him lying on grass, Sara lying on top of him. Annuals past without Sara visiting, but Alan saw Sara's soul in plants and grass. His family would put his ash body at Nottoway.

dada



dada

da-da - *noun*

1. the style and techniques of a group of artists, writers, and poets of the early 20th century who challenged the established canons of art by producing works marked by nonsense and incongruity
2. French for *rocking horse*

ROBERT CEMPROLA


*Poem made with
newsprint, by chance.*

Disparate a-acknowledgements and...discover!
automatic deeper asthma?
door advantageous
displaced answers, diseases, aquatics:
deli addresses down advertise dominion
ain'tcha divided?
Dispute across decade.



Photomontage I, ANDREW OLAH

Yuletide celebrated and lights that
of festive centuries, Folly
Boughs of versions and
successive Christmases For
the ornaments their
holiday trees generations
past adorn our
own holiday of
how decorations. symbols
But are with
have The



did these traditions begin?

Return to Seasons, BOBBY CEMPROLA



Irony is a fake idea., ANONYMOUS

JOSHUA PUCCI

L'absurde

The laconic Joshua Pucci appeared on the night of the 27th, and over the course of two and a half hours, used an X-Acto blade to cut out 452 words from various articles published in the March 20th, 2008 issue of VCU's *The Commonwealth Times*. The words were arranged on an 8 ½ by 11 sheet of ultra white printer paper, but not affixed to the page.

He called me over and showed me.

He blew gently.

The Student Media Center, part of the Student Affairs and Enrollment Services division at Virginia Commonwealth University, is a resource center for recognized independent student media at VCU. Current recognized student media include Poictesme; Amendment, another literary journal; The Commonwealth Times newspaper; The Vine, a quarterly magazine; and WVCW radio.

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