

2005

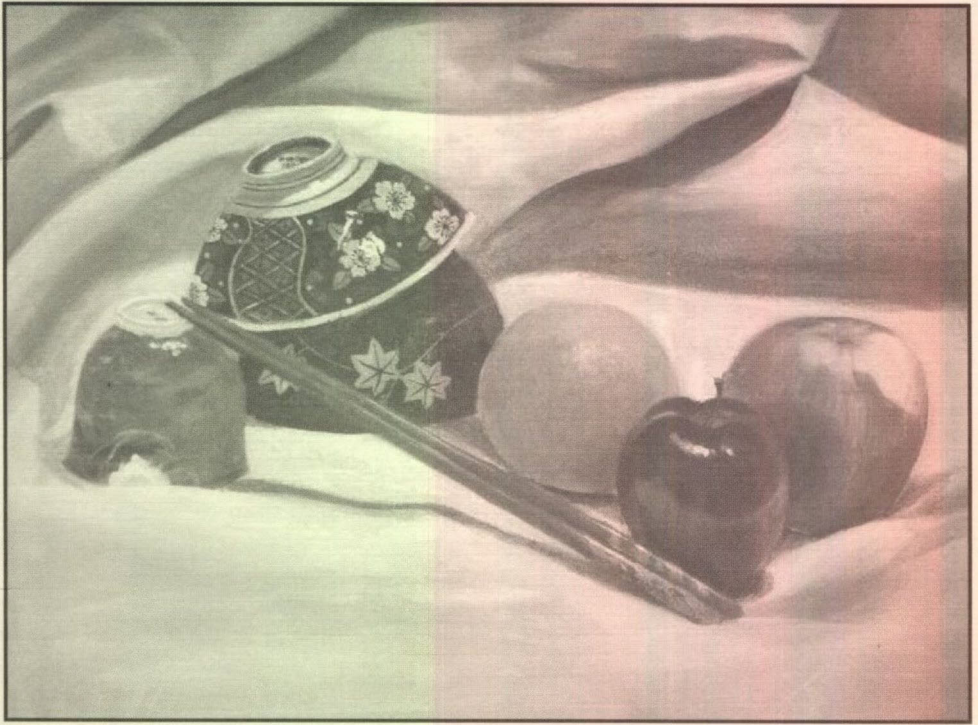
Spectrum, 2005

Northwestern College

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Spectrum 2005

Dear Reader,

Architect Charles Moore writes in his forward to Junichiro Tanizaki's "In Praise of Shadows":

One of the basic human requirements is the need to dwell, and one of the central human acts is the act of inhabiting, of connecting ourselves, however temporarily, with a place on the planet which belongs to us, and to which we belong.

Inside this issue of *Spectrum* you will find many creative explorations of place, both close and common to us as well as those far away. For college students the question of place is just as primary as questions of vocation and relationships. Many of us are away from our homes, but we are aware of being *from* a home; we come from somewhere. We are also going elsewhere. These tensions are deeply rooted in questions of our identity and purpose.

This search for true dwelling is a difficult one. Moore explains that belonging "is not...an easy act...and it requires help: we need allies in inhabitation." We hope that in this year's *Spectrum* you will find in the creative writers of our campus those "allies in inhabitation."

Ryan Pendell, editor

Benjamin Brownson, copy editor

Allison Simmons, layout & design editor

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Ryan Pendell, Editor
Benjamin Brownson, Copy Editor
Allison Simmons, Layout & Design Editor

Joanna Trapp, Advisor
Martin Cockroft, Advisor

Akane Yokoo, Artist

Joanna Klink, Off-Campus Judge

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Hannah Dutt, David Elder, Clarissa Janssen, Maggie Keelan,
Ryan Pendell, Allison Simmons, Joanna Trapp, Katie Van Eton

Pluim Publishing Orange City, Iowa

Dear Reader,

Our country is at war. Why are we reading poems and stories? Why are we writing poems and stories?

The work in this issue attests to the very basic impulse to feel alive. I was moved by the evident desire, in these pieces, to respond to our broken country, our broken-down world, to search for words that might describe how terribly, radiantly complex this world is. So often in our lives we must struggle to feel something in the absence of complete understanding. Isn't it the purest form of honesty to be exact in our language about what we strain and frequently fail to see? And isn't it true that to feel anything honestly and precisely, we must clear away the commonplaces and clichés, the very pressures of routine and habit that threaten to wear away the language we use, to wear away our lives? When we engage with language in a meaningful way, we revitalize ourselves; we keep ourselves from feeling numb; we keep alive our capacity to respond. Like the author of "Winter Walk" who, with a deeply perceptive eye, registers, on a cold late-night stroll through the neighborhood, a world turned faintly strange. Among the glass suspensions of snow and night-clouds, she senses that even her own face is changed. Or like the author of "Down Winding Roads," in her sustained and beautiful account of accompanying her father on veterinary calls, who offers us a glimpse into the mysteries of a teenager growing independent, feeling the depths open up within the outline of who she is. These writers show us what it means to be instructed by the world; they point to a world within the world we live in, one that is full of shifting depths and strangenesses. I have not answered the opening question. But it seems evident that as human beings and as Americans in the year 2005, we have lost sight of who we are, what we stand for, and how to be attentive to and responsible for each other—evident, then, that we must altogether rethink and re-feel what it means to respond. "This is," writes Wallace Stevens in his poem "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,"

the intensest rendezvous.

It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a
warmth,

A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

—Joanna Klink

Joanna Klink is an Assistant Professor at University of Montana's MFA Program and author of They Are Sleeping. 2003 Rona Jaffe Writer's Award recipient.

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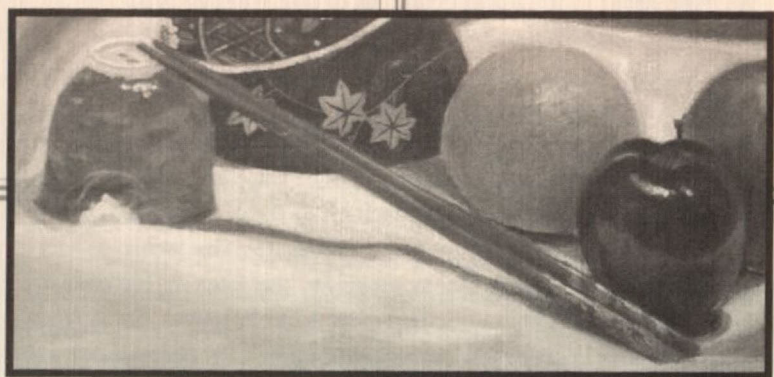
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Creative Non-Fiction

Down Winding Roads

by Erica Romkema

On Saturday afternoons and hot summer days, my sister and brothers and I ride with our father on veterinary calls. Mom shoos us out of our small house in town so that we can experience the country and she can get some work done. We slide onto the cushioned seat of the truck and bounce a few times to get comfortable—making sure, of course, that we have a good view out of the windows. The truck smells of dust and dried manure; the dashboard has dirt worn into the ridges, the windshield is speckled with mud, and the mats on the floor hold scatterings of gravel. The seat is crowded with maps and appointment books, syringes, boxes containing jars of medicine, and strange scissors and utensils that we toy with. The small front compartments of the truck hold old pens, thermometers, miniature feed company calendars, and usually several vials of blood. A little yarn-and-plastic sailboat hangs from the rear-view mirror. I made the boat as a preschool art project, and it has hung in the truck for so long that the sails have turned brown and the bottom seems ready to fall off at the next bump in the road.

We leave orderly city blocks behind us to take winding roads around lakes and into farmland. Dad drives a lot faster than Mom on gravel roads so that a cloud of dust rises behind us and we are loud through the land, cutting into fields of corn and alfalfa, passing by countless dairy barns and pastures so full of Holsteins we think we'll never stop seeing in black-and-white. Dad rolls down the windows and turns the radio to country, which makes us laugh and feel a little naughty since at home we're only allowed to listen to Raffi or the Maranatha singers.

Afternoons with Dad mean we get to visit at least five farms, usually more. We attempt to fix those places in our memories so that later we can compare them with one another and pinpoint certain ones as our favorites. Some farms we are sure to remember because they have unique animals, or children our ages, or especially exciting places to play. Others we remember because they're extreme, like the farm that is full of flies and so filthy that we prefer to stay in the truck rather than fight the manure and germs that seem to get into our skin even as we sit there; or like the farm that is so clean and orderly we can only look around at everything but not touch, not play, afraid we'll mess up the white fences and shiny painted signs and the perfect gravel drive.

We find that most places, however, are fairly similar, with several barns and a few flies per cow and just the right amount of dirt to make tire tracks leading to where we need to go. We tumble out of the truck and hang around the back as Dad pulls on his rubber boots and nods hello to the farmer. Usually a dog comes running up to bark at us and sniff the tires, and we decide whether to pet it or shy

away depending on the appearance and sound of the creature. We like the golden retriever and collie mixes, but the rambunctious Labradors and thick-necked shepherds make us uncertain, especially if they're dirty. We are town kids, after all.

As Dad converses with the farmer, he goes around opening and sorting through different compartments in the back of his truck. To us the unit seems magical, gassing open to reveal jars and bottles of all shapes and sizes, strong smells, extremely long plastic gloves and all sorts of things we like to play with but rarely know how to use. We clamber up onto the tailgate and slide the drawers back and forth, open the top, peer inside and mess everything up—but that's all right, because it's already kind of thrown together. Dad tosses a plastic glove, a few utensils, and some big bottles into a bucket; he waves us off the tailgate to shut it and we scamper after him toward one of the barns.

The barns are wonderful places, with large, noisy fans and feed rooms and milk rooms and multi-colored cats and rows of cows and large, spacious haylofts. We almost always go through the milk room first, which somehow smells like milk and bleach at once in a clean, delicious sort of way. In the middle of the room stands a large silver tank, where the milk flows after it's made its way through the clear containers hanging and chugging on the walls. I want to open up that shiny tank and scoop out a dipperful; I imagine that the milk will taste more real, somehow, than the milk we buy in gallon jugs at the store.

After Dad has filled a bucket with hot water from the sink, we push through a worn swinging door into the main portion of the barn, where the scents and particles of hay, grain, and manure thicken the air. We make our way down a row of cows until Dad finds where he needs to be; then my sister or brother and I watch him until we decide whether we want to observe the procedure or not. Once we've seen something three times that's about enough. Dad handles endless milk fevers (with a shot of calcium) and cases of mastitis (using antibiotics and creams to treat the infected udder). If he doesn't have either one of those the next most likely guess would be a DA, displaced abomasum (or twisted stomach). I have watched my father perform DAs with fascination several times and am amazed at how little blood there is and how still the cow stands. Dad cuts a slit in the cow's side and sticks his arm in and works around until he gets the stomach back into position. It's during one of these procedures that I realize what a scary and interesting and important occupation my father has, and a part of me wants to try to do what he does, but I still can't help finding the operation kind of gross, if somewhat less gross than when Dad sticks his arm into other places on animals.

If my siblings and I decide that the procedure is going to be too bloody or uninteresting, we wander off to amuse ourselves elsewhere. We make our way down the line of cows, trampling through their hay bunks or crunching over spilled grain, and we attempt to discover some unique quality to each animal. We pick out

our favorites—the ones with the most white, or the ones with the biggest ears, or the ones with hearts on their foreheads and maps on their sides—and we give them our own names and pretend they're ours. We're careful not to stand close to the gutters, though; we know how far those cows can shoot out streams of pee and poop if they get a good start. The gutters are the worst thing about the barns, catching piles of manure and urine and afterbirth and letting them run together. Nasty, we think, and yet we stare at those stretches of filth in a sort of thrill at the disgustingness.

After we've spent enough time with the cows—which is usually longer if the farmer has doe-eyed Jerseys or long-lashed Brown Swiss—we find the calves, the darling, tamer, softer (though often more headstrong) versions of their mothers. This effort sometimes means venturing to another barn and, in unfortunate cases, wading through manure-filled pens. And if the farmer has some calves, which he usually does, we slap at their wet noses and stare at their big eyes and let them suck on our fingers. Too often one or another of the calves has scours smelly enough to stink up the barn, but we tell the calf that our dad will come and fix that with some medicine in a little while—and if Dad doesn't know about the problem we are sure to inform him. We draw away with hands thick with saliva, which we wipe on hay or our pants or the calves themselves, and bend and twist the calves' fuzzy ears. On particularly good days we happen to be around at feeding time, and the farmer's kids in their scruffy jeans and scuffed up boots show us how to feed the calves with bottles of milk replacer and how they've trained several calves to drink from a bucket.

My sister makes sure we go in search of kittens. Often the farmer bends down to point out where a litter might be hiding: "You can sneak in there when the mama cat ain't around and try and find 'em." We dig through piles and bales of hay, search through cubbyholes, crawl under staircases, even peer into semi-hollow posts until we discover the kittens and pull them out by the unwilling scruffs of their necks. We cradle them in our laps, look into those streaky green eyes, and laugh in pity at their confused, helpless faces. We imitate their tiny mews and hand them back and forth to each other, getting needle-fine scratches in our fingers and on our shoulders and necks until we've had enough, or Dad comes to fetch us, in which latter case we beg him for ten minutes to let us take one of the kittens home.

The best farms, though—which include my best friend Sara's—are those with big, shadowy haylofts. I hope Dad has a long job to do when we go to places like that so my sister or brother and I can take our time building forts, or swinging from fraying ropes, or climbing and sliding and jumping from bale to bale until Dad calls us and we scramble down the ladder with hay caught in our hair and our pants and our sleeves, and scratches bright down our arms.

Yet my sister and I stop riding with our father when we grow into adolescence, when in the beginnings of womanhood we find Dad strange to talk to, and the farmers are serious when they ask if we've come to help, and especially when a wild-haired farmwife yells at us for running around and bothering their animals. We seem to realize that we've somehow lost our rights to a world we were allowed to slip curiously in and out of through childhood. As we become distracted with school activities, however—with tennis, swimming, musicals, band, ballet, and gymnastics—we hardly notice the transition. We half-consciously let go of old practices as seems appropriate.

When a year or two later our parents buy us our own small farm and fill the barns with hay and calves and new puppies, we find ourselves unexpectedly glad for those early rides with dad. Thanks to afternoons of farm-visiting we can wander comfortably through a pasture thick with cows and mud pies; we know how to feed calves and determine whether or not they're sick; we can guess the best hiding places for the latest batch of puppies or kittens and have the requisite gentleness for handling them; and despite being in junior high and high school we can still make pretty swell forts from a pile of hay bales. We rarely climb into the truck with Dad anymore; but when he rounds his pickup out of the driveway to answer another call, we wave at him from inside our barn, with hay poking out of our sleeves. ❀

Good-bye Nizhni

by Clarissa Janssen

I'm sitting in the back of a dark green, dilapidated taxi—the stench of cat urine filling my nostrils—and wondering if I have the willpower to keep from vomiting all over the seat in front of me. The taxi service promised our vehicle would be a Jeep Cherokee, but it's just another Volga sedan, courtesy of the GAZ car factory here in Nizhni Novgorod. The stout, silent driver careens around each icy corner, braking and rapidly accelerating again, making me more nauseous with every second. I just want to get to the train station and out of this car. "Don't throw up! This is the last time you'll see these streets or be with these people. Don't ruin it!" I command myself. Today is Easter Sunday. I am leaving Nizhni Novgorod for good. When I came to Nizhni three months ago, I was disoriented as we drove the unfamiliar, dark streets to our dorm. Now the afternoon sun sheds light on the shabby apartment buildings and dirty streets I have learned to love and call home.

Ira, my host mother, sits shotgun next to the driver. She called it back in the apartment. I smile remembering my feeble attempts to explain to Ira why we call "shotgun" with Zhenya interpreting only a few minutes earlier. Ira is calm and collected—a picture of beauty and eccentricity—her short black hair with purple highlights accenting her small, square features.

Zhenya is sitting next to me in the back. Her waist-length brown hair, which I openly covet, hides the side of her face. She is quiet and subdued, occasionally giving me a half-hearted smile, but I know that she and Ira have hosted at least six girls before me. My going will mean more to me than it does to them. They will probably host another girl in the autumn.

Another nauseating whiff. Don't Ira and Zhenya notice? Perhaps they are used to the smells of urine, cigarettes, and car exhaust I associate with Russia. They know how to make due amidst ugliness and filth. They've been doing it their whole lives.

We drive by a church, and I am reminded that my day began at a midnight Easter service. My friend, Laura, and I had stood in a tiny church with hundreds of other Russians holding candles inches from the person in front of us, praying the person behind us wouldn't start our hair on fire, and celebrating Christ's resurrection. We had followed the procession of priests, icons, and singers around the church. We had stood awed by the beautiful ceremony, humming along to a tune familiar to our ears but unable to sing words we did not know or understand.

Afterwards, we walked the two hours back to my apartment to sleep, shivering with cold and fear that marauding taxi drivers and holiday drunks would accost us. Safely at home in my uncomfortable, little bed, our conversation lasted until,

exhausted, we fell asleep at 5 A.M.

A jolt of the taxi brings me back from my thoughts, and I begin to take the driver's actions personally. Perhaps he deserves to have me empty the contents of my stomach on the fuzzy fur hat resting on his ears. But I cannot do that. Ira and Zhenya would be very disappointed in me. They have been too kind and generous. I cannot let my last moments with them be spent in embarrassment, even if they did force me to celebrate Paskha (Easter) with them and consume the food and forbidden shots of vodka that now clamor to leave my stomach.

I fight back tears. I do not want to leave. Never before have I had to say good-bye to such good friends, knowing I will most likely never see them again.

I wish I could see Nikolai Yevgenievich, the sweet elderly man I lovingly refer to as my Russian grandfather. I wonder whether the church where I helped Nikolai carry away the rubble of years of misuse will survive. So much work is still needed to convert it from an abandoned bread factory back to its original religious purpose.

Nikolai always surprised and shamed me. A man who had become a Christian about the same time the Soviet Union collapsed, Nikolai had devoted his life to the church, and every Friday his short, wiry frame instructed me in the merits of Orthodoxy and scolded, "No Klara! You not carry so much! You *dyevushka* (girl)! Someday you have babies. *Tolka dva!* (Only two!)" He would seize the three or four metal trays I was carrying and leave me empty-handed. "Nyet! (No!)" I objected passionately, glaring defiantly and scolding him with raised fists. He shook his fist back, mockingly. Nikolai's coddling always frustrated me, but eventually I realized he carried my trays as a labor of love.

Earlier that day I shared a Paskha meal with Nikolai and his wife in his small, dark apartment decorated in 1970s browns—eating food laden with eggs, sugar and oil forbidden during the Post (Lenten) fast. He and I talked. His wife quietly served us. He showed me pictures of himself as a young man in the navy. I compared his wrinkled skin and thinning hair to the muscular boy in the pictures, and I was sad. He walked me to the trolley afterwards, and with tears streaming down his face he said to me, "Good-bye Klara, my joy."

We are crossing the Oka River as we near the train station. At least the driver cannot turn sharp corners on a straight bridge. Even while I urgently need to get out of the car, I begin to dread it. I cannot bear to say good-bye just yet. A statue of Lenin, hand outstretched, passes on my left, and too soon we are at the station.

Ira, Zhenya and I grab my bags as we look for the rest of my group. We spot the large, awkward group of American college students and Russian families and start towards them. Many red eyes greet mine. Ira and Zhenya do not cry. "It is not time for tears yet. Later," Ira states. I pathetically attempt to check my tears, finally stopping. As we stand around waiting for the train, the agony of the end drags on

and on. My throat aches with suppressed crying.

Suddenly, I see a familiar man. It is Nikolai!!!! Why is he here? He told me he could not come. But it is Nikolai! I excitedly run to hug him. I am so glad to see him, and once again tears begin to run down my cheeks. Unlike Ira, Nikolai cries with me. After several minutes the faucets in my eyes slow, and I regain tenuous control of myself.

I introduce Nikolai to Zhenya and Ira, and they exchange polite words about me and other things I cannot understand. Uneasiness and a sense that there is nothing else to say but the good-bye I cannot and will not say yet overtakes me. My eyes drift to my fellow travelers. The same look shows in their eyes. I am torn between not wanting to leave and desperately needing closure—or at least the end of this emotional limbo.

The time comes. We move to the platform—a step closer to the end, but still not the end. The long, cold, blue train sits ready for us to board. Now tears flow freely down all faces.

Tearful good-byes and last-minute photographs are taken to preserve our last, puffy-eyed moments in Nizhni. Laura and her host sister stand next to Zhenya and me. I try to tease Zhenya into smile, but she stubbornly maintains the usual, tight-lipped smirk she reserves for the camera. I try again a bit more forcefully. She refuses, and her frustration explodes in an emphatic, “No!”

Guilt rocks me. I am fighting with my sister, and I am about to leave her. I apologize, pleading for her forgiveness. She forgives me. We take the picture.

After I hug Nikolai, Ira, Zhenya, and several other friends, I follow the other American students onto the train, sniffling and trying to find an open bunk through the tears in my eyes. I throw my things onto a top bunk in a compartment with three other sobbing girls. The anguish in the room is suffocating. We press our faces to the cold glass windows, looking one last time at our friends and families.

From her spot on the platform Zhenya’s face is a river of tears, but Nikolai and Ira, their eyes equally as red, sternly admonish me not to cry any more. I try, but I fail. I call out, “I love you! I love you! Good-bye!” though I know they cannot hear me. The pitiless train sits motionless on the tracks, and I weep uncontrollably, glued to a corner of the window that separates me from Zhenya, Ira and Nikolai.

Finally, the train begins to move, slowly. The people on the platform walk with us at first, waving and crying. The train gathers speed, and they are quickly left behind. Sobs rack my body. In my pre-trip information packet, amidst the pages on hepatitis vaccinations, warm clothing, Red Square and Orthodoxy, no one mentioned that I would have to say good-bye. ❁

Journeying by Erica Romkema

Several thousand miles and months of rain. Foreign accents, foreign food, foreign faces. Buses splashing mud, worn honeyed buildings, chunky towers from the fifteenth century. Early morning mists. Mile-long walks to find a stretch of green, anything green, please.

She liked England. She liked the sounds and colors of people in the city, the cozy abundance of tea and shortbread, the habits the natives had of calling her “darling” or “love” when she bought fruit at the market. She liked watching them, listening to them, trying to imagine how one perceived the world upon growing up in a country the size of the state of Oregon. The island seemed a very small thing to feel patriotic about—but the British were fiercely loyal, if somewhat uncertain about their country’s purpose now that their empire was gone.

The funny thing, she found, was that as she sat drinking English Breakfast in her dorm room she became conscious of an affection for her home country, for the enormous venture that became the United States of America. From across the ocean she suddenly understood; she saw the wealth of dreams, the sacrifice and struggle, the mistakes and the attempts at correction. She saw, too, that her country was large and diverse and still, in places, wild; and she was struck by the fact that she hadn’t seen very much of it. She wondered why she’d flown over the ocean to come and sit in a city when the Grand Canyon and the Great Plains and the Cascade Mountains awaited her back home.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. Before she left she had teased her parents that maybe she wouldn’t come back. Friends predicted that she’d meet a nice British boy and settle down with him in the United Kingdom. She snorted at that, but she did expect to love England so much that she’d stay there forever and live in a dream, the worlds of Jane Austen and James Herriot. She wandered out into the country looking for such dreams. She found the rural areas sweet and quaint and comfortable, but—lacking. She couldn’t figure out why, at first. She finally concluded that this place was too controlled for her. Too quaint. Too pretty. It lacked a sense of adventure. It lacked overwhelming space. It lacked a mix of European immigrants, of the blue-eyed Germans and dark-haired Bohemians and fair Scandinavians of home. It lacked Hispanics with their fast lyric phrases and deep-eyed children. It lacked the smack of pioneer hardness and hope that still lingered where she lived.

She struggled. She had loved reading American stories as a child, had felt that her country was exciting and special; but as she got older all she could see were the problems and corruption, the great wrongs that settlers and politicians had wreaked upon others. She began to hate and resent her nation. She buried

herself in British history and literature. She imagined an old, perfect, proper little country across the water. She believed she belonged there instead. She counted the months until she could go.

And now—what was happening? She felt, somehow, that she oughtn't to love her country; that she was being close-minded and selfish and even un-Christian by doing so. But she couldn't help it; she stared out at the paved sidewalks and wished for cornfields. Maybe this was only homesickness. She would get over that. But she wasn't longing simply for her hometown and her family. She longed for Maine and Kentucky, Utah and Texas, Alabama and Montana. She longed for the entire country, perhaps the unfamiliar even more than the familiar.

When in April her west-bound plane landed in New Jersey she wore a wide, goofy grin, but she didn't care. She beamed at the passport inspector who greeted her with American English and a "Welcome home." When her second flight landed in Omaha she looked outside and got shivers from the stretches of land and the enormous sky.

She thought about the experience over the summer. Tried to figure out what had happened. Most people go away to expand their ways of thinking. Had she instead become more closed, more self-centered, more sickeningly self-satisfied American? Had she failed in her study abroad experience? She chewed her lower lip and wrote journals and tried to make herself love England more and America less.

Sometime the next fall, paging through an atlas, she realized that she was fine. It was all right. She still loved England; she wanted to fly back and hike through Yorkshire, maybe wander into Scotland and Ireland. Further, she wanted to circle the Mediterranean and ride camels through Morocco. She hoped to tango in Argentina, sail through Indonesia, and climb mountains in China. She was determined to see Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and even more determined to find some way to connect with their people.

She still loved the world. But she could love her own country at the same time—even if that country often forgot to love the world with her. More good was likely to come, she thought, not if she turned against her own nation but rather if she loved it enough to work with it through its problems.

She flipped to a map of North America. She marked an X on every state she hadn't visited. She spent the evening planning road trips for the following summer. ☺

Four-Appointments with the Homeless Lady

by Tracy Scott

One

Observe my neighbors. Shouldn't one be aware of the people who live about her? So I hesitate in the doorway at 1 Vandon Street and watch those that surround me. These people often stare back, and we observe each other.

From an entryway down the narrow street, a woman appears to be well aged. Rolls of fat spill over the waist of her shorts and her hefty thighs are pasty white in color. The lady's skin is wrinkled, but I know that it is not wrinkled from age. It is crumpled, rather, from years of a rough life. This woman's skirt is tattered, stained, and dirty. The extra large white shirt clings to her body, hardly fitting but covering the areas that need to be covered. Her shorts don't fit any better. They are short and reveal too much. This lady is poor. Her face gives this away as well. Her hard eyes focus only on the task before her, ignoring the world around her. The lady's hair is shaved off, almost to the skin. Her large, stoic face is almost manly. It lacks any expression.

Standing with both feet planted on the ground, she grabs the sides of her shorts and pulls down. She takes off her shorts, lays them aside, and reaches for a skirt. Quickly she pulls it over the chunky thighs, over the rolls of fat, and up to her waist. She bends over to pick up her shorts and her buttocks spill out, a display for any passerby to see. Is she homeless?

If she is hungry, cold, and in need, why is she avoiding the world around her that might help? Why are her eyes turned away? Her voice silent? Where is the expression of suffering? She appears to be in acceptance of her lifestyle, a lifestyle that she cannot change but wishes she could.

Two

"Good morning," she greets me. Her voice echoes off the old, brick buildings that surround us.

"Good morning," I reply, smiling cheerfully, hiding my insecurity.

"How are you doing?"

"Great! How are you?"

"Good. What a beautiful morning!"

I pause to look up beyond the three story buildings and at the blue sky, accented with puffy white clouds. What a rarity in rainy London.

"Yes, it is. Have a good day." I continue to walk down the empty street, passing her by as I approach the tube station.

She turns to her bed and begins to pack it up for the day. One by one, she picks up the cardboard boxes, flattens them, and stacks them neatly in a pile to

the side of her doorway. All the while, she does not show any emotion. This is a stark contrast from the cheerfulness of her voice as she greeted me this particular morning. I continue to walk away, wondering what she will do for the next fourteen hours before her day concludes.

Three

I am stepping out of the tube station when I see another student walking to our home. We fall into step with one another, chatting as we walk. After a block of pubs, shops, and office flats, we turn down the narrow, dark alley which will lead us to our door. We step over the puddles as we go.

"Do you know what these puddles are from?" my classmate asks me.

"Rain?"

"No."

I realize it had not rained in days.

"They are from the homeless lady that sleeps on our street."

"What do you mean?"

"She pees in this alley. She has to go somewhere."

I jump over a large puddle.

"My boss told me that the other day. Weird, huh?"

Four

First thing in the morning, I rush outside to look for the lady. I am about to leave London and have extra pounds that will be useless to me in a few hours. I open the door to 1 Vandon Street and peer down the narrow road. Nothing. She's gone.

I walk to her entryway, looking for signs as to her whereabouts. Her cardboard is neatly stacked in a pile, pushed to the side of her space. I glance down the lonely alley. Puddles are still there. ☹

The Game of Life

by Jessica Babcock

On Thursday April 28, I went to the prairie to watch it burn, to see smoke billow into the sky and pheasants follow suit. I went to the prairie to watch it burn—and ended up playing God.

I am late, of course. When I get there everything is already charred black except for a few small green islands standing resolutely against the crackling orange waves lapping at their shores. The firemen have things under control, so my companions and I decide to go look around. We walk along the edge of the prairie that has been both our bane and our delight for a long line of ecology courses, remarking on how disconcerting it is to have a clear line of vision from one end of it to the other.

Becky, Mel, and Stacie tell me about all of the pheasants that had flown out of the thick cover just as the flames had closed in on them. I wish I could have seen that. We walk through the sooty remains of grasses commenting on how quickly the burn had gone.

"I'm just glad we didn't have to burn it on our own. That definitely would have stressed me out," says Stacie.

"Oh! Baby . . ." coos Becky.

The rest of us look down to see the small shape of a baby rabbit at our feet. About the size of a hamster, the fur of this little creature is singed black, making it look like a little round piece of toast. It hops dazedly around, oblivious to our presence, trying to find its way out of the charred prairie.

"What are we going to do?" Mel cries helplessly. "We can't just leave it here!"

"It will be fine," Stacie reassures, "now that it's out of the fire."

"Can it see?" I ask. The rabbit is hopping in circles, stopping every once in a while to bury its face in the straw the firemen had laid down to keep the fire contained. Stacie picks up the rabbit to get a closer look. I touch the back of the little animal, and a chunk of charred fur comes away with my hand.

Stacie's prognosis: "It's suffering. Its eyes are damaged and the flesh is gone from its front leg. We probably need to put it down, end its misery."

"How in the world are we going to do that?" asks Mel.

"I don't think I can bring myself to step on its head," laments Stacie. A chorus of "Me neither's" goes around our little circle.

"We could thumb it," suggests Becky.

"It's too big to thumb," I say.

"Plus we would need a bag or gloves to keep it from biting us," she agrees.

"I have my gloves," I offer.

"I don't think those gloves are going to do you any good," says Stacie. "Maybe we could ask the firemen if they have a bag and we could suffocate it."

Mel, always the animal lover, says, "I have a better idea. Let's take it back to the lab and nurse it back to health."

"It's beyond health, Mel," Stacie gently says. I look around the ground and spot a plastic bag that must have been littered along the highway.

"Will this work?" I ask, hoping they will say no.

"Oh, that will be perfect," says Stacie. I hold open the bag, and Stacie and Becky start to put the rabbit in head first. Its feet get stuck on the way in, and it starts squealing in a high-pitched whine. At the sound, Stacie and Becky step back and give a pained look to me as if to say, *Can you finish the job?* I stuff the feet into the bag, twist the opening shut, and steel myself against the cries that sound so eerily like a human child. Mercifully, they stop relatively soon.

Now that the rabbit is out of sight, the other girls put it out of mind. We continue walking as if nothing is happening, as if a life is not draining out between the cracks in my fingers. They can't feel the tiny heart beat start to slow. They can't feel the warmth of the scorched body seeping into my hand. They don't know what it's like to look at those tiny jaws gasping against the inside of the bag. They don't know how I feel. I don't know how I feel.

Stacie glances over at me and sees my furrowed brow and downcast eyes. "You're doing it a favor, Jess. Don't feel bad. This is the right thing to do." My head nods at her words, but my mind ignores them. She is not the one with her thumb pressed against the sternum of this life.

Just keep holding tight, Jess, I tell myself. Whatever you do, don't let go.

The heartbeat struggles more and more to keep going. It slows, shudders, and each time the little body expands I know it will be the last. But it keeps on. In disbelief I wonder how it can compete against the squeezing of my hands. The body starts to move again, and I am frightened by the thought that maybe I have been trying to end a life that is not yet supposed to be ended. But the thought passes quickly as the death spasms stop and the body stills once more. I have no idea what my companions are talking about; I can't pull myself away from this battle going on in my hands.

At last, mercifully, the heartbeat stops. I keep squeezing, terrified that this is a trick. What if the rabbit is not really dead? What if it is sleeping and will wake up to take its revenge if I do not keep holding it tightly? But finally, I am sure that death has come; the hand holding the body is becoming cold again.

I have fallen behind the others. They don't notice. A new episode of *Friends* is on at seven, and they have to be back in time to watch. Gingerly I open up the bag and place the dead rabbit on a log. I want the body to be in plain sight so it's easier for predators to find. Why I perform this simple act, I do not know. It's almost as

if, by taking a life, I am in danger of messing up the whole cycle of things. I know it's self-centered to think so, but I feel as if by placing the body in easy reach of predators, I am reinstating the web of life that was shattered when I sealed that bag up tight.

I get in my car and drive home without the radio on. Somehow, music seems inappropriate for a time such as this. When I get back to my apartment, I go into the bathroom to wash my face. *Maybe this will make me feel better*, I think. But I glance in the mirror and see ashes on my face. I have been found out. What can I do to hide? I bring the water to my face and scrub, watching flecks of blackened life spiral down the drain. ♻️

Credo

by Solomon Davis

My head nods of boredom
I'm sleepy.

As I wait for the 9:00 rush
behind the counter at the movie theater,
a man walks up to me.

"Someone needs to call an ambulance. There's an old woman lying on the floor
in there."

"alright"

"I will call," says my supervisor.

"Do you know this woman?"

"No, just call."

"what movie?" I ask.

"That passion movie"

Working at the movie theater, I'd heard stories from all over the world
about elderly folks having heart attacks while watching that film.

Must be the intensity, the blood, the scourged body, flesh being ripped.
For some of the older people in this particular town, this film may be their
first look at intense violence. Unless this woman was a nurse during
WWII, this movie may be the only violence she's seen.

So she's dead or dying. That's what I'm thinking. She's not going to get up.
I haven't taken CPR since my freshman year of high school,
seven years ago.

But I begin walking toward the screening room where the passion movie plays.

I have a uniform on see. People are looking at me to do something.

I have a name tag that tells them I should know what to do in this situation.

I go there

Thinking about how

I've been contemplating my life as a smoker
and how I watched a Movie called *My Life* with Micheal Keaten.
Keaten plays a man who dies early of cancer.

I watched it shortly after returning home from my grandmother's funeral.
She died of diabetes. I watched this movie and wept... I wept at this slice
of life sap. I cried and vowed to never smoke again.

Life, in those moments of watching, became precious –
more precious than I can recall ever knowing. I felt fragile again...
maybe for the first time... I don't know.

I smoked again shortly after the credits rolled.

I keep walking to the screening room where the woman lies. I'm wanting
to see death... someone in a short process of dying.
I want to feel that fragility that I felt while watching My Life.
And I want to touch it. I want it to move me into some better way of living.
I want it to wake me up.

I turn the corner hoping to see a woman lying, but she's sitting up.
She had fallen and broken a hip, and she was breathing.
I hate myself for being disappointed. ☼

The Year That Gave Me Today

by Natalie Rieck

My white Buick didn't have a dent in the front bumper, or a broken turning signal, or a bad transmission, or even cigarette burns in the seats. Not yet. My best friend was sitting on the deep red car seat next to me, as she had been for the three hours it had taken us to travel from the summer camp we worked at. I was animatedly pointing out the high and low points of my hometown when he pulled his red Civic around the corner south of the grocery store – the only grocery store in town.

He was the first person our age we saw, so we stopped the car on the street to talk to him, something you can only do in small towns without blocking traffic. He was the secret boyfriend of a good friend of mine – her parents did not approve, especially since he had a run-in with the law that is still sometimes whispered about. I knew his name, some of his family, and that I really liked his dark hair. I also knew he raced dirt bikes with a classmate of mine, and that he once shoved a knife all the way through his hand.

He also stopped his car, which hadn't been rear-ended yet, and told me who in our little town had done what while I was gone for the summer. He didn't talk long; I hadn't missed enough. I was eating KC Masterpiece Barbeque Potato Chips, and he had Mountain Dew and smelled like *Very Sexy For Men* cologne. Somehow he ended up sitting on the old railroad bridge with me that afternoon while I pretended to be a sudden expert at picking my new red Johnson guitar. His jeans dangled over the edge, swinging expensive white shoes. Then there was a blur in my memory, and suddenly, we were inseparable.

His Civic was destroyed in a crash with a Ford Windstar that fall. The CD player's blow to his face sent him to the hospital with "a concussion-whiplash and amnesia," which he liked to say all as one word, like somehow that made the injuries seem more piled up. He saved only the CD player; then one night, he installed it in my car.

He got an old orange Chevy pickup a month or so later, and he drove me to the Homecoming dance in it. I wore flat shoes because he was an inch shorter than I, and he wore a shirt that matched my dress, but forgot the flowers. A few weeks later, he wrecked the truck and the nerves in his right hand on a curved road; it still sits in his yard, a blazing orange warning signal. He never got a new car after that; he refused to like a job long enough to get any money together.

He played trumpet in band, second chair, under me. After school, or after marching events or basketball games, we'd get in the Buick and drive around seeing if we could go down every street in town before I had to take him home. While the weather was still warm, I got to ride on the back of his motorcycle on those

nights. The only thing that matched the amount of talking we did was the amount of Mountain Dew and cigarettes we went through. He turned seventeen in October, and I had in July, but we always found a way. He led me from a social smoker straight through "I can quit whenever I want" and into a cloud so thick I couldn't even see him.

I got him started playing guitar, and he taught me how to ride a motorcycle on my own. We took pictures together with my dad's expensive camera (mostly pictures of him), and I got to help name his new yellow lab puppy, the one that always ran to me when he kicked it. We jumped the fence at the local pool and swam at two a.m. I stayed on the honor roll, and he made sure to stay off.

At least once a week, we drove fifteen miles to the nearest McDonald's for one Butterfinger and one M&M McFlurry – I always paid the \$4.26. I went to his motocross races when his girlfriend couldn't, even when my parents didn't want me to. I was at his family Thanksgiving the day he cheated on his girlfriend the first time, and he was in my car the night she left him, his dark eyes brimming with tears that belied his tough cowboy image.

I'm not sure, but I think it was sometime that night that I fell in love with him.

I wrote poetry about him, but I kept my secrets, like women do, until one night when I couldn't help but grab him by the Fox Racing shirt and kiss him. I must have revived every cliché about losing your breath and getting dizzy that night, but when he obviously didn't feel the same, I put the Buick in drive and left it all behind for someone else to write about. At least I knew.

He was there the night I took my first drink; my mom had thrown me down the thirteen stairs in our house for the last time, I swore, and I realized being good didn't seem to be getting me anywhere. I sat in my newly married friends' dirty kitchen playing cards and pretending I liked the taste of the Mike's Hard Lime, when in fact, I could hardly drink half a can of pop at that point in my life. By the time we started on the bottle of Jack Daniels, I couldn't taste much.

The Buick was gone; I'd lent it to him and he'd dropped the transmission while driving down a gravel road one night while I was on vacation. I got a green Oldsmobile, which he didn't help pay for, and he drove me back to his house in it after the party, sometime around two a.m. He knew his mom wouldn't mind, and he knew I didn't have anywhere else to go. He also knew I'd compromised myself that night, and that's right where my weakness was.

I stumbled through the front door of his parents' log cabin and landed the rough, tan carpet in his room while he went to the bathroom. I had no pillow or blanket, but was almost out when he came back. He asked me why I was lying on the floor, and convinced me through the fog that his girlfriend would have wanted me to be comfortable. I lay down next to him on the bed, and we whispered together for the last few minutes I had control of myself. Until he told me he loved me.

I'm in love now.

I'm in love with a man who drives a Mercury Cougar and who was always on the honor roll and works at Subway and wears *Very Sexy For Men* cologne.

We take pictures together with my expensive camera, pictures of leaves and barns and bridges, and he writes poetry and stories and letters to me.

He is with me the night that I decide to quit smoking for good.

He gets out of my Oldsmobile with the Marlboros I turn over to him, twists the pack into an unrecognizable piece of plastic and paper, then throws it into the trash on his way into the Sinclair to get a Mountain Dew. When he gets back, he tells me he's proud of me and gives me a kiss. ☺

My Mother's Gift

by Allison Simmons

Mom's sewing machine was sacred. It sat in a brown cabinet underneath the kitchen window. Much of the day it hid behind the cabinet door, next to the rack holding dozens of spools of brightly colored thread: fuchsia, sky blue, and forest green. But in the afternoons when my brother, sister, and I were napping or playing outside, Mom would reach into the cabinet and push a lever that raised the ivory machine with a groan. It would sit regally on top of the cabinet until a touch to the floor pedal transformed it into a diligent worker. Mom would guide layers of sweatshirt fleece or bright calico under the flashing needle as she watched us play in our front yard through the large picture window framed by blue dotted curtains.

Whether or not the Bernina was hiding, Mom firmly said we could not twist or touch its black dots and dials. But she would let us stand by her side as she sewed. As Mom raced in a straight line down the edge of the fabric, I would stand mesmerized by the thin needle flashing up and down, blurring into invisibility. How did the thread catch all the layers of fabric and hold them together in such a tight way? How did Mom form the oddly shaped pieces of fabric into my jumpers, pants, and shirts? I didn't know, but I thought my mom was amazing because she knew.

If we were lucky, the last inch of bobbin thread would spin off the bobbin while we were playing inside, and Mom would let one of us wind the bobbin. If it was my turn, I would stand quietly as she carefully loosened the handwheel, placed the empty silver bobbin on a spindle on top of the machine, wound the thread around it, and pushed the pedal until the thread caught. Then when Mom got up from her chair, I would either squat on the floor and push down on the black, bumpy foot pedal with my small hands or sit on the chair, sliding to the edge until I could press the pedal with my toes. If I pushed hard, the thread spun wildly around the bobbin, racing like a horse running freely across the plains. If I eased the pressure, the thread wound gently around the bobbin's widening girth. But I always pressed down again harder and harder until I thought the speed might fling the bobbin wildly into the air. All too soon the lever next to the bobbin would pop away, and the bobbin would freeze, suddenly full of purple, white, or navy thread. Mom would return to her place before the machine, lifting the bobbin from the spindle and snapping it once again into the Bernina's slender belly. After rethreading the needle, she would race down another seam, and I would be left standing and watching, feeling the power of the machine vibrating in my fingers and toes.

When I was eight, we moved to a new town. The sewing machine left its place

under the kitchen window and disappeared into a large, concrete-block basement room, soon named "The Sewing Room." Mom was excited to have a room dedicated to the realm of sewing. She filled the tall shelves with books, boxes of patterns, and other essential supplies. Even in its new, secluded home, the sewing machine maintained its sacred aura. I liked to sit on the beige carpet near the Bernina creating doll capes and hats. Most often I used felt because the edges did not fray like those of the bright calicos. When I did have to hem a scrap of flowered calico with a skinny needle, my stitches always wobbled unevenly around the edge. I would gaze at the sewing machine, wishing I could sew with its precision.

It was in this sewing room that Mom first invited me to sit before the machine, scrap of fabric in hand, to learn to sew. Mom showed me how to raise and lower the tiny presser foot and how to loop the thread from the top of the machine through the eye of the needle. At first the fibers of the thread frayed each time I tried to shove them through the needle's eye, but after Mom told me its secret, the thread frayed less often. Soon, Mom left me alone with the Bernina. It sat poised on the table waiting for me to spark it to life. I hesitantly lowered the presser foot and pressed down on the pedal. The rough feed dogs pulled the cotton scrap forward. Neat turquoise lines appeared. Ever so carefully I pressed again. It obediently stitched forward. Although its cool metal seemed so strong, Mom's earlier warnings about breaking the machine still rang in my head. Next I maneuvered the fabric back and forth, creating a blue wave. When I arrived at the edge of white. I lifted the presser foot, pulled the fabric away, cut the threads, and held it up. I had created the mountain range we left in Colorado when we moved.

Shortly after this, we moved east across the state, to a two-story house in the capital city. Mom turned the small paneled room at the back of the house into the new sewing room. Here, I sewed my first doll dress. In school we were studying the Nebraska Native Americans and were divided into groups to create an Indian Village. My group was to recreate aspects of family life. I made a crude cradleboard for one of my dolls and wanted to make her an appropriate outfit. Mom helped me figure out how to cut and sew a little buckskin dress from a rich brown piece of fabric. I cut a fringe around the hem and sleeves and sewed Velcro into the back to hold the sides of the opening together. It fit my doll beautifully.

I began spending many Saturdays in the sewing room. Mom taught me the language of patterns and how to fit oddly shaped pieces of fabric together to make dolls and doll dresses. Running out of bobbin thread in the middle of a seam was no longer the exciting experience it once had been. I quickly learned how to use the little blue-handled seam ripper to take apart seams that didn't turn out quite right. Steam from the iron often nipped my fingers as I learned how to turn down narrow hems. At times when I pressed the foot pedal, a jarring groan rather than a quick clack filled the air. That meant the Bernina was jammed with thread, and I

would have to pull it all out and begin the seam again.

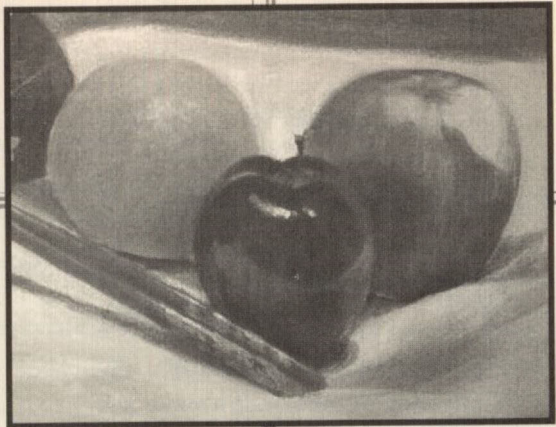
Often, Mom and I had to coordinate our projects so we could each have access to the machine when we needed it. After two years of trading off, Mom and I decided it was time for me to buy my own machine. One February, as we were out doing errands, we spontaneously decided to stop by the Bernina store. They were having a Valentine's Day sale on all their Bernettes, daughters of the Bernina. As I gently ran my hand across their smooth white surfaces and turned their pastel-coded dials, I eagerly wished to take one home with me. Instead, we just took a flyer home, telling me I would have to wait until a special day to actually get my machine.

That day arrived with the visit of my grandparents for Mother's Day and my grandma's birthday. After my grandma opened all her gifts, Mom brought out one more large box and announced that it was for me. Surprised, I tore back the pink wrapping paper, uncovering a picture of my Bernette. A smile stretched across my face as I gently lifted it from its Styrofoam packaging. That night, we placed my machine on the desk in the sewing room. Mom cleared out one of the drawers for my own small container of presser feet and bobbins. Her special sewing room was now my room as well.

The summer before I left for college, Mom and I placed our machines side-by-side on the dining room table, since the sewing room was too small to contain all the project before us. I painstakingly measured, cut, and sewed pale yellow curtains for the window and a blue and yellow plaid cushion for the hard wooden chair that would soon be mine. Mom snipped around her twenty-year-old bathrobe pattern, draping each piece of soft, smoky blue fabric over the back of a chair as she cut it free from the yards of fabric. As we fell into the relaxed rhythm of pinning, ironing and sewing, I was thankful we could share in these familiar rituals once more.

Now that I am in college, I understand why, even if the house needed to be vacuumed or dusted when went down for our naps, Mom would lift the machine, gather her supplies, and set to work. My Bernette rarely leaves its shelf in my dorm room. Piles of books to read and papers to write bury my thoughts of sewing. At the end of the semester I am eager to return home and to once more feel the fabric passing under my fingertips, press on the foot pedal, and hear the whir of the machine in my ear. These moments of joining oddly shaped pieces together to create a spunky bear, a wise grandmother doll, or a bright quilt, enable me to reflect, create, and recharge for a new semester, as I savor Mom's infinitely precious gift of pins, fabric, thread and light airy sheets of tan tissue paper. ☺

Poetry



Winter Walk

by Aleisa Schat

Crunching past sleeping houses, the cold
catches in my lungs, and my warm breath
slides into a fog. Then vanishes,

traceless. Like black water on summer roads. I press
my mitten over my mouth, and breathe into it
from the deepest place in my lungs. The red yarn

warms my numb face. Then
quickly, it becomes cold again,
my breath spent. That dull-damp feeling
of homesickness.

The blue-shadowed snow
whips like a meringue, and black clouds
move like ghost-ships across the moon, dark shadows
against its cold,

white light. These are the nights that feel
suspended, like the moment
after the sigh in conversation, when eyes shift
to the ground. My lips taste cold

and salty, and my eyes sting.
Every expression on my glass-face
feels comical, exaggerated. The silent snowdrifts
feel their way around tree trunks

and fence-posts. The music of a wind-chime
plays out over the air, in a minor key
as if from another world.

Before Morning

by Aleisa Schat

You wore a blue shirt
And you threaded the worm without a flinch, your rough hands
gently performing the task, its moist worm body curling quietly.
We were quiet

too. It was gray, still not
morning, and smelled wet. The clammy air seeped
into our jeans and laid against our skin. Your eyes
stayed mostly on the water, blackish
in the early dark. Sometimes I would drag

my fingers in the water
back and forth. After baiting the hook you dipped your hand
in the water, too. Listless waves

broke intimately
against our boat, coaxing us
toward shore and pulling our lines in taut angles. You steered
to shadowy spots when we drifted too far, and even before
the sun burned

through the gray
you would squint, and look out from under
your palm before you cast. The slow spin of our reels
gave us away. When your pole bent in a fury

tugging, you quickly slipped
the rod from my hands, and your skin itched mine as you handed
yours to me.

Pantoum of the Grocery Store, after Donald Justice by Aleisa Schat

Life is at home waiting
While we wade through the aisles
Fingering coupons, those inky reminders
We plan another forgotten dinner.

While we wade through the aisles
Softly humming flat show-tunes
We plan another forgotten dinner
And eye the quality of the produce

Softly humming flat show tunes
The ordinary cannot consume us.
Eying the quality of the produce
We navigate narrow aisles, avoiding stalled carts.

The ordinary cannot consume us.
As we compare prices, our only heroism
We navigate narrow aisles, avoiding stalled carts
And fallen cereal boxes. No one knows our story.

We compare prices, our only heroism.
Beyond the automatic doors, the world beckons.
There is no one to know our story.
And the mundane enters our souls like a fog.

Beyond the automatic doors, the world beckons.
And as we scratch through our listed items
The mundane enters our souls like a fog.
And it is by blind chance only that there is no line

When we reach the checkout.

The Garden in Summer

by Aleisa Schat

The poppies bow languidly, letting the wind
have its way.

They move
like swaying charismatics
Held in place by strict wooden pews,
their deep black eyes
Turned toward heaven.

Bending their will
to a whispered suggestion.

The zinnias, loud in scarlet
and orange-fire, hold their posture
like a blush-faced girl
fresh from charm school

They sit politely, brightly optimistic.

The tangled petunias creep
toward the rusty lip
of the cast-iron pot,
Spilling themselves. Lazily

they dangle their bodies
over the edge,
their pin wheel faces flash deep
purple, clean white.

The pansies in the windowsill herald summer
and its noon mood

Running on the Puddlejumper at Dusk

by Aleisa Schat

The cicadas strike up a chorus in wheezing monotone
as if in response to the raised wand
of some unseen conductor
intensity waxing, then waning
following the movements of that hidden baton
The perfunctory notes of a lone squawking bird
punctuate the symphony at irregular beats
as it swallows up the graying air

The dart of vibrating grasshoppers
mocks my own attempt at flight
at least until one wayward traveler is interrupted
mid-arc, by my rude thigh
and I wonder at my strange sense of triumph

My mind wanders
out over the fields flanking the linear trail
a strait-edge ruler behind me and before
It seems recently unwound
reluctantly, even
It leaves no room for dreaming of the possibilities
corners afford
and my mind stays in the fields

My eyes tell me I've found my way
into a still-life painting
only in three dimensions
The grass along the side of the trail, oddly quiet
and the cacophony of insects
is soon lost on my ears
like the ticking clock in my grandmother's house

But my other senses
tell a different story
It's as if they can feel the wind

waiting, plotting
and my skin pricks at the possibility

As dusk decrescendos into twilight
textures and colors fade
only to be replaced by black silhouettes
emerging like a crazy pattern against the dulling sky
itself having breathed its last of the warmth of sunset
My eyes see less
though my mind picks up the slack

For a moment
the world disappears
and all that's left is the even inhale
exhale of my working lungs
and the cadence of my feet
meeting the ground, unbroken
except by the occasional rock
Gravity's grip grows tired
and I leave the grasshoppers in my wake

Monologue

by Natalie Rieck

we sat together and talked, joked, smiled, and laughed
and dare i say we flirted; no, he was my teacher
then he went home to his mortgage the cat i gave him

she and i would skip classes together and nurse our boy-wounds
i knew he'd propose eventually, and in august, i
wasn't a bridesmaid, i pinned carnations on white lapels

we were all in the same classes for thirteen years
i'd proofread their essays, then go home and type programs
for musicals starring the girl next to me in the yearbook

i was sister of the greatest mind ever to pass through my school
the cop's daughter, the girl that plays the trumpet, and
the one that will give you her last piece of gum after lunch

the girl in the back of the graduation picture whose parents
never showed up, no-name college, quiet life, and the kind of
daughters that are bridesmaids and star in school musicals

now, still starring as a supporting role in my own life, i
spin a monologue about what happens when you cross the line
and your life is nothing but fragments of other people's

Hamilton Street

by Natalie Rieck

the last time i walked past the bathroom, i swore
when i was of age, i would buy back my home
there was a snowmobile trailer outside
i saw my strawberry shortcake lamp tied to a chair

i remember the summer olympics in the new house
the t.v. in a room that was really a hallway
and books on tape in the stiff pink chair
and how glad i was that i had my own room
(my brothers shared)

at one house, there was
a water tower in the backyard — a great football spot
the gas grill and fireworks burns
on the cement steps in the background
of my first-day-of-kindergarten photo

a new mother, and new baby, a new house

tonight, yet another house, another bathroom
another bedroom (one that's still my own)
and that pink lamp is still keeping my eyelids up

but there's this girl, who somehow made it through
the gassing in the garage, the stepfathers
and the junior high depression
and who left her childhood back on that street in town

Kenyon Inspire

by Jessica Babcock

I want to be beautiful in a poet
picture someday. Resting above
About the Author and looking straight
at the reader from behind a veil
of shadowed canvas and charcoal
acquaintances in the artsy light of mid-afternoon.
Tousled hair and crow's feet knowing
everything—yes, even you. I need
to purse my lips with tragedy and amusement, deep
green light and hold—exquisitely normal and catching
in the deeper spaces of the body—ovaries
and spleen and liver,
burgundy earth vibrating lumbar
in the nether regions, the realm.

Shakedown

by Jessica Babcock

A black spider sits upon his chest,
a badge of all those years he spent becoming lost.
Hatred in a posturing stare-down
Venice Beach, rolling on the breakers
with the punches through the motions, and he skidded
to a stop on the horizontal, but he fell
and couldn't stop the niggers being
what they've always been.
So he put their mouths down on the curb, teeth grating
on the hot cement and stomped them out.
Three years of cell blocks and folding underwear, and it all smells
the same. Hard lines get bent over, and it's OK, and he's not
all right, and he knows he's not
human anymore, so he shakes the dice, and they disintegrate.
He can't move a muscle without that damn ink rippling
out of the corner of his eye, stalking from his chest, echoing
Has anything you've ever done made your life better?
He can still feel the stale air on his glaring white head, but it's
growing
back through the rubble, and the blood on his face
has come home, leaving splatters on the living room carpet.
So he puts his hand on his heart, and it comes away
black, but at least it comes away—

Aleisa's Portrait

by Jessica Babcock

And how I long to slate you
to write you up the chimney in gloss
or matte. But you are all-purpose and you bond
to everything but brick, and the grout is crumbling anyways.
Tell me, do you know who I am? Do you know why I court you
in this empty place? Tell me why
in the world I can see you as you walk in this hollow
place hollow with clutter—old Newsweeks and National Geographics
Saturday Evening Posts on the coffee table
in the living room, still. The dust never did figure it out,
how to get under the covers, between the sheets. Someone left
fingerprints on the varnish patina
and in the dull, and all I want to do is follow you
across the back porch step, the flat rock that must have come from the
glaciers
you brought home from the field on the tractor, and all I want
is to stand with you on grass in autumn
with frost and cold lungs.
To hold your color
between my thumb and fingers, I would let you watch
as I painted, though I never did before. And how I need
you to know I just wanted to be finished
first, before I had to face your eyes
your hand on my shoulder, in the hair at my neck, loving
my artist. And how I long to keep you here.
Your scent will fade to the grass we stood on
green to gold in the changing daylight. There are holes
in the roof, and the moisture is killing
my fingers, and your color is slipping the wallpaper
from the walls. It doesn't stick like you
don't stick because you don't need to, but I need to cling. So I am going
now, and this shell is going down to the crawlspace
to the frost and the dirt,
and the Newsweeks will hit the ground while the dust throws billows.
And all I want is for you to save us

from cracking, from the ripping of the walls
we built but walked through. You
need to be here now you need to be here
with your hand on my artist and your eyes
in my hair in the autumn daylight changing. So don't you ever go to the
fields,
don't you ever turn old again because I have been here.
I smell your fingernails and your denim and the earth
in your hair. The chimney has fallen down
around me, and I have only charcoal left to cling to.

Seven Forty One

by Jessica Babcock

She spent twenty-five years showing us the planet
that we live on, and we mocked
her hair, her lisp, her oh-so-familiar name.
But we listened
when she made Castro laugh
and murderers confess. We wanted to know
about Monica's lipstick so much more
than her motives. She talked about Tiananmen
and we wondered how the world could go on,
but it did, so we listened closer,
at least for awhile, but prosperity
makes a mind forget. We kept turning
on our axis and turning her volume up,
and Chris Reeve said come on
come on go for it, so we tried, and we succeeded,
and we failed sometimes. Now she says
I've had my heart moved and my mind expanded,
but she's mistaken, taken the words from our lips
while she complimented and made us feel big
and real and sometimes raw, and she said thank you
approximately seven hundred forty times,
so we'll return the favor with seven forty one.
Good evening and good night.

Untitled

by Sarah Mullin

If I were Pavlov's dog,
Would I be grateful?
Compelled to drool every time I heard that stupid bell
Purely because my need for kibbles overpowered my mind

If I were Pinocchio,
Would I be content?
My body flailing about in obedience to a set of strings
All for Stramboni's greedy ambition to dig in ignorant pockets

And what if we were all mermaids,
Swimming in the historical facets
of "what we could be."
But sometimes it's no more than a delusion,
Conditioning us to respond with
"that's ok" instead of "I forgive you"
and all the while confused
because of too many fairy tales
and years of being appropriate
bouncing around in our brains,
knocking out what's real.

If there was a happy ending,
Would we embrace it?
Too mixed up in what we know of our innateness
Forgetting to live as more than just blank slates.

Borysewicz's *Glass Lectio* by Ryan Pendell

glass undulates stained red if
blood froze into sheets mid-flow
pressed to dark grains – black

screws - incongruent til violent
the frame will crack the blood
like frozen puddles the hot red

eddies will surface - steam -
will warm a throat like wine
at the end of a winter mass

a soft white handkerchief rubs
the mystery from the cup's brim
to protect from infection and

more black screws – his blood
cuts the throat to cough – choke
on dust stirred up from relics

in the settled shuffle of parish
life tongues lick teeth like hope
over bones in a violent shiver of

ecstatic vision – all things are
relics worth the kiss and pressed
forehead if the heat of blood runs

through and the heat of blood
runs through all things now
the iced blood breaks the frame

Field Notes

by Ryan Pendell

crow, you've got to crow
for the loss of the womb
on the hill raped of trees
the cold shiver of wet death—crow
never crow for latent yellow dreams
but do so between them

sometimes you will crow
the iscariot crow, with flies
there will be iron chariots
broke on lesioned desert sun
the iscariot crows dry
there is a crow that brings back

the lazarus crow calls into rocks
wrapped with linen by the breeze
reeds bend and bow to it
requires aim and chalked hands
death is a small target

you still need the everyday crow
that strings the hours on the line
useful in the repair of shoes
a well-rubbed and grain sound
doors open and shut to their frames
there are daily gods of the hearth to excise

From the Art Gallery

by Ryan Pendell

they told us we could not pass through
endlessly sweeping the floor and doorknobs
but we passed through and now they hate us

nailed along the walls like writhing monks
for penance they hung—the ground you are
standing is holy ground—if you are willing

you can make us clean, they say to us passing
through to us passing through to us passing
and they tell us we are the Body but we don't feel
like a body—so they tells us we can save them
but we can't save them—and now they hate us
and they writhe

in every painting there are many rooms if it were
not so we would have told you—

Fog

by Benjamin Brownson

My head is in the clouds tonight as I stroll
among the wisps consigned to earth after
an evening shower, and I love that I can keep both feet
on the ground at the same time. It feels
like some sort of victory against the cynics, naysayers,
and realists, and such victories should be lauded.

Though I can't see the stars I love
so fondly, I have come to appreciate the beauty
of a starless night, especially when a softer, more
immediate piece of the heavens surrounds
me instead. I can breathe it in, and though
it doesn't sparkle in the same way,
the reflective glow is somehow more than ethereal.

Meditation on Language

by Kayli King

The sleekness of 'carafe,'
the simple ergonomic
beauty of the word.

The orange juice in the curving glass
condensing on the kitchen table.
Things taste better from glass,
a few days of paper carton
taints every cup. Even plastic jugs
seep into skim milk, turning it bland
to match its watery whiteness.

The squat glass jar poised
near the spotless
bowls, spoons, and empty cup.

The liquids, remembering
all of the glass in the cupboard, the refrigerator
filled with thick pans of leftovers
and smooth bowls of salad.

The lines of the faucet
curving elegantly, not dripping
into the muted stainless steel
filled with clear, drying dishes.

The silver drain bending, warping
in the light from the cloudy window. The greyness.

Sweet and Tangy Decimation

by Kayli King

The old barn crumples under the weight
Of wild grapevines splitting corrugated metal
Shingles curling downward framing
Small dark fruit clinging to blackish stems

Cloudy light flows through wooden gaps
Circulating the dusty air

A crumbling bale escapes its wires

Raccoon imprints disturb the floor

Weeds fade into winter brownness
Scattered on the ground

Airy vines curl toward the rusty apex
A ridgepole soaking in cloudy synthesis

Motionless fragile brown curly-cues complement
Dusty beams crisscrossing empty stalls

Grass brushes the outer walls
Stalks pressing against the wood

Paintless boards weather in the coolness

“Longing to have their feet fit in boots”, after Lyn Hejinian
by Kayli King

Longing to have their feet fit in boots
they follow Granddad through the forest
hopping from footprint to footprint
each boy deepens the dent, crushes the leaves
and I want to call them back
and I want to follow them
but they're already down the hill
I can see their trail curving at the salt block
stopping to find traces of dark hooves
but they're gone now
and I can hear young shrieks splashing near the pond
Granddad found some tracks, he always does
they know he will find the deep soft clay
and they will squeal in wonder
imagining warm rough tongues lapping the water
but they will stop too close and sink into the shoreline
I hear the leaves now, sticking to their clay-covered sneakers
as they jump over stones and roots
trying to grab Granddad's flannel sleeve

Talent

by Solomon Davis

Gary is forty-two.
He mows the lawn in loafers,
khakis, a collared shirt,
and a sweater vest.
His wife is fifty.
Her name is Margaret.
She reads while riding her bike...
Quite a sight
Watching her pass on her bike
While reading.
Gary moves through life as if Margaret doesn't exist.
Margaret's okay with that.
And they are very happy.
They are truly, truly happy.

Hands

by Erica Romkema

It seems to me
that men should
have rough hands
chapped just a little
with deep grooves and
lots of lines; tanned
red-brown from the sun,
buffed by the wind and
years of working with
tools, wood, motor parts,
animals, gears, grain,
engines and earth and life.

Yet these rough hands
must also know
how to be gentle
in the right places and times;
to draw a woman close,
to cradle a baby in their palms,
to let four-year-old fingers
curl safely around their thumbs.

These would be hands
written with the secrets.

Fight or Flight

by Erica Romkema

She licks her lips after the strawberry-
peach ice cream and leans forward
to rest her chin in her hands,
hair falling soft around her ears.
Sitting on the steps, she hears them
behind eggshell white walls --

fighting over something she
halfway wishes was her fault;
and the sweetness on her tongue
is sick in her stomach when
she knows she can't do anything
to stop this yankee doodle madness.

Her mother has said again and again
that arguing is good for relationships;
that silence is far more dangerous,
a sign of accumulating anger and hurt until
a once-healthy fire becomes too hot or too cold
and erupts in volcano or smokes gray,
and marriage shivers into ash.

She bites her lip and runs her tongue
against her teeth, the ridges, counting
the smoothness. The clock chirps
mockingbird-noon down the hall,
chewk chick-chick chewk.
She rubs her chin against
a bare knee, wonders how
she should want to imitate voices
that sound so out of love,
and imagines a world
where swift wings were
somehow a better answer.

Mt. Takao

by Akane Yokoo

We climbed a mountain this summer
It had been more than ten years

People there hadn't changed
They are merry and easygoing
You cannot see young people there
They leave for cities

Because I was with two tall Americans this time
People were very curious
Many stared and looked at us

Old style restaurants are along the streets
A strange feeling that I was there long before I was born

Along the path in the mountain there were houses which people still lived
Amazed to see people still living on the mountain
Time stopped just around there long ago

It was nice to walk
Noticing little things on the street
Like flowers and little streams

We encountered a group of stone statues of *Jizo*
They wore red hats and aprons
Josh and Nick laughed to see them
They thought somebody put them there as a joke
No, hats and aprons are official offerings!
"Let's take a picture with these statues"
They put their arms on *Jizoes*

Ancient gods can not terrify them

I am neither Shintoist nor Buddhist but
Old traditions come down to our minds over ages

Despite all my thoughts, they kept climbing like kids
They enjoyed finding weird things on the way

We arrived at a small shrine
Low sutra sounding from a water fall down the rocks
Candles on the rock wall were all lit even though it was not dark yet
A monk appeared from the waterfall
He started to pour buckets of water on his soaked body
Tourists took pictures of this sacred ritual

We finally arrived at the top of the mountain
Excited to see a breathtaking view below
It was foggy and cloudy
We could barely see the buildings

We had some ice cream and laid on a bench
Leaves from trees fell on our faces

By the time we arrived at a train station, it was dark
Lights of the convenience store were the only bright things on the street
Dim street lights guided the way to the train station
There were several people on the train
We slowly returned to the future

The train gently cradled our tired body
When I closed my eyes, I was still in the ancient mountain
With a regular rhythmic sound of the train
I heard Nick whistle as he always does

Indulgence, after Alfonso Cortes

by Daniel Berntson

Who knows how long we'll take to learn
to live as stars – those dishonest peddlers
sailing on holy water with blasphemous bones
in golden jars. Every night they stretch their wares
across plastic tarps and call us to come and kiss
strings of our ancestors. And we do.
We crick our necks and trace out icons
with pointed fingers, like children playing dot to dot.
We swing our paper boots across Orion
and slip his shadow in our belts. We remember the earth
pressed against our backs as we watch the empty star-swinger
slide his hands down the sparking hips of Cassiopeia. She smiles
and kisses his silver neck before he falls from the sky
to trace our crinkled shadows on the frozen ground.

Seeing

by Daniel Bernston

At night, in the fish-light of the moon,
my toes hang from slivers
of the creaking wooden dock
tasting water like fish
under sheets of cold, wet shadows.
I wonder

who let the stars slip between my toes
and grab the ghosts still swimming
beneath the soles of my feet. But I pray
for the fish-light that soaks my eyes,
remembering that it too is made of watching
the spirits slice through the dark. It too has seen
the silver boat with green eyes
reaching for God under the waves,
his white hands strung out like silk,
his fingers curling into steel. But the fish-light knows
that cotton nets will never hold
the slinking shapes and shadows that always
evaporate through the cracks
of the course wooden dock.
I watch

the lights across the lake push through dark,
carrying music and laughter
that rattles through my ears
and closes my eyes, reminding me
that my shoes are still
laying on the dark sand.

A Wake of Broken Lines

by Daniel Berntson

A wake of broken lines
reaches across his darkened face
as the buzz of a motor
pushes the boat

then stops. He stretches
coarse wooden arms
and presses them into water
still dark and cold from star gazing

too long. He pushes
a sharp hooked finger
through the soft night crawler
still refrigerator-chilled
and swings his cane pole

over the edge. He watches water
slink and slip with wind
like damp cotton sheets
hanging on the line

Shadows hulk
below the pads
then bury into weeds
as the sun begins
to turn the blinds

of night. He takes a silver cylinder,
screws off the cap
and feels the steam on his lips
as he takes a long sip.

I Will Not Love You

by Daniel Berntson

I will not love you on our wedding night
finally free of starchy dress clothes
slipped between warm sheets and dreams.

You will love me when I've forgotten you
and you hold my hand anyway
tell me about the weather
and smile when I ask if this is home.

I will love when you've had a stroke for 15 years
you can't walk, and can only say yes and no
and I visit you everyday after dinner in room 113
read you all your letters
and press your vein-streaked hand.

You will love me when I've died
and you've been alone for twenty years
and tell your youngest daughter that you know I'm happy
even when you're no longer sure what that means.

I will love you when we can't get out anymore
and we sit together in olive-green chairs
and you ask me what "European capitol,
four letters" could be.

God of the Harvest

by Daniel Berntson

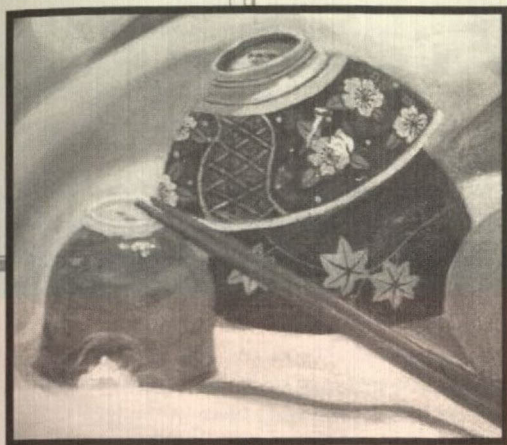
Scars stretch across the oily sky while diesel pulses through the auburn air. His tanned face is shaded by a faded seed-corn cap as he turns the John Deere onto the gravel road. He inherited the tractor from his father, who always claimed the land was "as dark and rich as a bar of chocolate," even when the corn melted in the bare August sun. He turns into the field with hands calloused and scarred from years of coaxing another season out of rusty machinery long past the age of retirement.

He punches the clutch with a steel-toed boot, pulls the lever of the PTO, and listens to the shrieking syncopated rhythm of oiled chains grating their teeth against the rusty panels of the corn picker.

The picker gnaws brown stalks and swallows as it pulls through lines of corn until it jams hard from too many wet stalks and golden bushels. He walks to the back of the picker and reaches to clear the clot. Hot steel chains strangle his wrist, slice of skin, and shell off his fingers like kernels from cobs. He screams, watching oiled teeth dig long crimson furrows into his arm. He tries to pull it out, but teeth clamp onto the other arm and drag it through.

Jeans and shirt soaked in blood, he struggles to shift the grimy levers of the tractor and drive the half-mile back to the farm. As the tires push through the dusty gravel, great gashes of prayer fall through his dry mouth. When the tractor pulls into the yard, he sees the figure of his wife at the window washing dishes.

Fiction



Sifting

by Erica Romkema

I sat in the middle of the kitchen and felt the dust. Everywhere. On my dress. My skin. Even in my hair, and my scalp itched no matter how hard I tried to scratch out the sand. The house seemed darker. The babies were crying in the next room, for water, for Mama's milk, but the well and Mama and even the cow had gone dry. Milk from the store was too expensive. We hauled a bucket of water from another well each morning and strained it through a cloth so we could drink it, but by evening we had already drunk the day's share.

I got up and went to the window to watch the dust clouds skimming off the ground. I wondered if it were possible for the entire earth to blow away.

At school Sarah Adamson would brag about how her great-grandparents had lived by the ocean in Virginia. As soon as possible her family planned to pack up and head back there. I wondered why her parents had come here in the first place. The other kids listened to her talk, though, about rolling green hills and splashes of salt water, and they hoped they could convince their parents to take them to Virginia, too. I heard the adults discuss leaving when we were in town or making visits. Mrs. Everts from next door had grown up in Wisconsin and still dreamed of thick forests. Mr. and Mrs. Tannen discussed California and orchards full of oranges.

When they talked I felt curious to see those other places, but I knew that after I saw them I would want to come home to the prairies, to my prairies, so I could watch the way the crops waved under the summer sun and rabbits darted through the oldest sorts of grasses. I liked the way the cows could roam and I could pick out Katie Singer's house with its blue roof three full miles away. The sky was so huge it would make you feel tiny or enormous depending on the day. The earth reached until it met up with the sky in a long, clean line—but the farther you went, the farther that line pulled back, so that you could chase it forever and never catch up.

But the things I loved belonged to the old prairies, not this stretch of restless dirt I looked on now. The sky was still big, but I hated it for refusing to shed rain. The land wouldn't grow anything—even the remaining patches of grass were crunchy and brown. And I didn't care that I could see Katie's house anymore, because her family had left for California a week ago.

Our animals crouched into a little shed and moaned when the dirt blew through the cracks, scratching their eyes and coating their lungs. Our family crouched in the house and on less windy days we spent hours trying to clean out the dust that leaked in everywhere. Mama gave us rags and had us wipe the cupboards, the cabinets, each plate and piece of silverware, into the icebox and closets and windowsills. But I didn't see why; a few hours later the dust would be back. Everything was hot and everyone was thirsty for ice cream and clear water. I spent nights dreaming of clean lakes full of smooth pebbles or snowshoes and a cabin up north. I wanted to get outside and run until the air felt cool and the dust blew away in the wind I created on my own.

My father came in, brown with sweat and dirt in his clothes, his wrinkles, his hair. He looked at me, where I stood by the window, for a long quiet moment; then he looked to my mother. Her eyes matched his.

"I'm sorry, Lena," he said.

Mama frowned. "None of that."

He coughed. "Shouldn't have brought you here."

"We both came, Jan," she said. She picked up one of the twins, brushed the dirt from the baby's clothes, and bobbed her against her body, hushing.

My father looked at me again, but his eyes were too bright blue, intense, and my gaze faltered to the ground, where I was tracing patterns in the dust with my toe.

"We've gone too far west," he said to my mother.

"Jan." Mama went to him, smiling. She held up the baby—it was Hanna, I could tell, from her pointed ears. "Look at her." Hanna had stopped crying, and she stared wide at my father. She stuck out a fist towards him, which he grabbed in his palm and covered with his fingers.

"See her," said Mama, smiling up at him, "this healthy baby. And her twin. Born here. And that girl, that Margit," she said, smiling at me, "also born here, and grown here. This is good."

My father said nothing.

"Even good places have hard times, Jan."

Something in my father's face went weak as he looked at my mother. I turned around and watched the dust scratch against the window.

Hard times stayed. In school the seats grew empty. I wondered why at first, until James Fritz raised his hand and said, "Miss Martin, where is everyone?"

Miss Martin was slender and brown-haired and spoke with a soft voice. Her fingernails, though, were painted red. Bright. She folded her hands and looked straight at James with a sorry sort of smile.

"A few families have moved," she said. "The McElroys and the Clouds. So Clara, Alan, and Rosie won't be coming to school anymore. We shall miss them, won't we?"

He nodded, and so did the rest of us, trying to make it seem okay.

"Well," she continued, "perhaps they've gone on to find some adventure. Now who can spell adventure for me?"

I walked home behind my brothers, barefoot because it was too hot to wear shoes and the only pair I had, anyway, were patched hand-me-downs from my brothers. Ruben and Dirk, tall and skinny and scruffy-haired, carried ball gloves and tin lunch boxes and talked about things like wiring radios. We hunched over to withstand the blast of the wind, and I was glad they could block it for me. I hated trying to breathe and catching dirt in my lungs until I coughed myself dry.

Dirk looked back at me, slowed, put his hand round the back of my neck and pulled me up closer. "Stay right behind," he said, "It blocks better."

Ruben glanced at me as I bumped up against them. "Hey you, what's the matter?"

I shrugged and shook my head.

"Don't lie at me. What's wrong?" demanded Ruben. He turned and walked backward, watching me.

"It's just—" I sighed. "Everyone's leaving. You know."

"Yeah," said Dirk. "Like the Langs, they just decided today. They're going west, to California. Family out there or something. Seems like everyone wants to go that way. So you miss your friends, that it?"

"No," I said. "I mean, yes, I miss them, but—"

"What?"

"Talk, Margit," Ruben said.

"It's just—well, do you think we would leave?"

The boys stopped walking, and looked at each other.

"No," they said together, after a pause that made me worry.

"No, we wouldn't leave," Dirk said. "Pa loves Kansas."

"Do you love it?" I asked.

"Yes," said Ruben. "Course. We live here."

"Do you, Dirk?"

"Sure," he said, but he glanced sideways at the soil blowing over the plains.

I twisted the end of one braid around my finger. "You want to stay here forever?"

"Stop asking so many questions." Dirk began taking longer strides, and ducked his head against the wind.

"We'll stay, Margit," said Ruben.

"Even after everyone else has gone?" I tipped my head up at him.

"Is that what you want?" Dirk's eyes were fiery dark as he looked back at me.

I slowed down. "I don't know."

"Well, don't worry. It'll probably happen." And Dirk strode ahead, his feet leaving firm prints in the path behind him.

I wasn't sure whether I became light-headed from the heat or the ideas rushing through my mind, but I grabbed Ruben's sleeve until things cleared up again, and stayed close to him until we reached the house.

The Langs passed by our house on their way to California. They had come west with us from Illinois, and their parents had traveled with my grandparents on the ship over from Germany a long time ago. Mrs. Lang came out and her eyes softened when she saw Mama. "Lena," she said, and held Mama tight. "It will be good. But we will miss you."

"Yes," said Mama, and little more.

The five Lang boys peered out at us from the truck. I waved at Josef, who had been in my grade at school and played with me sometimes. He gave me a nod. All of the boys were squinting in the wind. Mr. Lang smiled and laughed, but he grew momentarily grave as he shook Papa's hand. "Come now, Karina," he said to his wife, and they climbed into their truck and left, brown clouds billowing behind them.

Mama didn't speak at supper, only served us beans and bread in quiet. Papa ate

slowly and watched her. Dirk wouldn't look at me, and Ruben focused on mixing his bean sauce over his bread. Only the babies made noise, gurgling as Mama fed them. I was glad for their happy, ignorant sounds.

I heard my parents arguing at night, when they thought I was asleep, in words muffled but clear enough to understand.

"Jan, I won't let you move us. We'll make it."

"Lena," said Papa, "no. People aren't making it. Can't you see? They leave to make a better life."

"But Jan, this is our life. Here."

"What life? Do you still see the good times? Those times are gone, Lena. Look!"

"Don't speak to me like that."

The wind made the house creak. I shifted, rolled to one side, tried to picture them on the other side of the wall.

"Lena," said Papa, quieter. "For the family. For what's best for all of us."

"And what about you, Jan? You loved this before the drought. The drought will end. I want to be here, then. And so do you."

"At what cost?" Papa demanded.

Mama sighed. "I'm tired. We can talk more tomorrow."

"Not much longer," said Papa, "this putting off. We must decide soon."

Then nothing, only the dark and the rustling night. I closed my eyes, but I didn't sleep for a long time.

Katie's family had gone because the bank came to foreclose. "Couldn't make the payments," Mr. Singer had explained to my father, staring at the ground. "Nothing comes up, nothing to sell. Nothing to pay with. That's all."

I was thankful, then, that we owned our section and our machinery. Even if we had had to scrimp and cut corners for a good long time. And that was why we couldn't leave, especially not now. No one would buy this place, not like this in the middle of the drought, not for half the money Papa had put into it.

I walked with my father down the rows where wheat should be poking out of the ground, and we kicked at the chaff together. Papa glanced sideways. "What do you think, Margit?"

"About what?"

"This," he said, motioning out to the bare stretch before us.

I stopped and stared out alongside him. "I don't know."

"You must think something."

I toyed with the split ends at the tail of my braid. "I hate it."

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Shouldn't have been this way."

"It's not your fault, Papa."

He rested his hand on my head, smoothed out my hair. Then he turned around to walk back to the house.

The next day the big storm hit. The wind kicked up around noon and we were sent

running home from school, the dirt flying and our clothes flapping and whipping against our bodies. We held our hands in front of our eyes as a screen, still squinting, lowering our faces to the ground. I coughed and choked and cried while Dirk and Ruben yelled at me to come faster, pulling at my elbows as we pushed straight into the blast for nearly a mile. Then we slammed inside, where mother was tucking cloth around the windows of the curtains, and she shouted "Bar the door!"

"Where's Papa?" I said, grabbing more cloth to help her, and wishing there was some way to keep a house from having so many cracks.

"In town," she said, her voice tight. "Least I hope he's still in town. He'd better find some neighbors fast if he's on his way home."

"He will," I said worriedly.

Hanna or Julia wailed from the next room. I went up to go, but Mama said, "Leave them. Help."

We kept tucking in cloth while Ruben and Dirk ran around to tighten what they could. In a few minutes the other twin started crying, so I ignored my mother and ran to their crib; I grabbed a sheet to throw over top, to at least keep some of the dust out of their faces. Maybe the dark would help them go to sleep. I went to look out the window, and there were the clouds, high and brown and billowing, and no so far away. I prayed that Papa was still in town.

We tucked into the kitchen, down against the cabinets, Mama cradling one baby and I the other, and Ruben and Dirk holding a sheet down over all of us. We'd had dust storms before, but this one seemed worse than all the others. The house made horrible shuddering and cracking noises, and I thought several times that the building would be swept entirely over. I braced myself to either go tumbling with it or be exposed to and buried by the dust. Dirt clouds slammed against the house, wind jerked at the posts, windows broke. I yelped the first time shards of glass scattered and clinked across the floor, but Mama looked so severely at me that I held Hanna tighter and pressed my lips together.

I don't know how long the storm went on; the sun got so darkened by the clouds of dirt that we lost our sense of time. We took turns falling asleep and hushing the babies and telling stories to keep from worrying about Papa, until finally the air grew quiet and the house still, and light shone through the sheet so that we could see one another's faces. Dirk and Ruben pulled the sheet off, carefully, and dust rained to the ground. I shook my head free of the material and peered out. The entire floor. Dust. I stood up and it was thick to the tops of my feet. I moved Hanna to one side of my waist and waded across the kitchen.

"Careful of the glass, Margit," warned Mama, but she hardly seemed to see me as she stared around at her home.

I wanted to see out the window. I picked my way around glass fragments and looked.

Waves of it. Waves of dust. It stretched thick out to the barns, high to the tops

of the fences, far to the horizon. It drifted up against the house, so deep that when I stuck my arm through the window I could grasp a handful of the stuff and let it sift through my fingers.

My throat ached.

"Come on, Margit." Dirk nodded to the door. "Let's have a walk. See the damage."

I nodded and gave Hanna to Mama. Dirk and Ruben yanked the door open, scraping dirt out of the way and consequently letting more slide in.

"Boys," sighed Mama, watching. I wondered why she cared. Everything in the house was so coated I doubted we could ever get all the layers off.

"Sorry, Ma," said Ruben.

"We'll be back soon. Going to find out about Pa. All right?" Dirk paused in the doorway.

She held both babies in her strong, tanned arms and nodded. "Right."

"Can I go, please, Mama?"

"You go, Margit."

We slid down in places, walking over the dirt like it was sand. My feet hurt a little, on the soft arches that weren't used to feeling ground. We were halfway to town when we saw my father coming without the truck. I shaded my eyes and couldn't believe it was him, at first, but it was—tall and loping and brown-red from the sun.

"We worried," I said to my father when he got close.

"Is your mother all right?" he asked, looking at Ruben. "The babies?"

"Yes, sir." Ruben fell into step with my father. "They're all right. Ma's upset."

How could Ruben know that? He must be exaggerating. Mama had told the best stories of any of us when we were hiding under that sheet. She even got us to sing some, and she sang the sweetest of all.

But I saw Ruben was right when we came close to the house. I was wandering behind my father and brothers, looking out at the dust dunes and the coal-blue sky, when I heard a shout and Mama ran from the house. She grabbed on to my father, fierce, and she was crying so hard I could see her body shaking.

I sat in the back of the wagon, leaning against an old rocking chair my grandfather had made back when Mama married Papa. The seat of the chair dug into my neck. I swung my feet back and forth and tried to pretend the ground wasn't really rolling away beneath us.

Our house stood thin and shabby against a white-streaked sky. The barns leaned. Sand still drifted through, wandering around corners and between windows and down our old paths. Someday it wouldn't be like this anymore. I knew it. Someday the old grasses would come up. The rain would fall and the crops would grow and lovely cool breezes would blow through the windows. And then I would come back. ☼

Jessica Babcock is currently in Belize studying tropical ecosystems and sustainable community development. She is also doing a fair bit of reading of Annie Dillard. She is a senior Writing & Rhetoric and Environmental Science major and hopes to somehow integrate these two loves in her future career.

Daniel Berntson is a junior English and Philosophy major who enjoys juggling knives, reading Garrison Keillor, and playing the organ. He is the fourth generation to have lived on his family's farm and sees writing as a way of caring for the stories of his rural place.

Benjamin Brownson is a Theatre and Writing & Rhetoric major whose poem "Burning Time" won first place in last year's Spectrum. His original play *Blue Laces* was produced last year as well. In the future he hopes to continue in theatre, writing, and telling stories, most likely by pursuing graduate school in playwriting.

Solomon Davis is a senior Theatre/Speech major whose gusto for writing started with the songs he sang and stories he made up as a little boy. Whether through painting, poetry, photography, or conversation, Solomon tends to be story oriented. After graduating, he wants to scrape a living as a storyteller/actor/etc.

Clarissa Janssen is a history major who plans to pursue a career in the museum field. She is passionate about Victorian and Mormon hymnody, and she would eventually like to travel the world and learn several languages fluently.

Kayli King is an English major who loves reading "classic" literature, envies the poetry of Jane Kenyon, and juggles on the weekends. She enjoys writing because of the magical element involved in creating three-dimensional people and places with two-dimensional words on a page.

Sarah Mullin is a Psychology major and Writing & Rhetoric and Music double minor. She has loved creative writing from a young age. She plans to attain her Masters Degree in child development one day and hopes to travel the world.

Ryan Pendell is a sophomore Philosophy and Writing & Rhetoric double major from Elkhorn, Nebraska. He is currently involved in the student newspaper, Spectrum, the International Justice Mission chapter, and the Northwestern Chess Society. This year he has thrown a giant pumpkin off a three-story balcony, assisted in burgling the Stegenga Hall lounge furniture and perpetrated violent works of performance art.

Natalie Rieck is a freshman Writing & Rhetoric major and English teaching minor from a tiny town in eastern Iowa. Other than writing, she loves reading, web design, photography, travel, and just taking care of people. Her ultimate dream is to own a bookstore, be a foster parent, and write in her spare time.

Erica Romkema is an English major with a wide variety of interests, although not all of them have been developed yet. She writes because it's instinct, telling stories even before she actually knew how to put letters on a page. She very much values the way that reading and writing allow us to explore various places, times, and experiences of life.

Aliesa Schat began spending much of her time this year doing what she would have considered crazy just a year ago: reading and writing poetry. She began writing poetry when she was young, but influenced by Anne of Green Gables, her poems were really flowery. Now she has come to love contemporary poetry.

Tracy Scott is a senior Mathematics major who is originally from Chowchilla, California. Her piece is inspired by her experience studying abroad in London, England.

Allison Simmons is a senior History and Writing & Rhetoric major. She enjoys creating characters out of words or fabric in her free time. After graduation, she hopes to work in a museum where she can bring the stories of the past to life for the public.

Akane Yokoo, originally from Japan, is a Humanities major with English and Art emphasizes. She likes to paint and sees writing, especially poetry, reading and painting as being related. Often when she reads or writes she feels like painting because it often gives her images she wants to paint. When she paints, she can almost write a poem about it.

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