

BACKBONE MOUNTAIN REVIEW

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2011

# BACKBONE MOUNTAIN REVIEW 2011

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## INTRODUCTION

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On behalf of the trustees and staff of the Allegany County Library System I want to say how excited we are to join as a sponsor of the 2011 *Backbone Mountain Review*. We are honored to be included within the Frostburg Center for Creative Writing and the Allegany Arts Council as sponsoring producers for this annual literary publication. These two organizations have done a remarkable job of showcasing how a vibrant arts scene enhances a community, and highlights an entire region's creative talents and economic development possibilities.

The *Backbone Mountain Review* celebrates the writers of our region and solicits works from all ages and walks of life. As our world become smaller, thanks to the Internet and the many opportunities within a day's drive, our regional approach distinguishes the literary arts in the areas surrounding Western Maryland. The works in this year's *Backbone Mountain Review* serve as remarkable examples of the rich cultural and artistic heritage of our area.

As my colleagues at the Frostburg Center for Creative Writing and the Allegany Arts Council Arts were reviewing the process of putting the *Backbone Mountain Review* together with me, I was impressed that the work of selecting the poems and stories is conducted by a small and dedicated set of editors. These editors read each and every poem and story and make the difficult decisions as to which ones are included in this year's issue. I commend and applaud them for the quality of this 2011 issue.

I hope you enjoy the stories, poems, and photographs in this year's *Backbone Mountain Review*.

Thank You,  
John Taube  
Director, Allegany County Library System

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DAVE HAMMAKER

## WHERE REPTILES DROWN

Marisa reaches for Joseph's hand as they walk down a wooded path. He pretends to not notice her gesture and instead stares through the tree tops where he can see flashes of white marble adorning the side of his grandparents' mansion. Joseph turns his head away from the building and concentrates on the long hill to his left that dwindles into a creek.

The couple can smell the freshly cut grass as they approach an opening in the trees. From here, rays of sunlight slice through the thousands of gaps in the maple leaves. The creek's estuaries divulge into a swamp with a bent house overlooking the thick waters. Joseph can see the carport attached to the neighbor's two-story rancher now; its moisture-ridden brown shingles an obvious departure from his grandparents' marbled siding.

Looking down the steep side of the eroded bank, Joseph can see Marisa's reflection in the marsh's water below. The black water distorts her image, but not enough to hide the anger in her gait.

"You better not slip, you'll ruin your new clothes," says Marisa, attempting to pry a word from Joseph. The last hour of their car ride Marisa was left with nothing but the sound of asphalt grinding their rubber tires into dust. "We're here" was all Joseph said as he took his first steps onto the path leading through a lush deciduous forest.

Joseph tugs at the neck of his blue sweater; he can feel every individual strand pulling his invisible white hairs from his pores. He takes one step lower on the bank; a few feet further down is a five-foot drop-off; a muddied hunk of earth hangs precariously over the edge.

A small dock emerges into view from the neighbor's five-foot-high grass and extends into the swamp. Joseph can finally see them now as he moves farther down the path and more of the dock comes into view. At first they are wet lumps adorning twisted brown hair that bow and breach against the tiny waves.

"As big as a minivan," says Joseph, looking toward the tops of their furry shells.

"I don't want to make your mother angry; we're running late as it is," says Marisa, catching a glimpse of bright orange painted on a turtle's face as it dredges through a low muddy spot in the bank.

Marisa leans closer to the edge as three turtles, make circles in the swamp, the two smaller ones following a large alpha male. A smaller turtle branches off from the pack and attempts climbing onto the neighbor's dock only to realize its massive weight cannot be held by the rotting wood.

"You've never seen the neighbor's turtles have you Marisa?" asks Joseph, testing the weight of an outpouring root in the eroded hill.

"No I haven't, but I remember your telling me about them, last time you mentioned your grandfather's house," she says, looking into Joseph's cheek, but he continues to stare elsewhere.

"Are you okay, Joseph?" asks Marisa, thumping his palm as she nervously glances at one of the younger turtles climbing the far bank.

"Why don't we go down and check out the turtles?" asks Joseph, finally looking Marisa in the eyes for the first time in hours. She doesn't respond, and Joseph can see that she is now more irritated than her reflection in the water originally hinted.

"Look, there's one right at the bottom of the hill," says Joseph pointing to one of the smaller turtles. It seems to have its eyes focused on Marisa as it slides on its belly up the hill, its claws pulling away clods of earth.

Marissa looks toward the white mansion as she laces her bony fingers through Joseph's hand, her eyes becoming tiny brown slices focused into his pupils.

"I know, but we're never here and I've always wanted to show you these turtles," says Joseph, raising his voice, "I haven't seen them in years."

"You said they were an abomination the only time we talked about them," says Marissa, concentrating on a dripping main of fur on the largest turtle's chin.

"Yeah, but," Joseph lets go of Marisa's hand, unable to finish his sentence. Marisa grabs Joseph by the wrist and pulls him closer to his grandfather's house; they can now feel the warmth of a massive fire burning in the front yard. Joseph can already see the plumes of smoke rising from a decorative burning pit.

"Joseph, your grandmother is waiting, she probably really misses you."

"I don't see how she could be my grandmother."

Suddenly, a moan comes from the crest of the hill and the couple can see one of the smaller turtles digging its claws into the rooted muddy hill, desperately making its way toward them. Joseph shakes off Marisa's grip and runs toward the still massive reptile. He lies down at the crest of the hill and is able to touch the turtle's ham-sized wet paws. The animal looks into Joseph's eyes as it loosens its grip. Sliding backwards down the hill, its eyes roll back into its head and the fear becomes visible on its face as it explodes into a section of marsh strewn with rotted leaves.

"Joseph what are you doing!" screams Marisa, her hands leaping down her sides, "you're going to get hurt; you don't know what that thing can do!"

"Let's just go inside," says Joseph pushing his way past Marisa, rubbing black mud onto his pants.

Joseph stops for a second to examine the twenty foot high arches wrapping around the fire pit. He closes his eyes and smells the distinct burning of endangered pine. A marble walkway leads to the ebony and gold front door. Joseph ignores the hand-carved doorbell and knocks instead. He is greeted by his grandfather, somehow looking a few years younger than from his last visit. Joseph thinks of tendons being pulled from a yellow fetus' skull; he looks at Marissa with a disgusted face.

"Hey Joseph, come on in," says his grandfather, placing his arm around Joseph's back and ushering him through a doorway large enough for a tractor. His white pants match the reflection of the sun gleaming off the fire pits protective arches.

Inside, Joseph can already hear his father and mother; their low grumbles are bickering as usual. He steps past the foyer and sees them sitting in separate brown leather chairs in the living room. Joseph does not even bother to ask where his aunts and uncles are.

Marisa walks up behind Joseph and pushes him towards a white couch lined with a thin strip of gold.

"I got to say Joseph, your grandmother is getting around better than we are." says Joseph's father sipping, his coffee.

"She's in the kitchen preparing a feast, won't even let me help," adds Joseph's mother cracking a slight drunken laugh, lapping a bead of red wine from her bottom lip.

There is no reply from Joseph as his grandfather becomes visibly uncomfortable standing behind the couch, squeezing the furniture with his hands that once shook from Parkinson's disease.

"Joseph, your grandmother is in the kitchen; why don't you see if she needs some help with the cooking," says Joseph's mother, "go ahead, Joseph. It'll give me and Marisa a chance to catch up; we haven't seen her in over a year."

Marissa places her hand on Joseph's grandfather's arm. Standing up, Joseph can feel the silence that he knew would eventually come. Everyone in the room knows he does not want to see or even talk to his grandmother, yet they stare at him, a slight hatred condensing in the tips of their pupils.

Joseph complies and leaves the room, clearing his throat. Already, he can hear the distinct talk of Marisa's graduate school, and laughter filling the space that he once occupied.

Upon entering the threshold of the kitchen, he can smell pot roast and sees a large tub of mashed potatoes, a wooden spoon shoved into them like a sword hanging from a fallen enemy's soft abdomen. His grandmother is wearing a red sweater, hunched over a steaming bronze pot. She doesn't notice him until the smell of chloroform turns his stomach and forces him to vomit a bite of lunch into his throat. This is the smell that Joseph had read about so many times when researching the procedure that his grandmother had been through. Tears begin to swell up in his eyes and he can feel the pinch in his cheeks. He gives a loud cough to clear the stinging acid from his palate. She turns around briskly like a bird of prey—staring him in his eyes. He is used to her wearing glasses.

Joseph turns the corner, almost slipping on the checkered tile, and runs into the basement, his feet thudding on the cool brown carpet. He sits hunched over the computer, weeping onto the paper thin keyboard. He thinks of funerals and car accidents, of pet dogs now rotting underground; a fat cancerous tumor consuming bright red flesh.

Joseph doesn't hear her approaching, but he feels his grandmother's cold hand on his shoulder. He stands up and wraps his arms around her solid frame and weeps into her thick red sweater.

"I missed you so much," is all Joseph can mutter under his tears.

Her flesh is not plush like he remembers, but instead hard like wood. He turns

his back to her and walks over to the couch across from the computer. He sits silently, staring at his reflection in the black nothing of a seventy five inch television.

"It's okay, Joseph, I'm back, it's me," says his grandmother. Joseph runs his hands through his hair, watching his grandmother in the reflection of the television.

"Remember when I used to read you and your cousins stories. All of you packed into that one bed," she says, holding her hands together as if praying.

"What was it like, Gram? After you passed," says Joseph, holding a pillow in his arms for warmth.

"It was horrible, Joseph. I am worried about the rest of the family."

"How was it horrible?" asks Joseph, unable to look away from her anymore.

His grandmother hesitates a second, but then a hard smile grows across her face and Joseph cannot tell whether he has upset her or not.

"We stood in line all day. They tested us on how well we could walk. How long we could stand in place. Our basic math skills. Sometimes they let you move up in line."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"It takes a long time to pass their tests. Finally, I was allowed to organize the money. A city of nothing but money. Bills and coins stacked onto shelves taller than skyscrapers. There was nothing else."

"Do you still believe in God?" says Joseph squeezing his pillow in half.

"No," she responds without hesitation.

"Why?"

"You know why Joseph, I've been dead. I've seen what it's like."

"Was everyone there?"

"No, not everyone, just people like me."

"Do you think it will be different if you go back?"

"I'm not going back. I can stay here forever. Me and your Pap."

Joseph turns around and looks into his grandmother's face. He can tell she is upset now, even through all the plastic surgery her face manages to contort inward toward the back of her neck. He wants to stop the conversation now, so they can all eat and then leave, but he knows how angry his parents would be knowing that he had asked her what being dead was like. The silence is broken by screaming upstairs.

"Joseph! We need you up here now!" screams Marisa from the top of the stairs. Joseph sprints to Marisa, leaving his grandmother in the underground basement. He is then thrown to the front door by his frantic family.

Outside one of the smaller turtles has finally made its way up the muddy hill and is scratching at the front door like a dog would. Joseph knows the animal isn't dangerous, but he is not going to be able to convince his family. Already, his grandfather is running upstairs toward his gun cabinet. Joseph pushes past his family, his dad angrily protesting in the background.

The second Joseph opens the door a crack of gunfire from the upstairs window sends the once curious animal into a terrified frenzy. Joseph runs toward the massive beast, corralling it away from the still-burning fire with waving hands. A second crack of gunfire makes the turtle jump straight into the air like a cat, its large shell slams against a decorative arch as it falls into the smoldering fire.

Its clawed feet immediately become wedged in the hot coals and instantly the animal begins screaming. Joseph runs to find something to un-wedge the turtle from the flames, but the horrid screeches from the animal make it hard to concentrate.

The fire is too hot and when Joseph returns with a large branch, he can see that the animal has stopped moving. Its jaw lies slacked open, a single flame burning a dark hole into its skull where its brain is bubbling out onto its thick neck.

His grandfather stands holding a long barrel rifle as he leans against the Greek-style balcony railing. He overlooks four acres of flat pampered grass. "Serves the filthy beast right, not enough room on this planet to have that damn thing running around on my property."



DAVE HAMMAKER

## MONET'S GARDEN

A woman stood on the sidewalk watching the bistro across the street. When her lover arrived, she slithered into shadows, where she watched him cross the threshold and disappear into the building behind the beveled glass. She might have gone in, confronted him, but she thought she deserved the truth, needed to know. She strained to see his silhouette through the lens of their uncertain future: faces, images, and places swirling together slightly out of focus, but she wasn't frightened; she was fascinated by the impressionist image of a wedding, an earthy collage of chocolate, ivory, sage, and fuchsia, and laughed at the gender-neutral towhead twirling in the center of the oriental rug, and wondered about the wind, which had picked up. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, shook her head, then moved out of the shadows and under the streetlamp, exposed. The willowy red head leaning on her lover looked flimsy, like a strong wind could whisk her away. She noticed the tiny funnel cloud of debris forming on the sidewalk by her left foot: theatre tickets, cigarette butts, leaves, and flyers gaining momentum: bouquets of begonias, French perfume, weekends in Rome, until the vortex's gravity upset her equilibrium; it sucked her in, pulled her down, down—depositing her in a heap, where she hesitated to rise above the cliché she might have been reduced to, until the oil on the street iridized into droplets of purple and green, relegating her regrets to Monet, painting in his garden.

## MONSOON

*"Let the rain kiss you. Let the rain beat upon your head with silver liquid drops.  
Let the rain sing you a lullaby."* Langston Hughes

The tranquil tap, tap, tapping  
of the raindrops on my tin roof  
tells me this is no squall, it's a soaker:  
the kind of rain that saturates,  
stamps out fires, stops droughts  
and sometimes over-supplies  
parched creek beds: the kind of rain  
I could get out of bed  
and wash my hair in.

The summer shower is warm.  
I step outside and strip,  
let the rain run down my face,  
tickle the tip of my nose,  
make me snort,  
like the horses in the painting  
over my bed,

Horses and big sky  
in the mountains of Montana  
that mold the breed,  
sure feet, sharp eyes, stocky build,  
and strong legs,  
for running across plains,

in the rain I imagine now  
trickling down my back, my thighs,  
over my whole body, which,  
still under the covers,  
curls away from him  
and the incessant tap, tap, tapping.

## MISSED COMMUNICATION

I know it's too late now, darling  
but when we were talking  
about children,  
and I said I wanted six,  
what I meant to say was sex,  
I want sex.

And two years ago,  
before Nick and Nancy's  
New Year's Bash,  
when you asked me whether  
I liked the purple paisley tie better  
than the geometric gray one,  
I meant to say purple, like hyacinth,  
my favorite.

And last spring,  
when you went to Santa Fe,  
and asked me to accompany you,  
I made excuses about essays  
and Easter eggs and exams,  
but I meant to say "certainly"  
with conviction.

And three months ago,  
when you asked me  
what was wrong, I said "nothing,"  
and this morning,  
when you asked me  
to sign the papers,  
what I meant to say,  
what I wanted to say,  
was I want you to stay.

but all you heard was what I did say,  
"okay."

## SAID

Be careful.  
Put your hands up.  
Hold your nose.  
I love you.  
Shut up.  
Never give up.  
Leave me alone.  
The kids in Africa  
eat rice in cups of cockroaches.  
You are piss ants.

Look both ways.  
Marry me someday.  
Can I take your order?  
You are not gay.  
In the name of the Lord.  
Watch the trolley car, please.  
Don't forget.  
I hate you.  
Do you miss me?  
How are you?  
Make yourself presentable.  
Shut the door.  
Delete me.

## STUFFED ME

I name stuffed animals  
colors.

Green is a cheetah.

Orange is a polar bear.

Black is a pterodactyl.

A snake is Blue.

A motherless elephant is Red  
and Purple is the wrinkled walrus.

I wear Yellow, the coral-colored fish,  
where my collar bones collide,  
thrust forward,  
nude and ribless,

when the heart aches  
that caffeinated ache,  
that beady, black-eyed flush of blood  
before crying.

## FREUD'S DATING COMPLEX (CIRCA 2010)

He cannot stop himself.  
Every time the waiter brings the spritzer,  
he waits for her to get comfortable,  
and then proceeds to pick out her flaws.

Michelle has problems with her mother,  
which he has deduced is a result  
of her jealousy. She wants her father all to herself.

Analeise always tells him of her dreams. She wants  
to be an actress, an artist, or even perform  
opera at the Volksoper one day,  
but all he sees is another hysteric in need.

Martha was the young psychology student he met  
at the University of Vienna. She had shown interest  
in him and his research. He wanted to discuss  
the latest method of hypnosis.  
She wanted to go out for wiener schnitzel.

His Viennese office holds no pictures of a wife  
or child, no smiling pictures in front of the Belvedere  
or Leopold, only inkblots and research articles,  
lovingly placed into golden frames, lined the walls.

He stares at the empty couch by the window, and sighs.  
He clears his schedule for the night, picks up the phone,  
and asks her to meet him at Julius Meisl for coffee,  
hoping he still has a chance to cure himself of his complex.

## TEMPTATION

Always a glitch in paradise,  
hooved-down herbs, the bitten tomato  
scummed over, shriveling—  
complications in the garden.

They'll break your corn right off,  
my neighbors warn, and take  
the heads right off your broccoli.  
Our yards are their path  
from the woods to the woods.

Filchers, pinchers—  
the neighbors threaten guns,  
hang white rags over flowerbeds,  
build high fences.

Coming around the house  
this morning, I meet her,  
cloven feet concealed in my bed  
of white impatiens, black eyes  
amber-glazed, our muscles  
still and taut as stones.

For just seconds:  
my graceful nemesis,  
the garden's undoing,  
my daily armful of apples.

## AS THEY FLY

Straight, a ruled line  
unlike my own vain march toward the sun,

approaching an old man or bare tree  
(I can't see clearly yet)

pointing off to a patch of white  
clouds or smoke over the hazy hills.

Crows haggle over mucked puddles  
on this half-etched trail, leave their haphazard

glyphs in the mud. This is no place  
for marching, in a mob of trees,

only the leaves' humid whisper,  
nowhere to stretch out a map

to locate oneself. Days, meetings,  
forgettings branch through these woods

like veins on the back of my hand, not a line,  
but the scattered miscellany

of crows, the oily commonness,  
the uncommon heaviness of crows,

and in their feathers the gloss and rainbow,  
their wings, a map ablaze.

## FREE LUNCH

always the possibility of a fork  
in the road or a web of arteries  
veering out of the usual

statistically they can't all be  
more of the same

things change

large bills sometimes wave from the sidewalk  
lotteries are won

the best part is  
we never know what's coming

water lines break and work is cancelled  
snow sometimes shuts down everything  
some days no one is hurt

people make love for hours in the back seats of cars  
a forgotten name may drop effortlessly from your tongue

and you could find yourself dressed perfectly  
for an unexpected occasion where you are treated to food  
that tastes better than you could have imagined

## WHEN WATER PIPES BURST AT SIX A.M.

This morning  
I wake to water  
sluicing through floorboards,  
that first dim awareness  
of a breakthrough,  
and the realization  
that all my life  
I have been waiting for a miracle—  
that longing inhabits emptiness,  
bending the rigid space  
between desire and fulfillment  
the way mystics  
bend spoons  
with one unyielding  
thought.

There is a longing so urgent  
it can pull other worlds  
through walls  
the way water  
importunes itself  
through rock  
or old pipes.

Wringing wet towels  
on my knees,  
I hope they unwound  
Lazarus swiftly  
as he splashed,  
foamy, furious,  
through the barred gate  
back to this world,  
gushing and bubbling  
through narrow spaces  
between the strips of cloth.

Daylight leaks through  
my shuttered windows,  
showing up warped wood,  
rusty puddles,  
bulging wet wall,  
and me still waiting  
to feel that first tug  
at the bindings.



DAVE HAMMAKER

## THE MUDDY EARTH

Rain left the ground soft and muddy. He knew exactly what was happening. Jack's hands were covered in it, from where he had lowered himself to the ground. He used a stick to try and scratch his message in the mud. Dragging the stick was like moving a heavy log.

'Chest pain.'

He'd managed to push himself over to where his back was against a tree. This couldn't have happened at a worse time. He was at least a mile from the nearest road, on Meadow Mountain. There was another car and a pickup parked in the dirt next to the trailhead. He wasn't the only one out here. Even moving over to the tree had left him short of breath, sweating like he was in the desert despite the cool, forty-degree morning. Jack wondered if it were LAD, the main artery down the front of his heart that would leave him dead quicker than most, or maybe the circumflex that wrapped itself around the left wall of the heart to the back.

He was the only doctor in county without a cell phone on his belt, but it had been hell night, in and out of the hospital covering his partners, and with his call behind him he'd left his pager and phone in the car, not wanting that world to find him. And he knew he wouldn't likely find it either; it felt like a leather belt being tightened around his chest. It felt just like they said it did in medical school. All the words he'd memorized, and some of them were actual facts. Sub-sternal chest pressure. Sense of impending doom.

My God, what if they thought he'd fallen out of the tree and was a trauma? They'd wait for a backboard, a neck collar. They'd screw around and want to do an x-ray, or worse, a cat scan, and all that time would be wasted. Jack picked up his stick and forced his arm to move against its own inertia. His left arm was all toothache.

'No trauma.'

Now what? He was resigned to waiting. He threw the stick as far as he could. It landed at his feet. He'd try to be calm, lessen the heart's work as it raced in barely controlled terror. What was the last thing he'd said to Monica? It wasn't a thing at all, the last thing was the loud silence that morning. Jack had been on call during the night, so he wasn't expected in the office until noon, and had this chance for a walk. He'd been upset about something. He didn't remember her being upset, so maybe it was just in his head. No, she'd tried to talk with him; she had tried and he just turned and walked away. He breathed in deeply but couldn't get enough air. His breath was a cloud he could see. His wet skin was cold, cold and hot at the same time.

They'd had an argument; he was sure of it. He imagined them finding him propped up against the tree, and like those out-of-t-e body experiences where people say they can see themselves, he imagined what he looked like. 'He was in the woods.'

They'd had an argument; 'he was found leaning against a tree.'

Jack struggled to retrieve the stick with the heel of his shoe. He dug a deep furrow in the mud. It was a struggle to reach down and pull the stick back. He knew what it would look like, and prayed he wouldn't pass out before writing one more thing.

'No OD.'

A true suicide might write that same thing, so they wouldn't revive him. A suicide would want them to think it was something else. He thought of rubbing it out, but wasn't sure what the right thing to do would be. He left it there in the mud.

He needed to know why he'd given his wife the cold shoulder that morning. Jack was fifty-five, the same age his father was when he died. Why would he try to punish Monica with the clock ticking like that? His father had kissed his mother that morning, and said he loved her, before telling her to call the ambulance. He probably had angina. He could have had angina for weeks, but would never say anything and would never go to a doctor. He never trusted them. He had the best health insurance in the world, thanks to his union, and wouldn't go to a doctor if his life depended on it.

Until he asked for the ambulance.

He never made it to the hospital, and died in one of the Ford trucks he might have helped build, the siren warning people to get out of the way.

My father's dying; show some respect and pull over.

He remembered what they'd told him at the hospital. 'If only he'd gotten to a doctor a week ago, or even yesterday.' Jack had no notion then of becoming a physician himself, but the words had stuck with him.

And he was his father's son. He kept checking his own blood pressure and knew it was high, but whose wouldn't be? His job was stressful enough. His cholesterol was a little high, too. He'd checked it a few years before, and it was pretty close to normal. He didn't know if he trusted the doctor thing anymore than his dad had, even though he knew they meant well.

The circumflex artery travels in the atrio-ventricular groove between the left atrium and the left ventricle.

God, let it be the circumflex. He pictured in his head what his EKG might look like, or rather what he'd like it to look like. Then the terror of being a patient, a priority-one cardiac, began to grip him. He pictured in his head again what his EKG might look like, the segments that get so big and so towering high on the paper they're called 'tombstones.' God had no call to help him. He didn't believe in God anymore. He'd tell patients he'd pray for them, when they wore a cross or he had to move a Catholic scapula to listen to their heart. He'd said the same thing to his sister when she told him about her breast cancer, but he never gave it another thought. If there were a God, he would do what he wanted.

The circumflex is dominant in fifteen percent of the population and provides blood flow to the posterior descending artery.

That would be just like God, to grant the dying physician his last request, knowing in his omniscient mind that he was circ-dominant and it would blow out the back of his heart. Dim the house lights; queue the universe's laugh track.

He held the stick in his sweaty hand. There was something else he wanted to write, but wasn't sure what it was. A wave of tightness gripped him around the chest like he'd been lifted up in a giant fist, but he stayed planted in the mud. He came out here to connect with the earth, and now he was sinking in it. Why would he leave home without speaking to her? Why couldn't he have kissed her like his father had kissed his mom, and then said he loved her? After his mother called him at school, he'd driven to the hospital, and driving, he thought of all the things he would say to his father, but none of it ever got said. They already had the sheet up over his head. They couldn't take the tubes out because he didn't have a doctor, and so they had to do an autopsy. That's what they told him. It was the first time he'd seen an endotracheal tube, twisted grotesquely in his father's mouth, like he wanted to spit it out like his chewing tobacco.

In medical school he had almost passed out during his first intubation, becoming clammy and sweating like he was sweating now. Someone had to take over and he had to sit down. The patient moved, and he thought he saw his father opening his eyes, cold and dead.

It was a Tuesday morning and little Amy would be in preschool. He hoped his little girl would not have to see his body the same way he'd seen his dad. She was so young, and so sensitive to other people and what they felt. Even when he was a medical resident, she'd ask about the sick people in the hospital and then feel sad about what they were going through. She had such empathy, that one. She cried when he told her some people had to be in the hospital on Christmas. It was Christmas and she cried.

Jack was crying, thinking about his girl. He thought of Monica, his daughter's mother. He loved her so much; how could he be away on call all night and come home and be angry at her, not even speak to her? It didn't make any sense. He was tired, but that was no reason to be an asshole. How could he do it? Maybe that's what he wanted to write, that he was sorry.

He looked at his assessment. 'Chest pain.' 'No trauma.' 'No OD.' It was the beginning of a 'history of present illness' and 'review of systems.' It's what Jack had been doing all night, up writing in charts and admitting people from the emergency department.

Decompensated congestive heart failure.

Exacerbation of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Chest pain.

He was reliving the night like a bad dream, from the eyes of the people he had treated like broken parts, plugging in tests and treatments to keep the machine running. And now this was his epitaph, these cursory words that meant something to his colleagues, that might communicate an important message, but at the same time not containing anything of his own.

What would I want to tell her?

He wondered whom he meant, Amy or Monica? Amy was so young; she was young when he was a medical resident. He didn't remember when she wasn't young. Amy was always young.

But I was a resident more than twenty years ago.

It was the most basic medical evaluation. The patient is oriented to person, place and time. Jack knew it was Tuesday. He knew the month and the year, and that blood was still getting to the gray brain inside his head, still keeping him conscious for a while longer. He saw his father's white pasty face like wax, lying in the coffin with his closed eyes. The best part of his face was the blue eyes, and they were closed forever. He would never see them again. He saw him lying there, but it wasn't his father.

It was his daughter.

There was something about her that was profoundly sad. At first he didn't recognize what it was, then he let the satin pillow become part of his view of her, and the closed eyes with her long brown lashes, and the wood box with the satin lining, and he knew she was dead. She was so small. It must have been a long time ago.

Is she waiting for me there?

There was a connection, he just had to slow his breathing down and maybe he'd think of it. It had to do with the night, and the hospital. He'd been on call, came home tired and went to kiss her goodnight. Monica was sleeping. Amy had fallen between the bed and the wall, a bundle of blankets, and the breathing had left her. He covered her mouth with his and pushed on her chest. Her lips were cold, and she never said another word. It came back to him like a wave of sickening air vented from the pit of the earth. It boiled up through the mud. He hadn't been angry at Monica all those years every time he took call, but when it came back to him he knew enough to keep his mouth shut. He'd been glad for the miscarriages, glad he didn't need to kiss his girl goodnight again and leave her home.

Home with her.

The anger came through his already squeezed chest and left him exhausted and ashamed. All those years he would rather keep it in his heart, his silent, diseased heart, than put it out where they could see it, and do something with it. And now it might be too late. He kept hoping to hear another person walking, or a group talking as they took their morning walk on Meadow Mountain, but there was only the wind in the branches, and the birds and squirrels. The thought of it being too late almost overwhelmed him. He thought about putting his head down before he passed out. He was seeing things like they were in a tunnel. Jack held his stick to the ground.

'Love and forgive.'

He smiled as he let his head rest on the ground, part mud and part tree root. The wind seemed to change direction and it was a minute before his face, already drenched in sweat, felt the rain falling. Then he felt it on his hand.

And he watched his words. 'Chest.' 'Pain.' 'OD.' 'Forgive.' He watched them splash with drops of water and be washed away into the muddy ground.

God, did I ever say I was sorry?

He looked at where his words had been, erased from the earth. The straight lines of the rain began to turn in circles, and the tunnels of his vision went dark.



DAVE HAMMAKER

## WAITING

It's the model of efficiency  
forms and signatures  
wristbands and gowns  
skin shaved and stained.  
Iodine dyeing  
flesh brown-yellow-red.  
The precise procession of scrubs.  
The stench of antiseptic  
burrowing into your skull.  
The fear pressing your worry lines  
into your third eye—  
You can not see  
beyond.

And this waiting.

The clocks conspiring against you.  
The precise procession of scrubs.  
The incessant, beep ... beep ... beep.

Here, he is not  
whom you know,  
whom you love.  
Here  
he is rendered small  
and useless.  
Here, he is so very  
not.

In this bed,  
with the IV lines  
and the cloying prints of the gown,  
wrapped, swaddled.

Here, he is not  
here.

And this

Waiting.  
Your head  
filled with antiseptic,  
filled with the swish, swish

of the booties,  
like walking along pine forest paths.  
Heads swaddled in puffs  
like blue mushroom caps.  
The hither thither scurry of nurses  
like squirrels, fat and industrious.

Here,  
he is not.

Not here,  
he is what fills you.  
He  
who has always been,  
who is larger than this room,  
larger than this hospital  
with its rough red bricks  
and antiseptic floors  
and the swish swish  
of booties.  
He is not who he is, here.

The doctors avert their eyes.  
They can not see  
you there, waiting.

Outside, it is not winter.  
The dead piles  
of snow  
specked with cinders,  
leaves, broken branches.  
The steady rain  
collapses the snow into  
itself.  
It fills the empty spaces,  
as the fear  
without him  
fills you now.

Outside  
a woman in an impossibly  
blue bathrobe,  
throwing crumbs

to the squirrels.  
Each handful  
arching and spreading  
with a swish, swish  
as the crumbs rain down  
to the dirty snow.

Soon,  
there will be daffodils  
and peonies  
and the cloying smell of hyacinths—  
the perfume, headache inducing.  
You can feel the beginnings,  
right between your eyes.

Later,  
feet swish swishing  
along the brown-yellow-red  
carpet of the forest floor  
punctuated with the truculent chatter  
of fat squirrels,  
you will remember the contours  
of the waiting room chairs,  
the ache within you  
arching and spreading  
like the canopy above  
filtering  
the impossibly blue sky.  
Yes, he is here,  
solid and strong,  
yet somehow  
diminished—  
the memory of waiting  
compressing your heart  
like rain-sodden snow.

## THE FIRST TIME I SAW A DEAD MAN SMILE

I was fifteen and fresh faced in the stale streets of Savannah. I grasped a psalm sheet for you in one weak hand and my father's sticky fingers in the other. The funeral home smelled like roses and body heat; carpet crumpling beneath my feet like old paper.

When I saw that grin: skin pale, matte with makeup, false brilliance shining pink in hollowed cheeks, I was amazed by the subtle beauty of the creature that used to be my father's father.

Dad was trapped in a suit as old as I, sweating upon strangers and family in a dance of rigid, unwanted embraces, awkward, eyes darting, whispering thanks while I chirped notes of graciousness past his shoulder blade to fill in the blanks ...

How long had I been ignoring the surprising length of those spiky blonde lashes? In life, I'd never noticed with any clarity the smile you held stiff, the round dangling of elderly earlobes, or the elegance of nostrils fat with laughter. I let go of my father, and though sure you'd open your eyes if I got too close, I abandoned my anchor to the real world to submerge head-first into the land of the dead, condolences passing me by on the way. The closer I got, the more your lips seemed to grow and distort, Cheshire-like and much too red. I faced you, the two of us still, a slow dance of memory electric between us, and felt the emptiness of your coffin in my bones.

## THE PYGMALION

With sculpting palms  
Furrowing indents  
At the creases of her arms  
And backs of her knees,  
She is persuaded into submission.

Wishing for her  
To come alive again  
Beneath the pressure  
Of his fingertips

He kneads her eye sockets deeper  
With bruised knuckles,  
Carving thinner day by day  
The rambling spaces  
Between her ribs.

He paints her with the force of his hands

Teeth and sharper instruments,  
Cleaving sharply the delicate  
Separation of lips, buttocks,  
Breasts and thighs.

Yellow, brown and green,  
Purple blue blossoming  
Beneath her skin,  
Forget-me-nots of love

He prays for her  
Each morning—for her beauty  
And for her constant presence—  
Apologetic for yesterday's art:

And sometimes red  
Like poppies tumbling  
Down expanses of her flesh.

He lies,  
Don't leave me, I need you,  
And she stays.

## BENEATH SUBURBIA

Once you own the minivan, the four plasma televisions, the my kid is an A student bumper sticker, the lawn service, the grocery warehouse discount card, the non shedding dog, plastic fruit, and the happy family collage (one for every room), you will begin to see your sons and daughters sinking into the Febreeze-fresh carpet. It will wrap around their necks as they slide farther into the chemically pressed wood. Your children will turn their heads and see the hundred gallon septic tank go by before they drop all the way into the suffocating underground river.

Then you will look at your own feet or maybe your spouse's as you both begin to sink between the fresh vacuum lines. You will take one last look around to see if there are dirty dishes that someone forgot to wash, if the kitchen guy really built the countertop even. Finally, when your eyes pass the carpet, you will wonder about how clean it ever really was when you notice a single stray dog hair.

The rivers here only lead underground farther where you'll be stuck, vulnerable and squatting, perpetually marking your territory among men with armaments of Christmas lights and fleets of tractors protecting their postage-stamp yards.

## SUMMER OF SOLITUDE

Empty beer bottles rest like watching crows  
On top of the  
Microwave, unbalanced like a hat upon the  
Television. I've never cleaned  
This place up.

Instead,  
I take the empty bottles  
And run my fingers over their openings  
to play a song, the stale  
Beer left in their bottoms giving each a different pitch.

I have shaved my head for efficiency.

My only worries seem to come after  
drawn out  
Tokes on the neighbor's  
Pipe, filled with whatever is available across  
Those railroad tracks.

"God? I've never seen him," he says.

I tell my girl back home  
I'm real busy  
As I dig a garden for watermelon plants,  
placing one rose in the middle  
And watering it last.

I've discovered every old hiking  
Trail in this town, leading only to lumber yards  
And garbage-choked underpasses.

Yet I'm still packing cigarettes  
To the beat of a  
Static-infested  
Radio Tune  
In a red 1985 pounded pickup.

## DEEP GREEN

As a child, I would  
Pluck grasshoppers from  
My mother's shrubs.

Their Velcro-like legs easily pierced  
The tiny calluses on my fingertips.

I would twist off their metallic bb-like heads  
And their insides would dangle below an armored neck in  
Stringy purples and dark greens glinting and reflecting the sun.

Throwing the body, I would  
Marvel how its empty shell would fly away.  
"It's an angel now," I would tell my mother pointing to its  
Still beating wings,  
Then ask her if the motionless head and guts  
Were the grasshopper's soul.



DAVE HAMMAKER

## HIBISCUS

## Part I

The table was covered with cheap cloth flowers; you know, the kind that are all faded from years of desperately trying to make some godawful windowsill merry. Ragged edges marking the passage of years. Years I had been else where. The Upper Ninthth Ward was a place I was eager to leave behind. I only got as far as Houston: waitress by day, barfly by night. I empathized with the flowers.

The air in the turquoise and lime-green three-room shotgun was stale; even with 97 percent humidity and a sun that would roast a chicken, I preferred the back porch. I settled on the glider next to Uncle Ren.

“How you doin’, chérie?” he asked.

I sighed. “Until now, I thought I would always have a chance to apologize. You know. For the way I left.”

He squeezed my shoulders. “Doughn’t worry about it, chérie. She knew you din’t mean those things you said.” Uncle Ren, of course, was a world-class liar. Alright, not a liar as such, but a con man for real, for real. He worked Rue Bourbon from Rue St. Peter to Rue St. Ann. His favorite con was the change up. He called it a classic example of greed. Walk into any of the overpriced souvenir shops filled with landfill fodder and approach the cashier directly (helps to alleviate suspicion), and ask if you can get some change. The standard reply from the uninitiated will be that you need to make a purchase. Buy a pack of gum, and try to pay with a hundred. The key is that during the entire interchange, thank the cashier for being so helpful, and promise a good tip for her or his jar. When they offer you twenties, say you need tens. Then say you’re sorry, but you need some twenties. Move your hands fast, talk constantly so they can’t count, and in about five minutes you’ll be able to walk out of the store with an extra \$20.

But I decided that right now, I needed to believe him. I leaned into him and closed my eyes. A merciful breeze swept the smell of jasmine and coriander past me. So rare are these breezes in the summertime, Creole people have given them a name: Mukmuk. When the sizzle of the air becomes audible, you can hear folks talkin’ ‘bout how we need some mukmuk up in this city. My gran mam told me the story once while I was all wrapped up in her flappy arms.

“Chérie, you know why folks dun call dis here summer breezes mukmuk? Is ‘cause many years ago, whene’er a slave don have a chance to skedaddle off into the swamp and try to get some relief from the plantation work, he think it gon be so much better. But in those swamps, chérie, there be things that make you go white as a sheet. And dat take some doin’.”

Then there come along dis fine young man; Mukmuk was his name. He was tall and proud. They say he ruled a country all by hisself back in Mother Africa. And when he run off, it was like a rare breeze of joy and hope blew all through the

Quarter and areas thereabouts. So we's named those breezes after him. Some people say if you look just right, you can see him runnin' through the Marigny, pullin' those breezes behin' him."

I used to believe all of her stories, especially the ones about me becoming a great actress. "With those fine looks and good hair, you gonna be famous, chérie." But now I just felt faded and ragged around my edges.

In four hours, friends and family would be arriving for the funeral. I didn't want to see the casket. I didn't want to see the march to St. Vincent de Paul Cemetery. I didn't want to see the joy of the second line. I was not sure I could truly "cut the body loose" as my gran mam told me we all needed to do. But this was only partly true; the rest of the truth was I didn't know how to handle seeing my old life at the funeral. At least not while sober. I started thinking of ways to keep a low profile.

The deacon's secretary, Miss Pomerleau, had mentioned a small room in the rear of the church would be available for the family. For those overcome with grief like elderly aunts who fainted dead away, she had said. Sounded like a nice soft place. I reached into the pocket of my jeans and fingered the small metal token that marked six months sobriety. Taking a to-go cup to a funeral was maybe in poor taste. Best to slip away to a package liquor store for a petite bottle.

"I'm gonna take a stroll. I'll be back before noontime."

"Yous want me to go with you, sugar?" Uncle Ren asked.

"Naw. Need to clear my head a bit. I'll be fine."

## Part II

The nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniels was tucked inside the zippered pocket of her purse. A few of Uncle Ren's tricks had kept her from actually paying for the bottle, and she was a few bucks richer besides. She had changed into some more appropriate clothes: button-down blouse in a light cream paired with an old A-line navy skirt. A black silk scarf added a somber note, and she swept her shoulder-length brown- and blond-streaked hair up off of her caramel neck. A faded hibiscus bloom, cloth edges frayed, sat at the top of her French twist.

At the church, the grief room turned out to be more of a closet furnished with a solitary, shoddy, avocado-green couch covered in cigarette burns. A closer look at the spiral of metal on the stained coffee table revealed that cigarettes were not always the grief alleviator of choice. The burnt-out stub of a jazz cigarette brought back memories of days and nights spent on the banks of the Mississippi with various girlfriends before she left town at 17, four unbearable months before graduation. The clouds always looked different in NOLA.

She peeked up at them over the lenses of her dark glasses during the march to the cemetery. Familiar hymns, ones her gran mam had taught her, filled the air. She hummed along with "Just a Closer Walk With Thee" out of habit. At any moment the pavement could have turned into a sizzling sea, black and rolling away from their feet.

Uncle Ren supported her arm and kept her walking steady. Mukmuk pulled his breezes past, giving some relief to the late June heat. Inside the inside of her, after pain and apathy were passed by, was an awareness. An awareness that something was just behind her right ear, waiting for her to give it attention in her own time. With each trumpet blast, the awareness grew.

### Part III

Walking to the edge of the vault, I think about the whiskey in my purse next to the AA token. Maybe I should hurl both of them as hard as I can against the plaster, watch the glass burst into a rainbow of shards, amber liquid mixing with brick chips and the bile and blood in my throat. Alcohol always wakes the palmetto bugs of my rage, crawling with thousands of filthy feet over the faded flowers of my shitty, spent life.

"Fuck my life," but my lips press like vice grips over my teeth. Uncle Ren's arm tightens around my waist. I wish he would just let me sit my ass down. I pull away and slash a hand to wipe the hot tears and snot off my face. I need to spit or throw up or punch someone in the fucking stomach.

I stumble to a bench a little apart from the crowd. Overcome with grief. Ha! I'm not sure whom I feel worse for—the person inside the coffin or myself. Coffin of oak covered by a tattered velvet pall.

Jesus fuck, don't start with the cheesy poetry.

"Chérie, wipe your nose."

I freeze. This is a lie, I am not frozen. I am floating in warm water face up like in a bath tub. All stretched out and naked in Gran mam's porcelain tub with eagle feet and stained yellow all along the bottom. Here but not here at all. The crowd of mourners is still there several feet away, but I can't hear the wailing through my ears anymore. I am listening with my body. Every pore soaking the sounds up.

My head turns without using my neck.

"You should always carry a hankie in your purse. It's a mark of a lady, chérie."

"Yes, Gran mam." Her arm skin flaps back and forth as she points at my purse for emphasis. I find a McDonald's napkin with a wad of chewin' gum in one corner and wipe my face as best I can.

"I'm guessin' you're a trifle upset, sugar."

I wipe my eyes again, to be sure. No, she is still sitting there next to me in fresh-pressed blue gingham. She drapes a solid mocha arm across my shoulders.

"I'm sorry."

"Uncle Ren was telling the truth fo' once. I know. You was speaking your pain out loud for the world to hear back then, and I just happened to be standin' there. But I'm thinkin' somethin' else is restin' heavy on your pretty head." As she leans in to kiss my forehead, I smell her liniment. I rub my cheek against the soft folds of her neck. I am embarrassed by my sour whiskey breath. She doesn't seem to notice. Maybe ghosts don't have a very good sense of smell.

"I guess I'm a bit worried."

“Bout what, sugar?”

“Bout where I’m headed.”

“Shit, honey! You’re the one who decides that!”

I look into the familiar eyes and wonder just how crazy I am. My purse is still flopped open on the bench, so I dig out the nearly empty bottle and pour it out.

“Good choice, chérie.”

“What next?”

Her wrinkled hand reaches up to my hair and pulls the hibiscus into view. I smell it before I see it; in her hand is the most vivid orange hibiscus I have ever seen.

“Make us proud, chérie.”



DAVE HAMMAKER

ELIZABETH HENSLOE

Sisters tending garden one spring played  
at marrying a man with eyes like the sky.

Watching for sheds, they unrolled each skin  
like parchment, searching for pits

near the eyes ... "Poison!" Faces shining, hoes  
erect, they stalked sunny patches for rich

chestnut bands with copper saddles. The brothers,  
returning from fallow land, only laughed as Elizabeth

waved the banner of skin, proclaiming  
"We seek the living among the dead!" Now,

she sits the skidder like a throne, drags bucked logs  
with a delicate touch, loads with perfect balance.

Her timber, by father's will inherited,  
drunken brothers gone, sisters wed.

As maiden queen, stones mark her lines,  
stones of testimony. She traces the lines

each new moon, marking corners  
turned: southeast and west,

northwest and east. Judicious,  
she harvests, plants, defends.

## SAUERKRAUT

*"When tamping out the cabbage, do not break the shreds,  
bruise them until clear and the juice runs." –Nina Doman, Fox's Hollow, W.Va.*

The making of sauerkraut in this cool stone crock,  
when translucence follows the way of the body  
in age. Release its juice, and a soul that poises  
on the edge of fermentation. The brine  
can sour, so remember to daily skim  
the scum from off the top and press down  
with a weighty rock on the covering plate.

Salt is the key to preservation and words  
are the grains of salt telling the tale  
to a new generation. This recipe calls to tamp  
it thin, accept the work of each day  
for those you feed and spend your strength  
until light passes straight through you, like holding  
up a single cabbage leaf into the sun,  
pale veins and inner cells a revelation.

## BROWN TROUT ON THE HUDSON

Each slick and riffle inspected since spring, after melt  
until first frost, the world small as any pool, changing  
hour by hour, nymph to mayfly, blue-grey to jade.

It hung, hook-jawed, like a sunken mortar  
on the bank side of the boulder. In action, it snapped  
up frogs, grasshoppers, also flies, to whom death came

in one small blink and dimple. My father angled for trout,  
fly rod a compass setting his campaign an easier  
course, pausing clips of war that played of their own

accord. As bird trills signaled change of light,  
Father would bypass the pool, never permit us to engage  
in that domain. Surely, once we saw the trophy rise,

leap for a young squirrel, leaders trailing  
from his jaw, flesh grown over embedded barbs,  
spray's trajectory casting silver to the bank.

FLYING LOW OVER CHESTER COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA,  
AT NIGHT

The sky/s on its back.  
Highways pump veins of light  
toward Philadelphia.  
Ice eyeballs rattle in the plastic cup.  
I want Thomas Eakins  
in the next seat, seeing  
the organs of the land,  
the made earth,  
muscle-real and named.  
I want Eakins in the next seat, seeing  
the Schuylkill opened up,  
its rushing tendons still familiar  
from this high.

Draw what you see,  
not what you think you see.  
Remember  
knives slotted in their case like oars,  
the scalpel in Dr. Gross's hand,  
carmine-wet and warm.

Steal nature's tools  
from all points of view: drying biceps  
to river mouths to anatomy  
from up here, this land lit  
and stretching.  
Know what you see is incomplete.  
I want Eakins in the next seat.

## FIRST DAY OF THE BATTLE

*After Margaret S. Creighton, The Colors of Courage: Gettysburg's Forgotten History: Immigrants, Women, and African-Americans in the Civil War's Defining Battle*

Punching her apron with her knees  
Harriet walked, wished.  
Where an instant before  
there had been fields  
and woods and the peacefulness  
of the Sabbath day ...  
the earth grew soldiers by the thousands.  
She pivot-turned to sprint for the barn,  
for her dead daughter's mare  
that last, live piece of her—  
racing the gauntlet of Madam!  
Where are the Yankees?  
How many are out there, Madam?  
Her elbows digging the air  
like scythes through each Where?  
Where are the Yankees?

Every battle has a first day,  
a first woman, with uncanny timing  
and something to lose  
and something freshly lost.  
When Harriet's moment came,  
when the day cracked open  
and she wanted only a tent flap in time  
to disappear through,  
her apron a sail, her Gettysburg  
a door in the ground where from  
they rose, she'd later say as if by magic—

## THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A LANCET

I

From the pockets and purse floors  
of diabetics they collect  
like spare change, like bobby pins.

II

Mountains of them bloom  
in the wake of a finger-sticking life,  
could fill eight jam jars a year.

III

A scalpel for Dr. Barbie  
in long-legged scrubs  
and penny-sized mask.

IV

Thrust at thumb and finger-cheeks,  
like the cuckoo bill,  
through his tiny clock shutters.

V

Two hundred wait in the slick paper skin  
of each box: sterile  
sterili steriele steril steriles ...

VI

Bullet loaded in the plastic pistol,  
waiting to be sprung.

VII

Someone's fortune.

VIII

Mixed-media artwork  
sandwiched in Plexiglas  
and mounted on gallery walls,  
the dust of blood  
intentionally not boiled away.

IX

A magnified tip in PowerPoint,  
dulled exponentially per jab,  
sci-fi large to teach.

X

Improvisation, when needed:  
pinning the wings  
of butterflies for display.

XI

Find the lancet in every picture,  
in a life long Where's Waldo?

XII

Its cap could be any cap at all,  
any blue accessory.

XIII

The finger, held prone,  
in the shadow  
of the next lancet descending.

## LOGOPHILIA

Some words are fun to say.  
You can almost taste the spice  
as they roll off the tip of your tongue:  
Sizzle. Fizzle. Fissure.  
Pay attention to how your tongue clicks  
as your lips form the silhouette  
of billow, bellow, and Monticello.  
Notice how your esophagus tightens  
as you sputter, crackle and spackle.  
When you craft your next poem,  
personify and picture epeolatry  
leaving your mouth and joining  
bamboozled and begonias,  
bold accomplices hanging in the air,  
too gallant to be tucked away for rare use.



DAVE HAMMAKER

MY MOTHER: HATTERAS ISLAND, NORTH CAROLINA,  
1988

You look so beautiful with your brown hair woven into a loose braid. The wisps that spill onto your sandy shoulders and over the thick black straps of your soggy bathing suit are perfectly disheveled. Your bright pink lips clash with the red sunburn that colors your skin. Your must have been caught by surprise; your bright green eyes—the ones you gave me—are wide and your cheeks are sucked in like you just took a quick gasp of air. I imagine that later that night, when you washed your hair and the tiny fetus that you never wanted stirred inside your belly, you were already planning for your life beyond me.

## AT THE READING

The poet entreated  
the writers in the audience  
to cling to an image when it appears  
and to do something with it.  
The writing I have not been doing  
has been a watery resurfacing,  
not graceful like a dolphin's.  
Perhaps it is a corpse whale,  
a corpulent and putrid  
mass of blubber  
rising to the surface,  
draining over the waves  
in greasy pools.  
What I'll cling to on this whale,  
is what will feed on it,  
ripping the flesh in strips  
with a yellow beak,  
and the parts of it  
that will float down or out  
to be consumed elsewhere by others  
who will, themselves, be consumed.

## FOR ELEANOR

What I don't want to write  
is a motherhood poem.  
That is, perhaps, because I didn't want  
to be a mother in the first place,  
and there are still times, especially  
driving by myself through swirling leaves,  
when I don't want to be a mother,  
and would choose to keep driving.  
I spent long enough  
in composing this actual child  
that it seems moot  
to write anything about her.  
What could I say about toes, for example,  
that isn't already in the toes themselves?  
What would I say about toes, for that matter?  
What is relevant, of course, is that,  
like other compositions,  
she is flawed,  
shuddering, human, detailed,  
and it is that which makes me want to write a poem,  
to enhance or compensate for these flaws  
she has inherited,  
this headstrong and hopeful exuberance,  
this unrelenting independence.

## THE CLUTTERED DRAWER

This long-established coffin,  
Where sacred secrets lie interred,  
Old memories are stored,  
One tragedy ignored.

Two marriages, three love affairs,  
Cards of greetings and accord,  
Letters of catastrophe,  
Drawer of double-bladed swords.

Sought I one night,  
A deck of cards,  
Amidst this crowd of layered sins,  
Pained cobwebs I had barred.

A crayon picture crumbled,  
A stick man colored forest green,  
Though I was not her daddy,  
I was "Daddy" in her scene.

Rising from the casket,  
In red letters ABC,  
She offered me her heart,  
On that Valentine at three.

A is for I loved her, too,  
B is for I miss her,  
C is for I'm sorry  
For one thing I didn't do.

I never bothered telling her,  
I wished I was her dad,  
And as I laid her back to sleep,  
I wept and wished I had.

## WHEN SHE SPEAKS OF LOVE

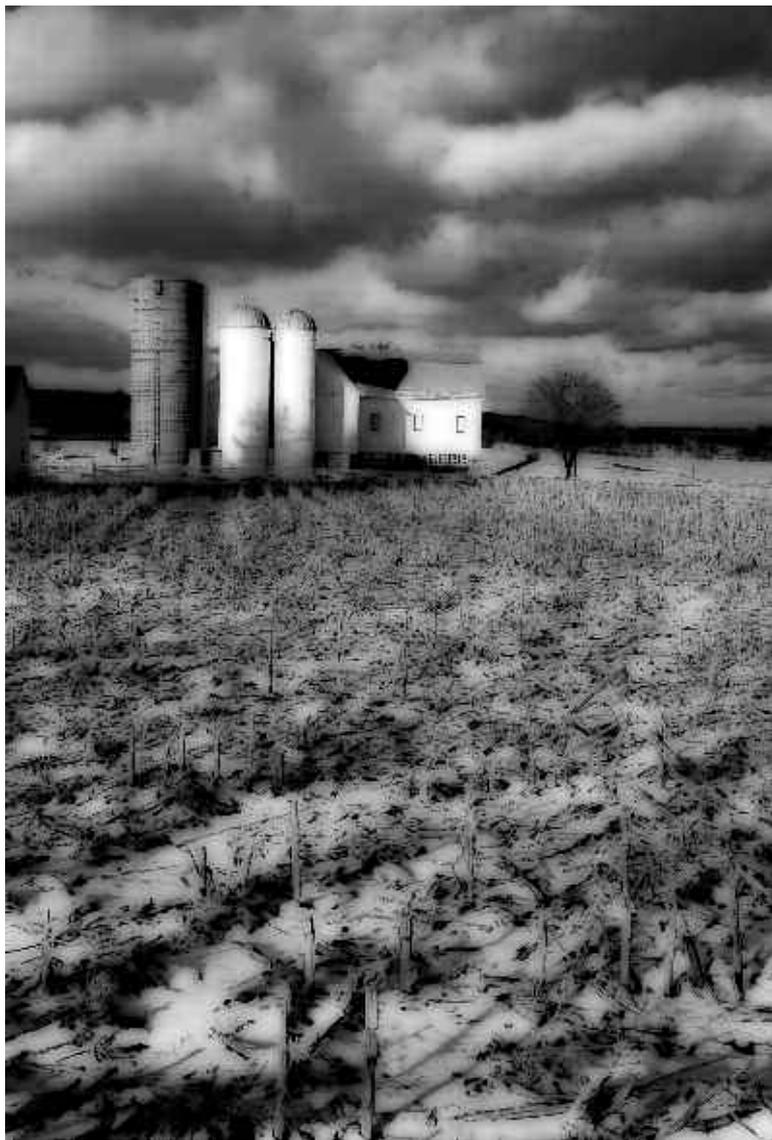
You disappear for weeks, leaving  
her emaciated as she considers  
the slow drying of the sea.  
Your voice on the wind leads  
her to desert, where the sky  
is blank with no history of clouds.  
She touches your ghost with a mouth  
full of stones. Do you see her now,  
as a huntress with no bow?  
As her tongue pictures  
rain; the pierce of hunger drives  
the weathering of her skin.  
Night wanes, and she wars  
against you in a dream of your hands  
singing to her, as thunder curls  
in your palms.

## AFTER LEAVING MY APARTMENT

You walk onto a street lined with alleys spitting  
out cats I've named. Or a dirt path between  
mountains still snowcapped in the haze of spring.

A road lined by a fence of rusted wire and wood posts  
blackened by rain, or a path of cobblestones through rows  
of boarded-up houses that look like scars.

Through a tunnel, maybe where you are sought  
by shadow. I pull you to a gate I've unlocked opening  
to a field battered by a hailstorm. Maybe here  
you finally drag the silence from my eyes.



DAVE HAMMAKER

## FAST FOOD AT THE END OF THE WORLD

We came upon Barstow, an accidental town that sprang up because of the many converging highways and the resulting sexless truckers that by now don't mean anything. With each wiry step our own sexes became more obsolete, mine like a bloody nuisance and his like a dangling afterthought. The checkerboard of abandoned fast food restaurants was gray and peeling with dilapidation. After the solar wind killed much of the western hemisphere with its atomic burst, the sky turned a smoky maroon in which black clouds hung like God's last breaths. A pair of golden arches, a pan-seared red and yellow McDonald's, was the first restaurant on this stretch of crumbling I-40, and remembering the days of quarter pounders and milkshakes, we set off, feet thumping pavement, to that false shelter, offering some strange semblance called home.

He ran through the glass doors, half melted and streaked with warped pictures of French fries and snack wraps, boasting 99 cents and 1 dollar. He approached the drive-through window from the inside and stuck his head out of those familiar tiny windows that open sideways. How many exchanges of clinking coins and greasy bagged food have trailed quantum tracings of different arms (brown or peach, smooth like a baby or threaded with millions of thick waxy hairs), different sleeves (blue spring jacket sleeves or white T-shirt sleeves or no sleeves at all)—arms and sleeves—stretching repeatedly from car doors over and over in some dimension where Barstow is still a city, the world still the image on a map? Exchanges for anything with any arm or any sleeve are now obsolete.

I waited for him to live out his spirited break from our new starving reality. I stood by the drive-through order machine. The menu was pelted with bird feces, shards of brick and roofing from some unknown, and even the sticky carcass of a scorpion hung, pinned to an ice cream cone by its third bloody rib; its needlepoint tail crying a tear of poison. The black plastic covering of the machine had long ago melted to form stalactites from its body to the ground. Its innards consisted of a circular microphone and a bundle of frayed wires that might have reminded me of daffodil stems before flowers were killed by the silent burst of death from the sun.

"May I take your order, ma'am?" He cupped his hands around his mouth to shout at me from the window.

"Jack don't." He was always happier than I, and it never crossed my mind when I would sit on the back porch swing staring at some distant air with tears hurting my eyes and a book with empty train tracks or a wistful young girl on the cover strewn carelessly on my lap, or when I would carry laundry from the basement only to slam it on the kitchen table and run up to the bathroom to submerge my body in warm, cutting water. It never crossed my mind that his approaching and joking, his blowing on my eyes to reduce the moisture, his laughing and brushing my hair from my face, his taking me to rent some Oscar-winning movie to watch that evening, or his pouring shots of tequila and setting up Monopoly on the kitchen table, laundry folded and stored—it never crossed my mind—that that would help me survive the apocalypse.

“Excuse me? Ma’am, if you don’t want any food, please pull through and let others order.”

“Jack.” I warned him even though we both knew without having to see it: a smile was creeping onto my lips.

“Ma’am. What’ll it be?”

“I’ll have a cheeseburger,” I mumbled.

“Ma’am. You’re going to have to speak up.”

“I’ll have a cheeseburger. And a caramel sundae.”

“Nice choice, ma’am. Are you sure you wouldn’t like anything else? Perhaps something to share with someone? Some fellow traveler?”

“Jack.” I coughed his name in a laugh. “I’ll have cherry pie. Do you have that? Oh, and a Caesar salad with ... with bacon crumbles on it.”

“Ma’am, we got anything you want back here.”

“Then I’ll have chicken with noodles over mashed potatoes. A chocolate lava cake. Moo goo gai pan. Broccoli. Mandarin oranges. A buffalo chicken salad with hard-boiled eggs on the side. A cool glass of milk. An English muffin with butter and elderberry jam. Hmm. Chocolate pancakes with butter and syrup. Hot green tea with orange. A sweet potato with butter, cinnamon, and sugar. Fresh green beans with salt—thick salt as big as sesame seeds. Sunflower seeds! And rice and refried beans with nachos and Mexican cheese and hot peppers. A Christmas ham with pineapple. Homemade pizza. Broccoli pizza with garlic seasoning.” My voice was lifted, sounding fresh to my own ears. I never even liked ham with pineapple when my mom made it in my homestead in Minnesota, before Minnesota was drowned by a boiling Lake Superior, but any meal is better than grass and chicken grease and cold canned corn, even when that meal used to be the foaming swine of my holidays.

“And chicken saag?” He added to my list like he thought he was getting in on this.

“This is my order, sir.”

He stared at me from around the corner, stretching his neck and shoulders through the window to show me his bottom lip was pushed out and quivering.

I laughed. “Ok. And chicken saag. But that’s all I can afford.”

“This one’s on the house, babe.”

I walked around to the window, and we hugged, smiling a while and breathing heavy with the weight of survival drifting back on our shoulders as the lightness of our game faded.

“Taste is just a feeling,” he stated softly and abruptly.

“It’s a memory now,” I corrected.

“Let’s try to make it to the beach today. We could camp in an old hotel. See if there are fish.”

“Okay.” Anything is really okay when there’s nothing left to do but keep going.

He hoisted his body out of the narrow window, and we set off down the rotting road. With each heavy step, we sprayed puddles of chocolate milk onto our naked legs, and with each warm breath, the grease of fried Serrano peppers trickled down our temples.

We pointedly fixed our eyes forward—to the winding tree stumps bordering the highway that reached like severed arms to the smoky maroon sky—without a glance back to the McDonald’s, reduced to a crumbled page from a magazine, torn and dragged through a murky puddle. The bright red and yellow fast food restaurant of our memories left us with a new ache in our pupils, for everyone to come, without that memory.



DAVE HAMMAKER

**Jennifer Browne**, having never lived outside a sixty-mile radius of Cumberland, MD, was surprised and disappointed to discover that her keen sense of place is nowhere evident in her writing. She was educated at Frostburg State University and has worked in academia for thirteen years, focusing on the needs of low-income, first-generation, and under-prepared students. She currently works as a lecturer in the English Department at FSU, where she is described by students as “passionate,” “knowledgeable” and “boring.”

**Kimberly Brown** recently graduated from Frostburg State University with a degree in English Literature. She currently lives in Frostburg, MD and serves as an AmeriCorps VISTA member and Community Outreach Coordinator for the Frostburg Center for Creative Writing. She moderates a bimonthly writing workshop at the Center and has been a member of Carlow University’s Madwomen in the Attic writing program.

**Mary Cumblidge** is a recent English Literature graduate of Frostburg State University who was also published in *Bittersweet* literary magazine. Mary is currently pursuing her master’s degree in education from Liberty University. Mary is a resident of Frostburg, MD where she lives with her inspiration, her Dandie Dinmont errier named Skunkie.

**Joanna Eastham** is a recent English Literature and Women’s Studies Graduate of Frostburg State University. She had her first poem published at the age of 13. Joanna plans on attending graduate school in the fall of 2011 and continues to write and workshop poetry in the local writing community.

**Jamie M. Fisher** recently graduated from Frostburg State University with her bachelor’s in English, with a concentration in creative writing and psychology. She has published poems in *Bittersweet 2009*, and *Backbone Mountain Review 2010*. Right now, she is currently living at home with her family in Frederick County while trying to job hunt and get work published. She is also working on a paranormal romance novel in her spare time, and helping her family with fostering puppies and ferrets.

**Katy Giebenhain** has an M.Phil. from the University of Glamorgan, Wales, and an M.A. from University of Baltimore. Her poems have appeared in *American Life in Poetry*, *The London Magazine*, *Bordercrossing-Berlin*, *Hidden City Quarterly*, *Pretending to be Italian* and *Water-Stone Review*. She edits the Poetry + Theology rubric for *Seminary Ridge Review* and lives in Adams County, Pennsylvania.

**Susan Gratto** lives in Keyser, WV with her husband, three children and Lucian, her Siberian Husky who wants to be a real boy. At forty, Susan decided she was unfulfilled and wanted to change careers. In May 2010, she completed her M.A.T. from Frostburg State University and hopes to obtain a position teaching middle school language arts or high school English. In her copious free time, she plans to continue writing and eventually pursue a low-residency M.F.A. Her poems “A Long Backward Glance” and “Shock and Awe” were featured in the 2008 edition of *Bittersweet*.

**Dave Hammaker** has been capturing images of our world for over forty years. He received formal training at the Rochester Institute of Technology and is a graduate of Penn State. His photographs have appeared in numerous exhibits across the country and have won many awards. Publication credits include the prestigious *National Parks Magazine*. His photographs are held in many private collections as well as the collection of the Grand Canyon National Park. Dave was selected in 2007 as Artist-in-

Residence at the North Rim of the Grand Canyon National Park. His photographs may be seen at [www.davehammaker.com](http://www.davehammaker.com)

**Georgia Kreiger** lives in Cumberland, MD, and teaches literature and creative writing at Allegany College of Maryland. Her poems have appeared in *poemmemoirstory*, *Literal Latté*, *Poet Lore*, *Antietam Review*, *Maryland Poetry Review*, *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Outerbridge*, *Backbone Mountain Review* and others.

**Nick Pingatore** is a recent graduate of Frostburg State University, where he studied creative writing and film. Currently, he resides in Frederick, Maryland, where he trains educators in the use of augmentative communication technology for students with disabilities.

**Kathleen Rogers** has published poems in *Blueline*, *Relief*, *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, and *The Ghazal Page*. She writes from Raven Ridge, West Virginia.

**Tiffany A. Turbin Santos**, a Frostburg native, works as a consultant at the Writing Center at Allegany College of Maryland, occasionally teaching English classes. She also teaches for the Regional Math Science Center's Upward Bound program during the summer and offers individual and group tutoring services and freelance writing and editing services year round. She also teaches at the new Tri-State Community School of the Arts, in downtown Cumberland. She graduated from St. Mary's College of Maryland with a self-designed Bachelor of Arts degree in women, gender, and sexuality studies and a minor in Asian studies. She writes poetry and creative nonfiction, and in her weekly blog she details her adventures as a scooter-riding academic.

**Daina Savage**, a Garrett County native, works as a freelance journalist for magazines and newspapers in the Mid-Atlantic region, with more than 3,000 published stories. She is a co-founder and co-director of the Spoken Word Festival in Lancaster, Pa., now in its eighth season. As the director of the Lancaster Poetry Continuum, she organized a number of poetry reading series in museums and coffeeshops. Her poetry has been published in numerous regional journals, and garnering many writing awards. She has been a featured reader in Baltimore, Philadelphia and Harrisburg events. But Deep Creek Lake is where her home, and heart, remain.

**Christina Seymour** is working toward a degree in English with a creative writing emphasis and a minor in sociology. She has been published in *Three Rivers Review*, *LiveWire*, and *Hard Freight*. She is the president of Altoona's Sigma Tau Delta chapter and a member of Schreyer Honors and Phi Kappa Phi. Christina hopes to attain an M.F.A. in the future, and she's been filling notebooks since adolescence.

**Jack Spencer** is an old man living in Garrett County who writes occasionally to kill time as he waits for hunting season.

**Mike Weddle** spent fourteen years in Cumberland as an emergency physician, and several of those as a local public health planner. His creative writing dates back to his college years when he had no phone, and members of his writing group would jimmy the window and fall asleep on his sofa. While preparing for the defense of his Ph.D. dissertation, Mike wrote a 3,300-line poem about a Methodist missionary in China. Mike has published poetry, short fiction and a novel. He was a finalist in the 2005 Gival Press Novel Awards. He has published poetry and fiction in the *Backbone Mountain Review* since 2008. His novel *2012: Under the Witz Mountain* was released in 2009, and is an adventure from a Mayan perspective leading up the end of their famous calendar in 2012. The book website is [www.witzmountain.com](http://www.witzmountain.com).