

**children**  
**churches**  
& **daddies**

v140 September 22, 2004

the unreligious, non-family oriented  
literary and art magazine



# cc&d v 141

## September 22, 2004

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# The Absent/Abusive Father

Kaitlyn M. Ulmer

Fathers are more than just mobile sperm banks.  
They are phone-deficient telemarketers  
And stingy Santa Clauses,  
Stained wife-beaters and assembly-line spankers.  
They have broad, hard hands,  
Speak softly but carry big sticks  
Wider than rule of thumb.  
They are boot-camp junkies,  
Alcoholic racecar drivers,  
Supposed dead infatuations,  
Ghosts of once-great men,  
Has-beens and never-beens.

And yet we couldn't breathe  
Without their date-raping,  
Attached abandonment  
And paradoxical pleasure pilfered  
From female fears, consummating in  
Testosterone-reeking breeding.

# Up a dirt road

Cliff Lynn

You're up a dirt road  
Porch lights are out  
In houses unfamiliar as the back of the hand

Fresh-mowed hay  
in the endless fields  
The baler's in pieces at the Copeland place

Summer rain ain't any more or less lonely  
Just because it's summer  
Forget what the song says

Here's a dairy  
And the mephitic ammonia reek of cowshit  
fills the mouth, coats the dentalwork

The asparagus  
Is gone to seed

And the second skin  
Of country dirt

And you know  
If you don't shift your direction soon  
You may end up where you're headin'.

# Miracle on nothing street

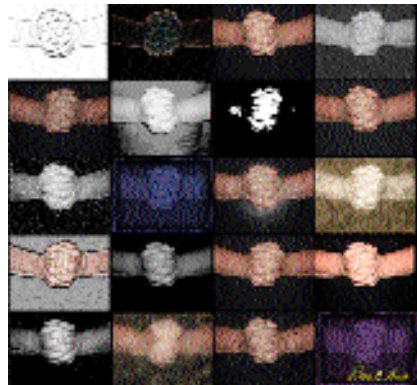
Milo Redwood

It was late January  
and we'd run out of food.  
My parents said it was the Lord's  
will--that he had big plans for us  
but I was eight years old  
and to me my parents were  
God--  
so it didn't make sense.

The third day of no-food  
was hard but we were distracted  
by a fresh foot of snow!  
My sisters and I went out  
to play and one of us  
Tripped over something--  
it was a can of fruit  
cocktail.  
We dug around and found  
more cans of food  
along with a block  
of cheese and a loaf  
of frozen bread--  
a shopping bag worth  
of food under the fresh  
snow.  
We came running in with  
our hands full.

To this day it's a mystery  
how all that food got there--  
maybe some old lady was crossing  
our yard during the blizzard  
and her shopping bag gave way.

It's more likely that my parents  
planted that food--  
they would have done anything  
to make us believe in God.



Creative Gray 1,  
art by Rose E. Grier

# Flawless

Kareene Martel

He won't let me wear sandals in the rain,  
His belt never matches his shoes.  
He never brings me flowers, they make him sneeze.

He buys fresh fruit every day,  
And only uses recycled paper bags.  
He never eats anything green, he hates that colour.

He rents videos on Wednesdays,  
Yet he doesn't own a TV.  
Never sees romantic comedies, only at the movies.

He never reads books more than an inch thick,  
Or rips them to inch-thick pieces  
They don't fit in his pocket.

His clothes are full of paint, his hair a mess  
He smells of canvas and solvent.

He lies about his family, he prefers mine  
Because his parents are not insane.

He says I smile too much, and he feels  
He inconveniences me by walking slow.  
He thinks my hair is too short, and wants  
Me to wear pigtails to bed.

He fears I don't dream of him,  
He only paints me while I sleep.  
He hates that I eat in bed.  
He doesn't know he's perfect.



Abstract1, art by Cheryl Townsend



Barn & Silo, art by Cheryl Townsend

# Blind

JC Lee

The conductor's flirting with the  
brunette in the back, and he  
gay bashes as part of his  
pick up repertoire in some  
insecure, defensive manner.

I want to hit him for what  
he won't understand and to  
break her for what she tolerates.

It's one forty-eight AM and  
she goes along with what's easy  
but wrong 'cause there's so much that's  
really not right in the world  
it drowns her in apathy.

She knows she's not free but how much  
does that really matter to we  
who suffocate in overwhelming  
apathy of drowning in wrong  
pretending that it's alright,

that the brunette and conductor  
are making conversation  
so they are somehow allowed  
to they hate what they're told not to  
take the time to understand.

# another long night

J. C. Lee

trying to get me drunk  
they are feeding me jack  
as though i could fit it  
all in endlessly

but bottomless pits are  
hard to cum by these days  
and i wonder if these  
are gestures of kindness

or if i will have to  
pay up at the end of the night



Epona, too, is such a protectress,  
Celtic and kind for all horses wild,  
All stallions and mates,  
All pony colts running  
From the shadows of ropes,  
The bits of slavery,  
Emerald-grey in her watchfulness,  
The vigilance, equine,  
For lunar guidance,  
The harbors of night



from the Sea of Myths, by Stephen Mead

# The town's too small not to know everyone's secrets.

JC Lee

The pedophile sits at the bar talking to a  
pseudo-intellectual,  
doesn't-look old-enough-to-be-in-here,  
I'll-be-conned-into-the-woods  
kind of boy  
while the rapist-never-brought-to-charges  
finds a mark in I've-been-raped-repeatedly  
and tries to gain her trust.

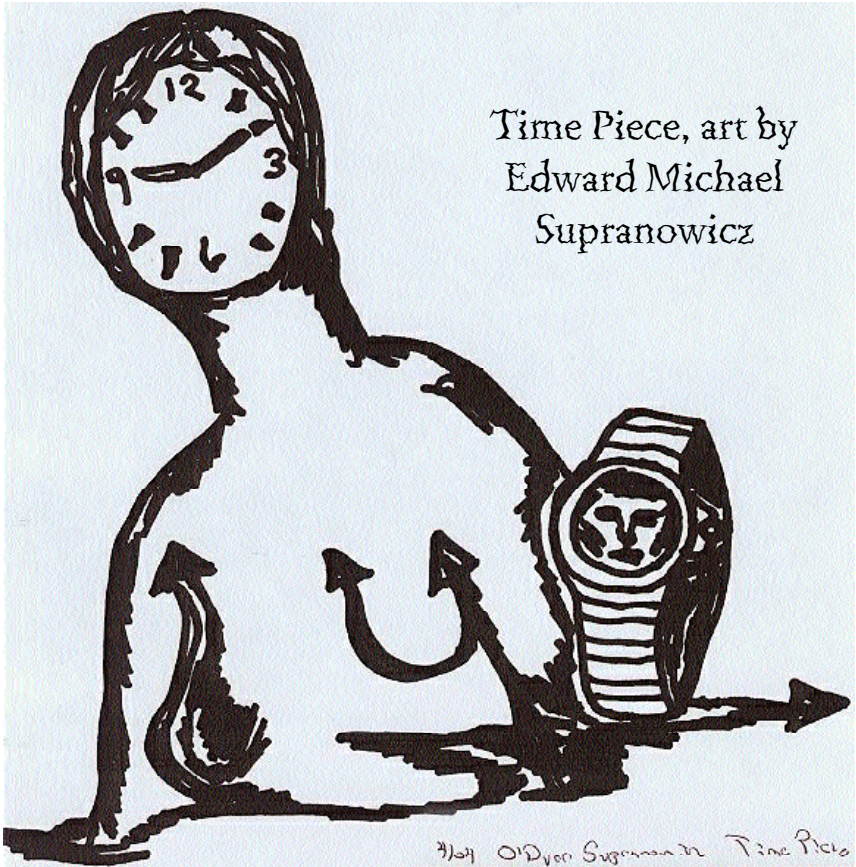
Always-cheats-on-her-boyfriend has found  
never-knows-it's-not-really-love  
and, off in some obscure corner, I sit,  
wishing I didn't know about the urophile  
or the pseudoman who's proud of fucking  
for a continuous, solid, unbelievable  
eight minutes.

There should be more mystery than this  
more secrets that actually stay as such.  
No one should have to know these things  
and be impotent to change them.

# Essay on a News Report (41)

Michael Ceraolo

In what seemed like Swiftian satire  
but was actually simple-minded seriousness  
the columnist reached new heights (or depths) of neo-Orwellianism  
when she criticized an independent candidate  
as being motivated by his own ego,  
rather than being animated by principle  
as the candidates of the two major parties were



# Bullets Flying

Teresa Spies Dempewolf

At thirty-eight years old, Kara wrestled with the noun 'hero' these days. She hadn't been for the war against Iraq-thought it foolish to impose America's democracy on another country. She knew plenty about laws and courts as a Peace and Justice Advocate lawyer; she had a father who was a General in the Army, so life in her later years was never smooth. Plus, she was the only one now who could give her parents grandchildren. Through two husbands, a career and volunteering, time didn't permit it. Besides, the heartache of losing her young brother years ago left her emotionally wasted.

She glanced around at the deep green walls of her family's library. Stacks of beautifully bound books alphabetically shelved, many read and enjoyed. But, what always drug her eyes across the wall to the left of the river rock fireplace, were the many medals and snapshots of her father's days at West Point. Also, snaps of his buddies who served with him in his young years, pictures of old historic flags and his promotion ceremonies. She leaned her head back on the soft leather chair; her small head strangling in wispy auburn hair as she thought about her life, kept at arms length.

Many young people go into the Marines, Army, Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard because they don't want to go to college and don't know what else to do with their lives. Or they do want to go to college but can't afford to and know the United States will pay their way. They join a service to travel and many times never have to shoot a gun. They get paid the minimal amount, but housing, food, clothing and time to grow-up are free.

Kara heard a door open then close. A voice yelled down from the second story home where she was raised.

"Ruth, is that you? It's about time. It's sixteen-hundred. I need a pain pill."

Her father was still giving orders and treating them like soldiers, even though he was dying of prostate cancer.

"I'll get it mom," her voice loud as she jumped up and went into the kitchen.

"Hi Kara," mom said, giving her a smile as she put the grocery sacks

on the table. "Has he been awake long?"

"I didn't hear a thing. I rested when he did. He must have just woken up or I would have heard him. How was the bridge game?"

"Oh Honey, I'm so glad you came and stayed with your father so I could leave for awhile. I enjoyed seeing my friends again and you know how much I love to play bridge."

"No problem, mom. Oh, Mary Ellen Maffey from Hospice called and said she'd see you at ten for the in-take tomorrow."

"Good. I'll be here."

"Ruth, did you forget me already?" Dad yelled. "Two women in the house and I'm still forgotten."

"Coming daddy," Kara said, grabbing the pain medication. She poured water into a glass from the refrigerator. "Your wish is my command, general."

Her father was hard to talk to these past years. He was the soldier, the 'I love America right or wrong' guy; and she, the complete opposite. They always ran away from each other when in reality there was so much to talk about, especially the war. They were miles apart in an empty cocoon. It didn't have to be. It wasn't always this way.

Yet, with the war she argued with herself about the two-thousand who died September-eleventh; but at what price? How many others do we kill to make up for them?

"Daddy, would you like me to give you a backrub or read this morning paper to you?"

Gruffly, "I'm not dying today and I read the parts of the paper I like this morning." Then he turned his back to her and she was dismissed.

"Here's your pain pill." She left it and the water on his bed stand. This little power play drove her up the wall, but she wouldn't acknowledge it. She wanted to ease his life in some way, but saluted his backside and went downstairs looking for her mom.

She saw the light under the bathroom door, so went into the library and sat back down in the dark brown chair she loved and closed her eyes again, waiting. When her mom came and sat down by her she told her mother what was eating at her.

"Those of us in the private sector made our way also after graduation, mom. We went to colleges, universities and rambled through books and studies and classes. We had part time jobs and many lived at home. Luckier ones lived in dorms and made do with one or two people living

in close proximity like I did. When we graduated we had to find jobs and it wasn't always an easy task. We had to pay back our student loans. Dad never asked me if he could buy my books. I was thrown out to sea. I was his only child, then. I would think he could afford it, mom."

Honey, I'm so sorry he wasn't there for you like you wanted."

"Thanks, but those who join the service never think they'll be engaged in a war. So, if one comes up they're told to be ready to be deployed. Dad just won't see there's other ways to look at this war besides his way. I'm feeling so frustrated. The day before dad was diagnosed with cancer we had one of our many arguments."

"I know Honey, I've heard them before."

"You men are all alike," I said, steaming hot like a tea kettle. "Not going to the doctor for regular check-ups; your macho-career getting in the way of good health. Now you're hurting and I hate it."

"Well Kara, you're right in one way. We don't run to the doctor every few weeks like you women do. Besides, we run the country. Our men are in Iraq. We have heroes coming home in body bags to keep you women-folk safe. We don't have to run to the doctor all the time. We have important work to do."

"It was just like him, mom, to put women down. He hated the idea of my being a feminist. 'If I wanted two boys I would have had them.' He yelled. I was devastated by the comment, mom. He made my blood pressure quicken. Here I worked my butt off to get through law school and do you think he ever gave me thumbs up? Hell no."

I yelled back, "Yea, daddy," my voice steaming like dry ice. "The next thing you know one is killed. The young man or woman is now a hero. They gave their life for their country. But who says just because they're doing their job-the job they signed up for, they are Americas heroes?"

"Kara, watch what you say, here. Your uncle Karl gave his life in the Korean War for you and all other Americans. His blood poured out on the battle field. You bet he was a hero. Sometimes you disgrace me with your words. You went wrong somewhere, Kara-terribly wrong."

"No, daddy, teachers, students, firemen, actors, parents and just plain others working in their line of work aren't called heroes if they're killed by a robber during a bank heist or by a drunken driver. But, we turn those in the service into heroes just for showing up. Not because they begged to fight, but because they had nowhere else to go; no skills, no nothing, but hoped life would be easy and it was a chance to get away on one's own

and see the world. I just don't get it, dad!"

Her mom patted her hand, but got up from the couch. "I need to put the groceries away, Honey."

Kara was agitated. Her thoughts hurled like wind, swooping in the cold dampness of life. Daddy wasn't always like that to her. He was a sweetheart in her young years and she had him eating out of her hand. He read to her and played finger puppets at night when she was scared someone was in her room. He made hotcakes in the shapes of animals and made her laugh. It took him forever to get the food ready, but she didn't care. After all, he was her dad.

Then when she turned thirteen and began developing he did a complete turnaround. Mom said it wasn't about her. It was the same time her brother Josh died in a swimming pool accident at age nine. He had sneaked into the city pool two blocks from their house on a hot night, climbed over the fence and drowned. We never knew why, since he was a good swimmer. Her daddy closed up and slapped her from his fun loving ways. It seemed they turned into enemies. She missed their wonderful relationship.

There was so much grief in the house after that, she made herself invisible. She got good grades in school and sang in the church choir even though she hated it. She babysat the neighbor's kids just to hear laughter. She had to admit she stopped being lovable, too.

She remembered coming home for the weekend once in college. Her mom and dad were relaxing after dinner, so she asked him to talk about her brother, Josh.

"What in the hell for, he's dead. Leave it alone, Kara." Then he knocked his chair down trying to hurry away from us. She looked at her mother, but her eyes begged Kara to understand.

"Mom, it's been almost twenty years now. Why can't we talk about what happened to Josh? Doesn't he realize I hurt and miss him, too?"

Her eyes sprang a leak and she pulled me close. "We all do, Honey. I miss my son terribly. Sometimes I feel like I'll break into little pieces if I speak his name. It's not fair to you, but it just hurts us so much not to have him in our life any more."

Then Kara realized how fractured the family had been since her brother's death. Love doesn't always smooth the seam of life and hearts do break.

Each time they argued she'd leave and slam the door. They both got fired up, but now she wished she would have...could have...just stayed

and met him head on. But she never did. She always chickened out. She let him take her power away. He never talked to her as an adult, so they stayed child to adult. She blamed herself as she was a red hot ember that never cooled, so she was more like her dad than she wanted to admit. She wasn't a shrinking violet in court or on the job though. Her temper kept her sharp, but she couldn't argue with her own father.

The night of his death his wife of forty-four years and daughter stayed close by his side, gently wiping his face with a cool cloth and holding his hand. They spoke softly with remembrances of old times. Only once his eyes opened. He stared longingly at his wife and slowly his head turned to Kara. Haltinly, laboring with whispered breath he said. "Give 'em hell, honey," and his eyes closed for the last time. The sobbing daughter fell apart.

Major General Ross Edward Morrissey died last Friday. He had a four star funeral attended by many hash marked individuals with impeccable uniforms and highly polished boots. His wife and daughter sat front and center at his funeral. As Kara watched the sad, stark ceremony she heard a close friend of her fathers talk about his beginnings.

"Over forty years he spent in the Army. Not because he had to, but because he loved the rules and traditions and American spirit and the democratic way of life. He was apple pie and all it meant growing up on a homestead in Wyoming as the oldest of six boys. From poverty he excelled to be a major general and we'll deeply miss him."

Yes, she thought through shimmering tears, he was one who went in the service to be taken care of and for him it worked. It really did. She lost it though, when the bugle played taps. She was proud of her father, but her blue tears only wanted the one thing he stopped giving her. She just needed-no, wanted back-more of his sweet loving heart.



the gate at the Dachau  
Concentration Camp Museum,  
Dachau, Germany 2003



# everything was alive and dying

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I

I had a dream the other night  
I walked out of the city  
to a forest  
and there were neatly paved bicycle paths  
and trash cans every fifty feet  
and trash every ten

and then a raccoon came right up to me  
she had a few little baby raccoons  
following her, it was so cute, I  
wish I had my camera

and she spoke to me,  
she said, thank you  
thank you for not buying furs,  
I know you humans are pretty smart,  
you have to be able to figure out a way  
to keep yourselves warm  
without killing me

and I said, you know they don't  
do it for warmth,  
they do it for fashion, they do it  
for power. And she said I know.  
But thank you anyway.

II

Then I walked a little further  
and there was a stray cat



Above: John Galt, Sequois, Zach

she still had her little neon collar on  
with a little bell  
and she walked a few feet,  
stretched her front paws,  
oh, she looked so darling  
and then she walked right up to me  
and she said thank you  
and I said for what?

And she just looked at me for a moment,  
her little ears were standing straight up,  
and then she said, you know,  
in some countries I'm considered  
a delicacy. And I said how  
do you know of these things?  
And she said

when somebody eats one of you  
word gets around  
and then she looked up at me again  
and said, and in some countries  
the cow is sacred. Wouldn't they  
love to see how you humans  
prepare them for slaughter, how you  
hang them upside-down  
and slit their throats  
so their still beating hearts  
will drain out all the blood for you  
and she said isn't it funny  
how arbitrary your decision  
to eat meat is?

and I said, don't put me  
in that category, I don't eat meat  
and she said I know

III

And I walked deeper in to the forest  
managed to get away from the  
picnic tables and the outhouses

that lined the forest edges  
the roaring cars gave way to the  
rustling of tree branches  
crackling of fallen leaves  
under my step

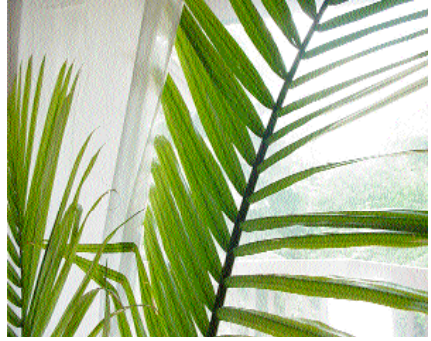
when the wind tunneled through  
the wind whistled and sang  
as it flew past the bark

and leaves

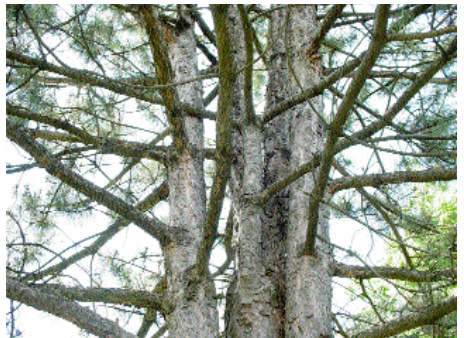
I walked  
listened to the crack of dead branches  
under my feet  
and I felt a branch against my shoulder  
I looked up and I could hear  
the trees speak to me,  
and they said  
thank you for letting the  
endangered animals live here amongst us  
we do think they're so pretty  
and it would be a shame to see them go  
and thank you for recycling paper  
because you're saving us  
for just a little while longer

we've been on this planet for so long  
embedded in the earth  
we do have souls, you know  
you can hear it in our songs  
we cling with our roots  
we don't want to let go

and I said, but I don't do much,  
I don't do enough  
and they said we know  
but we'll take what we can get



This page:  
Foliage, Illinois.  
Opposite (top  
and bottom):  
Washington  
State temperate  
rainforest.  
Opposite  
(middle):  
El Yunque  
tropical  
rainforest.





IV

and I woke up in a sweat

V

so tell me, Bob Dole  
so tell me, Newt Gingrich  
so tell me, Pat Bucannan  
so tell me, Jesse Helms  
if you woke up from that dream  
would you be in a sweat, too?

VI



Do you even know why  
we should save the rain forest?  
Oh preserve the delicate balance,  
just tear the whole forest down,  
what difference does it make?  
Put in some orange groves  
so our concentrate orange juice  
can be a little cheaper

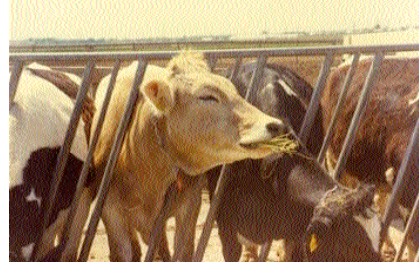


did you know that medical researchers  
have a very, very hard time  
trying to come up with synthetic  
cures for diseases on their own?  
It helps them out a little if they can first  
find the substance in nature.  
A tree that appears in the rain forest  
may be the only one of its species.  
Or one like it may be two miles away,  
instead of right next to it. I wonder  
how many cures we've destroyed  
to plant more orange groves.  
Serves us right.

## VII

You know my motives aren't selfless  
I know that these things are worthwhile in my life

I'd like to find a cure to these diseases  
before I die of them  
and I'm not just a vegetarian  
because I think it's wrong to kill an animal  
unless I have to  
I also know the excess protein  
pulls the calcium away from my bones  
and gives me osteoporosis  
and the excess fat gives me heart attacks  
and I also know that we could be feeding  
ten times more people  
with the same resources used for meat production



You know, I know you're looking at me  
and calling me an extremist  
but I'm sitting here, looking around me  
looking at the destruction caused by family values  
and thinking the right, moral, non-violent decisions  
are also those extreme ones

## VIII

everything is linked here  
we destroy our animals  
so we can be wasteful and violent  
we destroy our plants  
we destroy our earth  
we're even destroying our air  
we wreak havoc on the soil, on the atmosphere  
we dump our wastes into our lakes  
we pump aerosol cans and exhaust pipes



and you tell me I'm extreme

and these animals and forests keep calling out to me  
the oceans, the wind

and I'm beginning to think  
that we just keep doing it  
because we don't know how to stop  
and deep inside we feel the pain of  
all that we've killed  
and we try to control it by  
popping a chemical-filled pain-killer

we live through the guilt  
by taking caffeine, nicotine, morphine  
and we keep ourselves thin with saccharin  
and we keep ourselves sane with our alcohol poisoning  
and when that's not enough  
maybe a line of coke



maybe shoot ourselves in the head  
in front of the mirror in the master bedroom  
or maybe just take some pills  
walk into the garage, turn on the car  
and just  
fall asleep

in the wild  
you have no power over anyone else

now that we're civilized  
we create our own wild

maybe when we have all this power  
the only choice we have  
is to destroy ourselves

and so we do



Untitled art from Irene Ferraro

# Untitled

Britt Suzanne Posmer

I called you last night  
You were distracted  
The garbled sound of the tv  
Blaring through the receiver  
How is it  
That you are the only man  
With whom I feel boring  
Less interesting than the cacophony  
Of noise behind you  
Squawking like the voice of  
Charlie Brown's teacher  
You would rather watch your relationships  
On a ridiculous talking box  
Than risk the engagement  
With someone who might expect  
Something from you in return  
You hoard your life  
Like a rat  
Baring its teeth  
Over a pile of worthless objects  
It has stashed in a hole  
Underneath the stairs  
Desperately wanting someone to recognize  
The value of your treasure  
While savagely biting the hand  
Of any who come near



# Danger, art by Jace Jarvie



*Jace Jarvie*

# Untitled

Britt Suzanne Posmer

The rain is falling  
Outside my window  
When I was born  
The water declared herself my sister  
And preceded my arrival  
With a great rush of annunciation  
She has loved me ever since  
The rain is my sister  
We are one blood  
I know the rage and fury of her storms  
She the persistent erosion of my grief  
The rain is my sister  
And lately  
I seem to be joining her  
More and more frequently  
Standing outside the windows  
Of my life  
Cries tapping sharply  
Against the glass  
We are both on the outside now  
Looking in at a life  
That has abandoned me  
Somewhere my body curls up  
In a chair  
Hand against cheek  
But I am outside  
Tapping  
Tapping  
While my sister  
Damply strokes my hair

# WHO'S COUNTING THE PETALS?

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Floods here, drought there, disease, swollen bellies...  
Refugees from civil wars pleading aid;  
Terror taking place on our own TVs;  
Men, women, children, learning to be afraid

So what are the world's governments doing?  
All they can, we're expected to believe;  
So why such tragic images we're seeing  
Of a world wearing its heart on its sleeve?

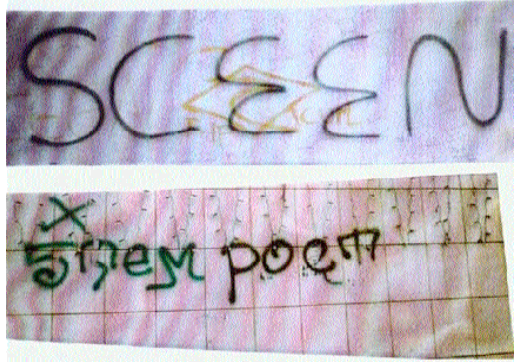
Where horror hits hardest, a hurt laid bare;  
Beyond headlines, unimaginable pain;  
Flowers at gravesides, each petal a tear  
For those men, women, children moving on

Plenty cash for this war, that election...  
A centuries-old degeneration



purple flower, art by  
Dr. Deborah FerBer

06 of Warhol  
Fame, art by  
Xanadu



---

Shades Before Your Life

Brandi S. Henderson

Soft steely eyes fixed upon  
dead earthen sparrow  
leaden with streaming raindrops.  
From inside my bed I watch  
the garden asking, frightened,  
for a reply to lies  
and the end of laughter.  
The thought of him has found me.  
Searching inside this eternal pain  
tinged with desire; disturbing realities'  
thorns stumbled into my head.  
How quickly he went out and  
I know everything must fall.  
I am turned through the length  
of seams of unraveled walls.  
Deep fibrous dreams heard ringing worn  
words. Once I was waiting for you.  
But you have passed.  
Rushing with the amaranthine souls,  
shades before your life.

Pinioned

Brandi S. Henderson

There is a sky,  
black and cold.  
I am pinioned in the fixed stars;  
tied to it, the bindings making  
me bleed.  
A tear falls and burns the ground.  
A fire explodes and I drown  
in flames.  
My scream reaches the outermost  
sky invisible, no echo  
through the dense lucid air.

There's no promise of peace  
at the end alone,  
only replete emptiness;  
hexed by the knowledge no escape exists.  
I cannot feel, anymore,  
the pain that surrounds me.

Please let me go...

# Thought Process

Joseph Veronneau

...And so I told the muse  
to <I>make sense of it all,</I>  
and he just nodded an empty nod.

The muse leads me to the river,  
after shrugging when I asked a question  
about how day and night are similar.

We sit on boulder-sized rocks, as I  
drink down words that dry my throat.  
If I were at home right now,  
I'd be the unmade bed; twisting and flailing  
in dirty sheets, laying sleepless for the night.

He tosses away things that are worth  
being kept, I find most of them down here,  
swimming upstream, against the flow,  
and I end up jumping in and pulling out  
the weary thoughts.  
I can usually plan on being  
led astray before the muse settles in,  
quits throwing away the valuable;  
dampening thoughts, which I then turn around  
and dry in the open air, refreshing them all.

# Born to Break Even

Joseph Veronneau

A neighbor runs into  
the street  
howling;  
it is yet another  
Saturday night.

Beer bottle in hand  
he feels sacred  
for a moment  
realizing he has the entire  
city block's attention.

He'll belt-out  
a threat or  
a lie  
whichever sounds best  
initially  
will do him fine,  
his flesh covered  
in whore's perfume.

The evening (early morning)  
will end with his pals  
holding his head up  
through clenched fists of hair,  
keeping him from knocking himself  
out again  
on the pee and pubic stained  
porcelain.



Danny the  
Saucer Man,  
art by Mark  
Graham



Prison Windows, art by Mike Hovancek

# Untitled

Simon Perchik

I don't let you finish without help  
cut short what you have to say  
the way each morning leaves its darkness

for the end though today or tomorrow  
your voice will slowly fall across  
as moonlight and these tiny stones

--I butt in to become your mouth  
your lips, your breasts --I breathe  
through you not just this once

but with tenderness --a simple sentence  
stopped so you can rest back to back  
standing, exhausted, commonplace.

Legs, art by  
John Yotko





# Chopsticks and Cordials

John Vivolo

I close my eyes and fall asleep. I dream. I wake up.

My dreams don't seem to come in a series of flashes like they once did. Now they only occur after long breaks of wakefulness. One dream and then an hour awake, followed by another dream and another hour awake. Each time, I wake sweating and shaking as if I'd just had a nightmare, even when I don't have a nightmare.

In the past I used to wake up not knowing where I was. Now I wake up and I know exactly where I am. I'm in China. The city of Jiujiang to be precise. Jiujiang is in the southern central area of the country, in the Jiangxi province. The people are polite and curious. They stare at me, the strange foreign. Even though I've been here for three years, it still sometimes seems to me as if I've just arrived. Yet, the wide-eyed indiscrete staring doesn't make me uncomfortable anymore, it makes me feel welcome.

It's seven o'clock in the morning. My room is very quiet; so quiet that all I can hear is the ringing in my own hears. It's that muffled sound of nothing. The same one you get when you place your hands over your ears, just the sound of the inside of your head. Is this what it's like to be deaf? Do you really hear nothing or do you hear this endless whistle of nothing, this white noise of nothingness?

Out of the corner of my eye I see the sun just peaking over the windowsill. She also seems to be taking her time getting out of bed. I follow her example. Moving my feet over the edge of the bed, I place my sweaty toes onto the old grimy industrial carpet.

"Do I have to work today?" I ask myself, trying to remember if today is a school day or not. I realize it's Saturday. I fight the urge to lie back down into the soft white covers.

Staring across the room, I see the empty rice bowl. Sticking out of the bowl are two wooden chopsticks coated in ivory. I remember finishing my dinner last night, filling the bowl with water to let it soak, and leaving the chopsticks inside. My Waiban, who gave me the chopsticks as a gift upon my arrival to this sleepy little town three years back, said not to leave them in

water. His exact words were: "Don't leave them in water. The wood inside will crack and that will be bad."

He likes using the word 'bad'. At the time, I didn't want to explain to him that sometimes 'bad' is slang for good. Besides, I'd spent enough time explaining to him that even though I was American, my decedents were Italian.

"You are from Italian?" He thought this was a country. "You said you are from America. That is bad!"

Ken (his real name is Jung Shuai, but in order to help him associate with the foreign teachers, he was re-assigned the name Ken or Waiban Ken) shook his head and smiled. He usually presents a wide smile when he's confused or uncomfortable.

"Ken," I replied, "I am American, and grew up in America, but in America many different people come from other countries to live there. My grandparents came from Italy."

He didn't believe me. "Americans live in America."

After ten minutes of explaining, ten minutes of the three-hour ride from the airport to the school, I think he finally understood and accepted it. However, he wouldn't accept the fact that a number of Chinese live in America.

"No! Chinese live in China," said Waiban Ken.

"Then who are all also those people in America who look Chinese?"

He smiled a wide, crooked, toothy grin and said: "They are Americans."

In case you're wondering, a Waiban or Waiban Assistant is a Chinese person assigned to foreign teachers to help them with the transition between the two cultures. They're also supposed to be knowledgeable about other foreign cultures.

As I step out of bed, I reach up and stretch. I can feel the strain on my muscles from my restless sleep. After a long a satisfying piss, I return to my rice bowl. Bits of rice float around my water logged, ivory covered chopsticks. Cleaning the bowl, I try to remember if I have anything to do today. After finishing, I turn toward the front door, under which is a small package of mail (the mail from the previous day usually doesn't come until the next morning...if at all).

Sorting through the various letters from friends and family, changes in regulations, notifications of meetings the school liked for me to attend, and other nonsense, I finally reach the bottom of the pile. There on the bottom is a small white envelope. On it's back is a seal—a heart in gold. Inside the golden heart, and written in silver, are the letters: J & K.

I don't need to turn it over to know what it is. For years they've been com-

ing, increasing as my numerous family members started growing older, and possibly less sane. Without turning it over I place it on my desk a few feet away. I step away from it and sit on my bed, placing my chin in my cupped hands.

A thought suddenly goes through my head: "I'll be home in a month and it's already starting."

I'd come to China to teach English, and was taught as many things by the people as I taught them myself. For almost three years I've enjoyed, and grew frustrated by a number of things in this country, but it's been the little things that I've enjoyed most of all. The little things like not having to live up to family engagements, birthdays, funerals, christenings, and, of course, weddings. I was, after all, in *fucking* china. How could I attend a wedding or funeral? But in a month—twenty-eight days to be precise—I will return to Staten Island (the forgotten borough of New York City), where my family awaits me. That everlasting line of family members: cousins, uncles, brothers, sisters, parents and grandparents (not to mention a huge number of step-family members), await my return. Also waiting is the beginning of the end, the end of the freedom of choice that I've come to love over the past three years (in China of all places!) and the beginning of the great cavalry charge of family engagements.

I stare at the envelope. The J & K in silver letters looks as if they're caged within a heart-shaped golden prison. Could this get any tackier? Either way, I know my time has come. Leaning back, I try to remember the last family wedding I'd attended. It's impossible to simply remember one wedding, but rather they churn into a singular moment repeating itself over and over again. I'll do my best to explain the basic plot.

The church service is a full mass. The 'Holiday Only' Catholics cry and whisper while the vowels are being spoken. The family spreads the word about the beauty of the ceremony and how they felt God in the air. "It's good to be Catholic...it's good that they got married in a church...I heard they were going to get married in City Hall...God forbid...it's good they got married in a church." The family members wait impatiently for the Father to finish his speech about what love is and the importance of religion in the family (not to mention a quick lecture on the 'evils' of abortion). I guess the Catholic Church thinks it's important to talk about deeply political and personal issues like abortion at weddings.



I can see how the two are related...definitely. Sorry, I'm rambling.

To continue...

The crowd rushes out of the church as fast as possible, hoping to get to the reception hall in time to get the newly cooked food. At the hall, rows of the, by now, redundant dishes are presented to the drooling, overdressed, and overweight crowd of uncles, cousins, mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. The trays of several kinds of pasta are attacked first: baked, marinara, alfredo, pesto, and whatever other pseudo-Italian-American names the catering hall can think up. Next, the sea is drained and every type of shellfish is presented to the crowd. They start with lobster tails, baked and stuffed with spicy *Italian-style* breadcrumbs; a deep dish of melted butter with a tiny spoon is left on the side. By the time the crowd passes the seafood section, the butter has spilt all over the table. The butter covers the baked clams that are alongside the black shell mollusks, which are already covered in a red sauce. Next comes the fried calamari and the crowd rejoices. It's not only the favorite but also the ultimate judge of a catering hall. As always, next to the fried calamari are the shrimps rolled in such a thick layer of fried wonder that even the tails are covered (most will admit they hate when this happens). Finally, the meat comes out: racks of lamb, roast beef, thin slices of turkey covered in gravies and marinated for hours on end. It's glorious, but futile. The family has already filled their plates with pasta and fish; the meats will have to wait for the second round (which should only be in a few minutes).

As the wedding reception grinds on, the drinking and eating seems to flow into the large gold-plated dining room like a river enveloping everyone in cheer and laughter. "Salute," someone shouts, which is Italian for 'good health and cheer' (or some shit like that). "We Italians know how to eat, aye!" shouts my uncle, already on his sixth glass of wine and his third plate. This is followed by both laughs and grunts of disapproval.

The music picks up and the crowd of overweight, drunken, overfed family members manages to pry themselves from their seats and begins sloshing around the dance floor, getting excited about the same dance songs they heard two months earlier at someone else's wedding. Soon the music slows down and the Italian love songs are played. The old people, the endless line of grandmothers and grandfathers, rise like zombies from their chairs and begin to sing along. They sway slowly back and forth like dying trees in harsh winds during the winters' of their lives. Vincent and the Esquires, the usual family band, play's the music. I think Vincent is related to me somehow.

Among the crowd, there are people I just saw at the last wedding and

some I haven't seen in years, whose names I can't possibly remember. Looking at these nameless people, I recall the one thing that remains constant in my family. Yes, weddings are one thing, but divorces seem just as popular. Nearly half my family is divorced and remarried, such as my father and mother. Once it was just my father, mother, sister and myself. Now, my parents are divorced and remarried to people (Italians? Of course! Catholics? Of course!) who are also divorced and have children of their own. The four of us have now transformed into two sets of parents, four sets of grandparents, three brothers, and three sisters. Of course we don't attend the same weddings, but in a wedding in which one of the children is getting married, all family members are invited and all attend.

The growing army of family members, both by marriage and remarriage, is ever expanding. The choices of marital status in my family are 'married' or 'divorced and remarried'. There is no 'single for life' person. There is no 'divorced for life' person. Sooner or later everyone expects you to 'meet a nice Italian girl (or boy) and settle down'. At this point I usually nod and introduce my family to Yanjun, my Chinese girlfriend.

This is also about the time when the subject changes to the various occupations: "So what are you doing with yourself...did you hear your Uncle Paule was made head of the printers union in his district?" I shrug and sit down with my fourth glass of wine. Here I begin noticing the men, who are predominantly working class. They're the printers, the firemen, the police officers, the police officers who became firemen, the firemen who became police officers, the appliance repair guys, or the leader of a wedding band who works in his father's pizzeria during the day. The women, on the other hand, are still trapped in the old world family lifestyle with two or three kids attached to each hip. A few have defied tradition and become teachers—never doctors, never musicians, never lawyers, and never artists—only teachers. The idea of becoming a writer (I'm the only one in my family to express a desire to do so) has completely baffled my family.

"You read a lot?" asks my cousin Cecilia as she wipes sauce off the face of her second child (or is it her third?). "I hated reading in high school."

I reply: "I'm a writer, Cecilia."

She takes a long gulp of red wine. "You write stories? You should write for soaps. They've got some good stories."

My only response is to empty my wine glass.

The party ends around two o'clock in the morning and everyone slowly marches home, passing the fabled envelope to the bride and groom. It's filled

with the same amount of money that the family members' had received at their weddings, regardless of how long ago it was. Wedding envelopes do not have interest rates!

"Was I adopted?" I say to myself as I lie back down on my bed.

I can still feel the pulling force of the envelope all around me. Gravity is a powerful force, but it doesn't compare to the power of family responsibility, especially responsibility that has been building up for three years.

There's a knock on my door, but I don't get up. A series of strange thoughts pass through my head: "Maybe it's the wedding invitation trying to trick me into looking at it again? Or maybe it's the mail delivery guy with another envelope. The real envelope that contains not one wedding invitation but ten or twenty; weddings, funerals, engagement parties, or any other reason for my family to stuff their faces with the same tired Italian food and cheap liquor."

The knocks come again. There are three of them, heavy and powerful against my shoddy wooden door. I half expect the person to knock it down, but I know he won't.

"Teacher John," shouts a voice from behind my door, "you are awake!"

I know who it is from the knock. It's the same knock that had come every Saturday morning during the first year I was here, until I was finally able to convince him that I liked to sleep late on Saturdays, and that waking me up was 'bad'.

I jump up, using my left hand to block my view of the white envelope with its silver and gold seal.

Another powerful knock on the door: *Knock, Knock—*.

"Ken," I open the door before he can finish the series of knocks, "it's Saturday."

Waiban Ken nearly falls into the room as his fist gropes toward a door that isn't there anymore. I don't help him, knowing that he doesn't like being touched. After gaining his balance, he quickly fixes himself and brushes off any dust from his pants, which is strange considering he didn't fall on the floor. He smiles a wide grin, trying to hide his embarrassment. The yellow teeth on his top jaw are just as noticeable as the white teeth on his bottom jaw.

"Teacher John, you are awake," says Waiban Ken.

I'm not sure if this is a question or a statement. I stare at him. "It's Saturday."

He frowns. "Yes."

"We talked about this."

"Yes." Waiban Ken steps into my apartment, without asking of course.

This visit must be important; he usually comes by with a message and is always in a hurry to leave. Before I can say another word, he steps up to the envelope on the desk and picks it up.

"Wedding invitation?" I wasn't sure how he knew, but somehow he did. Invitations must be cross-cultural. He frowns. "You are leaving?"

This isn't a question about whether I'm going to attend the wedding or not, but is rather a question about whether I'm going to leave China for good. For the past two months, the college officials, whenever I saw them on campus, would dance around the issue of whether I would sign another one-year contract. "Is America nice this time of year...do you miss your family?" It was the only time in the past three years when they hadn't just come out and said what was on their minds. "You eat too much...you are getting fat!" Their comments had been very forthright thus far, and believe it or not, refreshing compared to the evasiveness of some Americans. Yet, with the pending end to my contract soon approaching, the subject of whether I was staying for another year was being treated as a taboo issue. It was as if talking about it might make both the school and myself very uncomfortable.

Waiban Ken shrugs when he realizes I'm not going to answer him. He puts the envelope down and looks at the picture on my desk of my three-year-old niece. His face softens and he touches the picture frame.

I've gotten used to this scene. Ever since the first day I placed the picture on my desk (and after five minutes of explaining that this was not my daughter but my niece), Ken always walks over to look at the dark haired, clubby little girl. He never admits it, but I think he misses his daughter. I've heard she lives with her mother somewhere in the north.

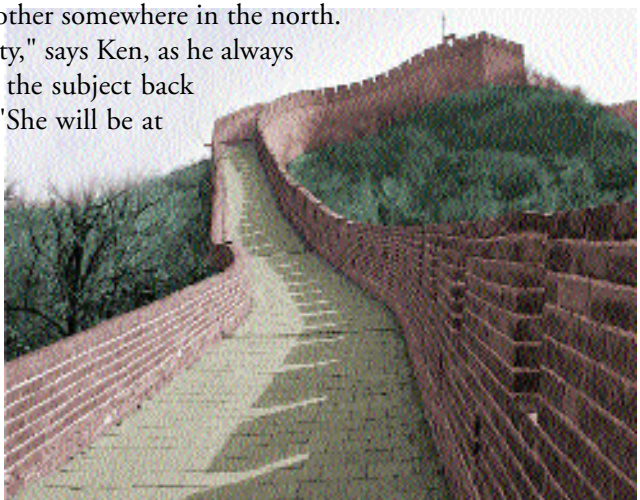
"She is very pretty," says Ken, as he always did before changing the subject back to official business. "She will be at the wedding? You will attend?"

I sit down on the bed. "I don't know."

"When is it?"

"I don't know."

"When will you...be," he pauses and looks nervously



around the room, then smiles as he looks back at me, "when will you be coming back to China?"

I frown. "I don't know."

"Good!" he shouts.

You have to understand that shouting in China isn't a sign of anger but rather a firm agreement to what has been under discussion, or just a firm agreement that he agrees to try to agree.

Ken takes one more look at the picture of my niece and then the envelope. "Goodbye, Teacher John." He shoots his hand out like a missile, almost hitting my face in the process.

I lean back and take his hand. "I will see you later, Waiban Ken." We shake hands for what seems like the longest handshake in history.

Waiban Ken lets go of my hand and smiles, but this one is a real smile, not one that hides his feeling of embarrassment. It's a smile of content for the strange friendship we've developed over the years—strange, but still a friendship.

"Yes!" he shouts as he leaves the room and gently closes the door behind him.

My eyes trail away from the closing door and slowly focus on the envelope. Waiban Ken had placed it right next to the picture of my niece.

I stare at the picture and then at the envelope. "Three years..."

There are two opposing forces active in the universe. Yin exists in Yang and Yang exists in Yin. This is the changing combination of negative and positive, dark and light, cold and hot which keeps the world spinning and creates Chi, the giving life.

I've also wondered what happens when you have a choice that is equally good and bad? When you can't tell the difference between the two? When all you have are the forces of responsibility and the forces of desire?

I open the invitation and read the first line: "You are cordially invited..."

I sit in the wooden chair in front of my desk.

"Cordially means warm and sincere; friendly. A cordial is also a stimulant, a tonic, or a liqueur."

After explaining this definition, I once said to my class: "In my family we sometimes add cordials to coffee during weddings. Can anyone tell me if there is a similar tradition during Chinese weddings?"

A dozen hands had waved frantically in the air, blocking the bright faces of my Chinese students.

I close my eyes again and fall asleep. I dream. I wake up.



# the little differences

Janet Kuypers

I know things are really different in China,  
but Shanghai and Beijing are urban areas,  
so a lot of things seems really similar.

I mean, you saw signs on the walls and  
in the streets in Chinese, but you understood  
how to get around and what to do.

I swear, what I remember most are the  
little differences,

like McDonalds, I got an  
egg McMuffin because I've seen signs  
in French for "Oeuf McMuffins."

So when I ordered one in Beijing, I got a  
hamburger bun for a muffin (*egg McHamburger?*),  
and it was covered in ketchup and mayo,

I swear to God it was fucking drowning in the shit;  
I wiped *some* of it off with my index finger  
and chalked it up to *knowing* the little differences.

Like in Shanghai we went to Starbucks (because  
even in China, there's still one on every corner,

& John said I liked white chocolate frappucinos,  
so Jim asked if they had white chocolate.  
The woman behind the counter said,

"No, we only have **Black** chocolate."

(You'd never hear that in the United States...)

Knowing that a good part of China lives in squalor,  
we saw that everyone hung their clothing to dry.  
Jim said China'd have to build a ton of new plants  
just to supply power to these dryers that people  
can't afford, so clothing dryers don't exist.


China has no medicare or government health care plans  
(don't say the United States is free of government intervention...)  
so people save their money for accidents. It's a good thing,

because we saw rickety bamboo stalks used  
for ladders & scaffolding for Chinamen  
for repairing & cleaning high rises.

But you have to remember these differences,  
I mean, a stop sign is still a red octagon  
even if you don't know the language it's in,

even Coke cans print both languages on them,

But you know, the funny thing about China  
are the little differences.



**children  
churches  
& daddies**