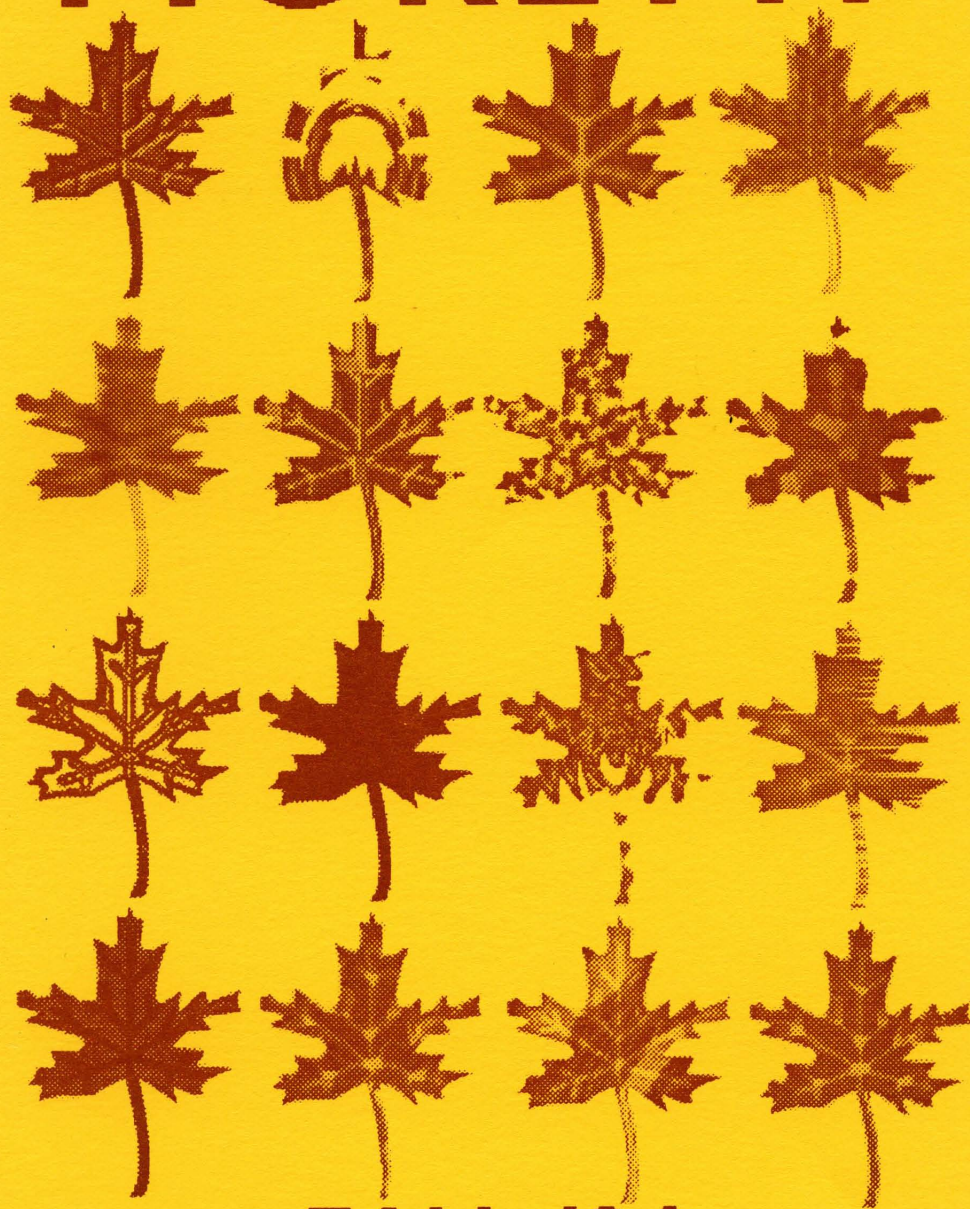


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Jack-in-the-box

I spin the handle and the song unravels my life.

Some days the revolutions slowly turn,

but today I outran the Apache Indians,

and tomorrow Jack may visit,

yet the music will end.

The box I will close, and spin again.

-Annette Roberts



Flight

It is possible
 yes
 I am wishing for you
 or not you entirely
 but the security of you
 (your arms)
 on my breath
 your breath
 caught.
 And yet—
 you lay your hands on me
 delicate
 on strong shoulder blades
 (bare)
 you cannot even feel
 beneath your tremulous fingertips—
 wings.

—Emily N. Persic



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Sestina

The warmth of the Shoppe is strong.
Shaking off morning's last touch,
She notices his smooth, clean hands.
He takes his coffee black. Soft,
Sweet aroma, and delicate
Coffee clouds dance.

Flawless white eggs dance
Over rolling water. Outside, strong
Winds strangle Old Glory, as delicate
New sunbeams whisper in and touch
His face. His stare is deep and soft.
She's embarrassed for her hands.

Charmed, she watches his hands
Move easily in a fluent dance.
He explains with soft
Words, and a heavy voice. A strong
Rhythm in her chest brings a touch
Of rose to her cheeks, almost delicate.

He swoons over his delicate,
Western-style masterpiece. His hands
Move swift as he devours it with a touch
Of grace, and only a smile left to dance
On his lips. Anticipation is strong,
And she enjoys the soft,



Look of the omelette, and then its soft
Feel on her tongue. She moves in a delicate
Manner, trying to impress. Hope rises strong
When she sees him glance at her hands,
And faintly smile. Her heart dances
A little when he reaches to touch

Her wrist. She notices a touch
Of happy pink freckles spread soft
Around a childish grin that lights to the dance
In his eyes. As smooth and delicate
As hot yellow, his hands
Find hers and he holds strong.

With his touch, she becomes delicate
And no longer wishes for softer hands.
Coffee clouds dance, and the warmth is strong.

—Jennifer Stewart



October Soccer

by Derek Witte

She reluctantly stands. It's morning. She knows that much. Why did she have to get up again? The boy. Oh yes, the boy's soccer game. She pulls on a robe to protect herself from the cold October air that stole into the house sometime before dawn. Down the hall to his room. He's still sleeping. She brews a pot of coffee using the last night's grounds, and then sits by the window. Seven o' clock. The game's at nine. She'll wash his uniform, a red thermal undershirt, and her work clothes—then she'll wake him.

The washing machines are three flights down, and she struggles with the laundry basket. She is still stiff and tired from last night's shift. Saturdays are always hard for her, because she feels the whole week in her legs and back. Luckily, there is an open machine. She sprinkles in the powdered detergent and then slides the quarters into their slot. She wonders how many quarters she's slid into these machines over the past ten years. She knows if she had managed to save all those quarters, she could buy her own washing machine.

At a little after eight, she wakes the boy. He stirs, mumbles a few words to some dream companion and then awakens to the sight of his mother. She smiles at him, and he smiles back.

"Mornin' rugrat."

"Good morning, mom."

"First game today honey. What do you want for breakfast?"



"Can I have French Toast?"

"Sure Tiger. Put on your sweats, and wear something under your uniform."

"Aw mom, I don't want to look all puffy. Kids'll think I'm fat."

"All the other little Cardinals will be puffy too, I guarantee it."

"But mom?"

"It's cold darling. It froze last night. Please don't argue with me."

She cracks the last egg into a small mixing bowl, adds some skim milk and then whips the ingredients with a fork. She dunks two pieces of bread and drops them into the frying pan. The sizzle fills the quiet house, and she smiles. She's made a pact with herself: on her day off, she's happy, period. She doesn't think about the week or the bills or the boy's father. She spends the day at the recreation department watching midget soccer or at the zoo or in front of the T.V. It doesn't matter as long as she can be with her son.

He rounds the corner, and sits at the kitchen table. He's like a warm little pod, grabbing his legs with his pudgy arms, and resting his head between his knees. She keeps glancing over her shoulder at him. Before he was born, her life was grayness. She married young, nineteen, and dropped out of college. She signed on at the grocery store only to earn some extra cash, but soon was trapped. She couldn't risk even a week of un-employment. Then the pregnancy, her husband left before the second month. He said he needed his freedom. She cried, but not for her failed marriage, and certainly not for fear of losing him—



she cried for herself. Her future was being ebbed away, and she couldn't fight the current. But then the boy was born.

She glances again at him. His golden hair loose and tangled, and his sheet-wrinkled cheeks already glowing.

"Here's breakfast, peanut."

"Thanks mom," he smiles and starts eating.

"Are you ready for the game?" she asks.

"Oh yes, We've practiced every day after school for two weeks. We learned all sorts of drills and passes, and special codes."

"Codes?" she asks.

"Yeah, codes, so we know where to pass the ball. If some kid has the ball, and you're open you don't just say, 'Hey Rodney, pass it to the right.' The other team would probably steal it. You say 'alpha one' or somethin'."

"Oh, I see. How advanced."

"Yeah, it's neat. Like the other day, dad came to practice, and he..."

She gasps.

"He asked me why the heck we were talking about apples and oranges out on the field, and I had to tell him that apples are passes to the left and oranges are passes to the right. He thought it was smart."

"Your dad came to watch you practice?"

"Yeah, he's back in town for a while. He said he told you."

He hadn't told her. Her husband was a crook, or in his words, an opportunist. He was a brilliant man who



saw humanity as so many pawns and rooks. He understood their feeble hopes and misconceptions and played them to his advantage. He would dress up in a worn suit, and stand around the train station waiting for gullible commuters. Often, he would tell them some story about a lost wallet and a dying mother. Other times he wore an old wristband from the hospital, and begged money for some imaginary prescription that would save his life. Unfortunately, kind people often refuse to see brokenness. He made several hundred dollars every night. This money had paid for her first wedding anniversary present, diamonds. He said he'd won a longshot at the dog track. She was so blind.

She loved the presents, but they were sparse. More often she would find a twenty missing from her purse, or she would receive her balance statement from the bank, and discover numerous withdrawals he hadn't mentioned. When she tried to bring it up, it was always the same:

"Oh that. Don't worry honey. I had to make a couple of investments. Our ship'll come in."

He had a job at some bar downtown, but she never saw a paycheck. He was either pockets-out broke, or buying big, expensive gifts. He'd buy her China, and then leave her to pay his credit card bills out of her meager salary. So, when her son was born, and he left, she was glad. She wanted a chance to be normal. She wanted him to fade away down one of the endless Inter-states. She wanted to forget his face as much as she wanted to forget her adolescent love for him.

"Is it bad that dad's here?" the boy asks.

"No, it's all right. I'm just a little surprised to hear



he's in town darling. I didn't mean to frighten you."

She reaches for her coffee, and then she hears it: the familiar rumble, the screech, the abrupt cutting of the engine, and then the ticking of the cooling metal. The opportunist coaxes the car for which she is still paying between a jeep and a station wagon, and then runs up the stairs. He storms into the apartment without knocking

"Hey daddy, daddy, daddy-o," her son yells.

"Hey there, cool cat, What's going down?" he asks with a smirk.

She grasps her robe near the neck, and steps out of the kitchen.

"Good morning sexy," He says.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I came to take my son to his soccer game. He said today was his first match so I thought I'd head out there with 'em. Ya know, to do a little father son bonding. Right kiddo?"

"You bet dad," her son says.

"I even brought a new jersey for him. I had his name and a little cardinal embroidered on the breast. Whaddaya think tiger?"

"Cool dad. Look at this mom. This is the coolest."

He runs to his dad and gives him a hug. She had wanted to buy him some soccer gear earlier that week, but she just couldn't swing it. She doesn't know what to say. Her son is so happy. She can't tell his father to leave, nor can she make the boy return the jersey. She wants to scream, and tell the man that he doesn't have a son, that he can't see her boy, but she only bows her head. Every boy deserves a father even if he is only a myth or a lie.



"Why don't you go get ready for the game honey. We need to leave soon."

"I'll put on my new jersey, and be right back daddy-o."

"You got it," he says, shaping his hand into a gun and playfully shooting the boy.

"Why?" she whispers, after the boy leaves.

"Why what?"

"Why the surprise, why the gift, why today?"

"He's still my son. What's wrong with dropping in. I don't want him to forget me. I'm his father for chrissakes."

"You may be his father, but you're no father to him. You're some phantom Santa Claus who just materializes with gifts every six months. If you were a father to him, he wouldn't forget you, because you'd be here."

"Aw come on, lighten up. I gotta move around to make money. You know how it is; I can't be somethin' I'm not."

She just shakes her head. She doesn't understand why he has to do this to her son. It just makes everything worse. His visits just punctuate his absences, and his gifts just make them seem all the poorer. She is biting her lip when the phone rings.

"Hello."

She pauses.

"Why, yes. He's right here.....Did he give you this number?"

"I see. All right."

She hands him the phone.



"Jerry, yeah, what's up? Tonight, are you serious? Fantastic. Of course, I can make it. I'd be a fool not to. See ya'."

He hangs up the phone and hesitates a moment before turning.

"Uh,"

"Uh, what? Uh, I'm gonna abandon my kid, because some scam is going through tonight? Uh, I'm really sorry I didn't mean to barge into your life and break your son's heart? Uh, what? what?"

Backing up with his palms facing the woman, he says, "You understand, right. I mean, if I don't get to New York by six, I stand to lose a lotta cash. I mean, hey, I'll send ya some. I can't turn my back on business right?"

"Right. You'll always have a son, but this is a once in a lifetime deal."

He has no answer. He turns and creeps towards the door.

"You can explain it to the kid. I'll be back later. Hey, I'll drop some cash in the mail for ya. Sorry, it's just business."

He quietly steps out, careful not to slam the screen door. His engine roars, and he vanishes as quickly as he has appeared. She sits at the kitchen table, and finally lets go of her robe.

She hears the boy's footsteps creaking towards her.



Clean

All chance of true love lost
Or not
I would not venture out-
Travel-
The length and space of two full days
Opportunity cost be damned
The sojourn
To see the spectre of a man
And hear life exit death's clogged, bloody throat.
Are you, perchance, familiar with what I say?
A cough or sputter, spray
The red and gutter-gray
It might be nice to know again
Let me feel clean, put bleach in my bowl
Because sometimes death sings sweetly
And I know an awfully rotten soul.

—Sean M. Parsons,



Winter Love: A Sestina

Our breath formed brief clouds in the chilly night.
Our scarves flapped like flags in the crisp wind.
My hand and yours were tucked together
In a warm pocket of your coat. I shivered as your cheek touched mine.
Your kisses felt like frost on my lips.
As we hugged and froze beneath the winter moon.

Your face in your parka was round and white, a moon
With gooseflesh, and moonlike in the night
Your lips were white and chilly-but still they pressed my lips;
And as the scraping of the wind
Peeled the last warmth off your body and mine,
We could have frozen there, for all we cared, together.

Above our heads the trees swayed together,
Creaking with the ice that gleamed back at the moon,
Bright as your eyes piercing like slivers into mine.
You cried. "I love you!" for the first time that night.
And love raged between us like the wind,
As we bit kisses from each other's lips.

Your lips are now divided from my lips.
Time edged apart what winter drove together.
Through my window I watch the battering wind
Lashing the trees under a quiet moon.
We sheltered each other once on such a night,
I with your love and you with mine.

The cold moon haunts me with your kisses, do you think of mine?
And have your lips lingered with another's lips
Freezing his flesh with your love on a winter night?
I like to think that only we together
Could be so foolish and that you've never shared the moon
With another for so long in such a wind.



The trees cry more softly now, the wind
Is a fitful gutter, these thoughts of mine
Ebb slowly like tides pulled by the moon.
I can't recall the sharpness of your lips
Or why we chose to stand outside together
When sensible lovers stay behind warm doors on a winter night.

Your love and mine,
Born in the wind,
Under the moon,
Nipping our lips.

Your love and mine
Blew fierce like the wind,
Glowed soft like the moon,
Bonded us together.

Your love and mine,
Set like the moon,
Died down like the wind;
Went out in the night.

—Brian McDonald



A Leaf to Remember

by Daniel Pryzbyla

Once again the aging widow begins her somber saunter towards the garage. The door creaks as she searches for her treasured rake. As she finally reaches the rake in the dark hollows of the garage, the dreadful images haunt her again. It was October 20th, and her husband, whom she loved far more than herself, had been in combat for four months. She felt that depressing moment at the Baltimore train tracks when their eyes last met before a cloud of smoke from the engine made him disappear forever.

"Ring, Ring," the doorbell cried. It was one of those telegram deliverers. As the woman, with a swift pull of her finger, unsealed the letter, she unconsciously caught sight of a golden yellow leaf prematurely descending from the sky. Word by word her most dreadful fear was confirmed.

As she marches towards the front of the yard on this cool, wet October morning, she gazes at each and every leaf to be raked. Kids are joyfully playing football at the nearby park and two youthful girls are jumping rope in the alley next door.

"Your husband has tragically died in a plane crash over the Pacific Ocean on October the 20th, 1942," read the telegram.

Thirty eight years later each leaf falls perilously to the earth, and each leaf is carefully and reverently swept up by her concerned rake. Each burnt orange and each



brick red prematurely taken from its home to leave the tree tragically bare.

Every leaf that falls is her grand husband who for four years of her life was the most special someone she could ever imagine. But now, as she rakes, the inescapable picture of that first golden yellow leaf plummeting to its fate, reminds her of her husband, helplessly carried to his own fate, and causes her to enshrine each leaf to its burial.

Her heart trembles, but for a moment, as she once again relives that frightful October morning carrying the last leaf away.

HAIKU

Leaves lullabying
With soft rustles and whispers
Sighing us to sleep.

—Deandra Webb



The Backs

Beaumarchais or Baudelaire
or a thousand thousand others
squat dumbly, their backs to me,
hissing in somnolent solemnity
"Multitudinousness, multitudinousness"
like Ecclesiasticus in the shoddy garb
of Matthew Arnold.

I can't leave a bookstore
emptyhanded no more
than I can lay to rest
my still awe
in the presence of the woman
in the long black duster,
her back facing me.

—L. Atwood



Face to Face

Caressing with hands of stone
 better made for gouging, hitting, cutting
Giving with words
 trembling, waivering, muttering, faltering
Facing, years gone, I wonder
 of days, of disbelief, of hope, of questions
Seeking, searching, trying undeterred,
 I continue
Feeling, touching, loving, wondering
 through marble chiseled years of union
Caressing inspite of hands unchanged.
 Softly answered.

—by Mark Hall



Heritage

It is the weight of the past,
that lies heavily on my back,
and leads down
streaking
to my right bare shoulder, tattooed
with the kiss—
of what has been
and what you are.

Palms up, strong hands,
my writers callus, slender fingers
(my mother's strength).
In the mirror, my brother's eyes,
wide and deep
and my sister's endless smile,
on my face
(that look of laughter)

Then there's me, the middle one
(almost black sheep,
but not quite).
With one foot raised in anticipation of the future
falling out beneath me.

Behind me
green plains break to city streets to mountain tops,
and red-gold earth
where
grandparents, uncles, cousins, aunts, great-aunts,
sisters, great uncles, brothers, god-fathers, mothers.
(Shall I even mention my father?)
hold me up, a wall against which I stand,
waiting.

—Emily N. Persic



38th Street

Nicholas Nickleby
dragging through bones
of riddled writers
sitting on thrones,
how serendipitous
lovely humid air
making alcoholics
confused as what to wear,
close talkers breathing
halitosis to kill
Civil War reenactments
here on Crown Hill,
now its Green Gables
and maybe Aesop's fables
those damn Grimm's fairytales
and Disney labels,
riddles alike
and literature confuse
38th street passed
only to amuse.

—Annette Roberts



The Question

Watching the waves gently fall,
on the soft warm sand,
And I wonder what others see,
when they stand where I stand.

I smell the coming of Spring rains,
as I sit by my window sill,
And I wonder how others believe,
and if they always will.

I hear the gentle blowing wind,
and the rustling of the leaves,
And I wonder how others feel,
and how they grieve.

I touch the silken petals
of a newly formed rose,
And I wonder how others learn,
and everything they know.

And in all of my travels,
and the more people that I see
I wonder if they are curious
and wonder just like me.

In this great big world of ours,
with so much knowledge to earn,
The more we stop to wonder,
the more we seem to learn.

—Amanda White



The Value of Warmth

by Timothy J. Vollmer

The dark night weighed down on me like a heavy winter cloak, slowing my stride, causing me to stumble. It was Halloween, that dreadful night when Hell opens wide its dismal gates and spews forth the wailing souls of the damned. Midnight was fast approaching.

The children were safe, tucked snugly into warm beds with bulging bags of candy resting at their sides, but I was not. I was utterly alone, adrift in a cold and lightless neighborhood. If I had fallen there, I would have died, and no one would have found my lifeless body until late morning.

An icy breeze moaned softly through naked branches, causing once-vibrant leaves to swirl at my feet in a dusty brown spiral of decay. Numb to the world, I crunched through them, leaving their shattered corpses behind.

I looked at my watch. It was nearing ten o' clock, and yet my nocturnal journey was far from over. It would be another three, perhaps four, hours before I would find warmth. I drew frigid air into my lungs, and sighed.

Suddenly, I heard a sharp rustling of leaves to my left, followed by the soft pounding of feet against the earth. Only ten strides away, a small boy broke from the cover of darkness in a panicked dash, his blue jacket flapping behind him like a cape.

I paused, watching with mild amusement as he leapt upon the shadowed porch of a nearby house, his white sneakers skidding as he landed. Almost immediately,



he began to pound at the door with his tiny fists, all the while looking behind, searching for monsters.....

"He's searching for you," a familiar voice whispered, "looking for you because you are evil, evil, evil....."

The voice was banished by the sharp retort of a lock being unfastened. The door opened, spilling warm light into the yard, and with a yelp of relief the boy rushed inside. I waited for the door to close before moving on, but it did not. Instead, a lithe, squirrelish woman stepped out—his mother, evidently.

She was wearing a loose, red nightgown which reached to her bare feet, and had short brown hair, tangled and frayed. Her eyes were weary, yet bright, and they glittered like emeralds consumed by a gentle flame. For one rapturous moment, I was consumed by complete adoration.

Then, our eyes met, and my heart was filled with a cold, liquid dread. Hers was too, for she grimaced and hurried into the house, slamming the door behind her. But, before she turned away, her wide eyes had betrayed her feelings: go away—go away and leave us alone. We have not enough warmth for you. With dire finality, I heard the door bolt click, and watched as the curtains were pulled over their windows, one by one, shutting in the light.

I walked many miles that night, down many cold and desolate streets. As I walked, I peered into the lighted windows of neighborhood houses, watching with detached wonder as a husband embraced his wife, as a father hugged his daughter, and as a mother held her son. I wanted to experience that acceptance, that warmth, that



love; I was so cold and had so far to travel

But no warmth was offered. All the love was trapped behind brick and glass. It was hoarded like gold, as if sharing might diminish it. I sighed, and turned away. My shoes scraped the street slowly, sullenly, as I limped my wretched way into the night. A church bell tolled, heavy and ominous. Once, twice, twelve times its rolling gongs shattered the silence, a death knell for all humanity.

I stood motionless, listening, until the last reverberations faded into the black abyss. It was now midnight, that dark hour of the damned, and I was all alone. A sharp, bitter wind suddenly swept down the street like an ocean wave. I paused, huddling in my jacket as it tossed dried leaves into the air, causing them to swirl and dance. As I waited, I could almost hear the darkness speak to me in tones of icy despair:

*"Poor, poor cub. There is no one for your.
Your fate is meaningless. Embrace me, and
you will feel no more pain. We can make
them pay."*

I shook my head and continued to walk, mindless of the pelting wind. My strength was slowly ebbing, sapped by the night's dank chill. I hungered for warmth, thirsted for light, but none was available. And so, like a hardened soldier confronted by the enemy hordes, I carried on with stoic determination.

Darkness, however, was not to be denied, and with frigid breath it murmured its sweet message into my ear:

*"Forgotten child, abandoned, unloved. Life is
suffering, and God is dead. God is dead.
God is dead."*



With numbing dread, I halted, then fell to my knees, the vitality sucked from my spirit. Terror gripped my heart as I looked up to a black sky devoid of moon and stars. I wondered, "Where is God in all this darkness?"

Gradually, I became aware of a light touch at my shoulder. So slight was it, and so new a sensation, that I had barely noticed it; it was just enough, however, to pull me back from the brink of a dark and desolate pit.

I stood up with a soft groan and turned around, expecting to see a ghost, but saw instead an elderly gentleman standing only a pace away. He wore rough work boots, patched jeans, and a frayed, plaid jacket. His wrinkled, unshaven face was kind, and his dark eyes relayed an air of concern.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly. His voice was gravelly and rough, but warm. For a moment, I could do nothing but stare. Eventually, I nodded. He turned to leave. "You best be gettin' home, son," he called over his shoulder, "This night is getting cold, and it's not safe to walk alone in the dark." Before I could reply, he was gone, like a ghost dispersed by the wind.

I began to walk at a steady pace. I had many miles to travel before I was home, but now I knew that I could make it.



Dangling my Wine

Wine does not make you
Wise: it makes you drunk,

But sometimes I drink,
and I think,
And I sit down in the corner of some poor fella's
living room,
with a bottle,
dangling between my legs.

It helps if you've forgotten
your name,
Or don't care,
just the same,
And then you might lean back into that corner,
and see
The scrapbook of your life.

Page one
to done.

And, with wine
Sometimes,
It makes sense
to be,
drunk or
in the corner,
just the same.

—Derek Witte



one single can

pop
inhale
swallow...
ah!
close the eyes
feel the drops
half-finished
set aside
flat

-Stacy Clevenger



The Compost Man

We gazed out across the beanfield
just in time to see
our childhood pal, the Compost Man
a-reeking in the breeze.

Ah, the slushful scents of old,
when by the creek we'd trudge,
up-rummied our very nostrils
like being knee-deep in the sludge.

Oh Compost Man, oh Compost Man,
we've missed you ever so.
We wonder why we now look down
upon that ground we used to know?

Oh Compost Man, oh Compost Man,
we've missed you ever so.
Tell us, won't you tell us please,
what's beneath your tan chapeau?

The Compost Man looked at us grimly,
his brown eyes shone a bit,
we weren't sure if we saw a tear
or if he was just full of wit.



"Children, children, you're all grown up,"
he said with hugs all round,
"I've missed you so these last twelve years
stompin' through the ol' sloggin' ground.

You've grown so old, I see,
and so very wise, I judge,
that you've got more important things to do
than stroll down through the fudge.

"Getting older changes you," he said.
winking, with a 'mark my word.'

"For all your being something,
on this you can rest assured,
that once you're planted in the ground
you're naught but one more turd.

—L. Atwood



I Never Sleep Very Well

I never sleep very well,
 Dogs chase me out of my bed,
 Up the prison wall,
 Head-long into the snarling barbed-wire.
 Bleeding in its rusty teeth,
 Crouching in the twisted strands,
 I spring with wings unfurled.
 The growling wind chooses my direction,
 I follow obediently.
 I land in the bushes.
 Dogs chase me out of my yard,
 Up the garden wall...
 ...I never sleep very well.

—Gregory Scott Beasley



Did You Hear That?

I placed a glass of milk upon my couch
To the left, a cushion centered rightly—
Just so—

I then sat up to leave
Not looking back, not sure
But I know,
That glass of milk there stayed
Kept erect
Did not fall
Did not go,
But
Of many things as such, wavered so.

Well...as one might imagine,
Among themselves,
Not much was mentioned
About the milk
Its precarious position on this ridiculous situation.
And yet
Upon disaster's quiet nearing
I distinctly remember hearing
From them, if you will, the furniture surrounding—
At least I think so—
An emphatic though hushed..."OOOHHH!"

—Sean M. Parsons



Night Vision

Far above the harbor,
We see the lightning
in gigantic forks.

No electricity.

The big front window
Is cinematic.

Each flash lights the
palm trees and
the ocean

towards

Japan

for a

blink

!!!!

!!

!

Only the porch
shines in the darkness.

—Derek Witte



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