



The Fall Line



Spring 2019 vol. XI
Piedmont Virginia Community College



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THE FALL LINE, SPRING 2019, IS THE 11TH VOLUME, SELECTED, EDITED, AND PRODUCED
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IN LOVE

by Marie Lotter

I'm in love with many things:
The breath before a song starts,
The smell of an autumn morning,
The moment before kissing someone
For the first time,
A young couple holding each other,
An old couple grasping hands,
The wave just as it crests,
The first shock of rain in the summer,
Every beautiful soul I meet,
The inhale before love's confession.
I'm in love with
The silence of a morning so early
Not even the birds are awake.
Where the still night sky is
Diluted with blue.
When my soul is at rest
And I may think of all that I love,
And how I am in love with life.

RECIPE FOR ME

by Kara Larson

A couple in Virginia,
A house in Goochland,
Circumstances and sixteen acres
Begin a recipe for me.

A dash of sarcasm
With a pinch of scatterbrain
Let simmer a few years
Then mix some more

Harsh words from someone close
A harsher blade from myself
Friends and favorite songs stepped in
I'll only wear bracelets from now on

A church in Short Pump,
Five older siblings, favorite books,
Choice friends, Gramie's bracelet
Gave what you see today

Still a sarcastic scatterbrain
But with a craving for travel,
A want for adventure,
And a God to praise.

The Chef knows what He's doing
But there are more ingredients to add.
This recipe isn't finished yet.



Hawk by Tori Thomas, Graphite Drawing

A FORK IN THE ROAD

by Rainah Gregory

Fog hung like a damp towel in the humid clot of night. The moisture caught between the mountains compressed my tired body as I stumbled down the road. Rocks crunched under my weathered shoes, pulling me away from my dormant Honda carcass. Dead. How could my car shut down in the middle of nowhere? Leaving me to roam amongst the spiked bushed forest, with its gaping voids of oblivion carrying an infinite supply of secrets I wish to stay a stranger to.

After what felt like centuries, my eye caught a fire lit in my peripheral vision. Without warning, my body lurched toward this mysterious beacon. Dauntless. As I approached, I laid eyes on three beings.

“Hi,” spoke one.

“Um, hi,” I responded. My voice stuck dry.

“You okay there?” spoke a woman, a long chocolate braid trailing her spine.

“My car broke down.”

“You look tired, man,” spoke the last of the trio. A red worn hat creased his ginger locks.

“Yeah, I’ve been walking for a while.”

“Well, welcome! Take a seat!” said the first.

“I don’t want to intrude...”

“Nonsense!”

I complied, sitting myself on a fallen tree. I felt their eyes peel me apart. I wasn’t prepared for such judgement.

“You have nice eyes,” spoke the red-hatted man. This took me aback.

“Um, thank you,” I managed to squeeze out.

The woman was now leaning forward, tracing her eyes from muscle to muscle on my limbs. “Do you work out...”

“Dan,” I breathed.

The first man glared at the woman hard and cold. He then turned to me, his face softening like microwaved butter. “Sorry about that, Dan. They haven’t been outside the campsite for a while. Meeting new people can become a bombardment of questions.” He wore a deep blue shirt. It reminded me of the ocean. I don’t know why. Maybe because I was dehydrated. “So, do you like camping, Dan?”

“Yeah, actually. It’s been a while, but I loved it as a kid.”

“We love camping!” erupted the woman. Her eyes gleamed in the misted moonlight.

“It’s a way of life for us,” said the red-hatted man.

“How long have you been out here?”

“Three years,” said the woman.

“Wow, that’s amazing! And survival has been...”

“Tough, Dan,” spoke the first. “There are months where we’ll have fantastic weather conditions and a thriving food supply. But then there are times where we are tested. Like now.”

“Now?”

“It’s been a few weeks since our last decent meal.”

“Really?”

“We’ve been eating a lot of plants,” whispered the woman in disgust. Apparently not a vegan.

“We can probably photosynthesize by now,” gruffed the red hatted man. The fire flamed, igniting his freckles like specs of paprika across his cheeks.

“What a view you have.” I gasped as I stood to survey the mountains.

“Take your shoes off,” said the red-hatted man.

“Feel the grass under your toes. It’s life changing,” breathed the woman.

I complied. The woman threw me a spray can.

“Garlic and olive oil?” I read.

“It’s a repellent.” She gleamed. “Do your wrists while you’re at it.”

“So why this life? What’s in it for you?” I was intrigued now.

“Well, to be honest with you, Dan,” started the first, “we’re quite different from city folk.”

“We have different tastes,” said the red-hatted man.

“We aren’t really ‘accepted’ into society,” clipped the woman.

“How do you mean?” I scoffed.

“People don’t understand us,” said the first.

“What’s there to understand?”

“We practice Cannibalism.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Me, too.”



Rob by Dara Kupke, Photography

REVOLUTION

by Isaac Rowlingson

The dream dominates the dreamer
and the flag goes with the foul land
the watch is in boiling water
and we hold the egg in our hand
Dare do all that becomes one
who dares do more is none
within our inch of freedom we stand
on the edge of oblivion
The opiate of the masses are the red and blue pills
that they feed you in the institution
hope is a necessary utopia
so we're waiting round for revolution

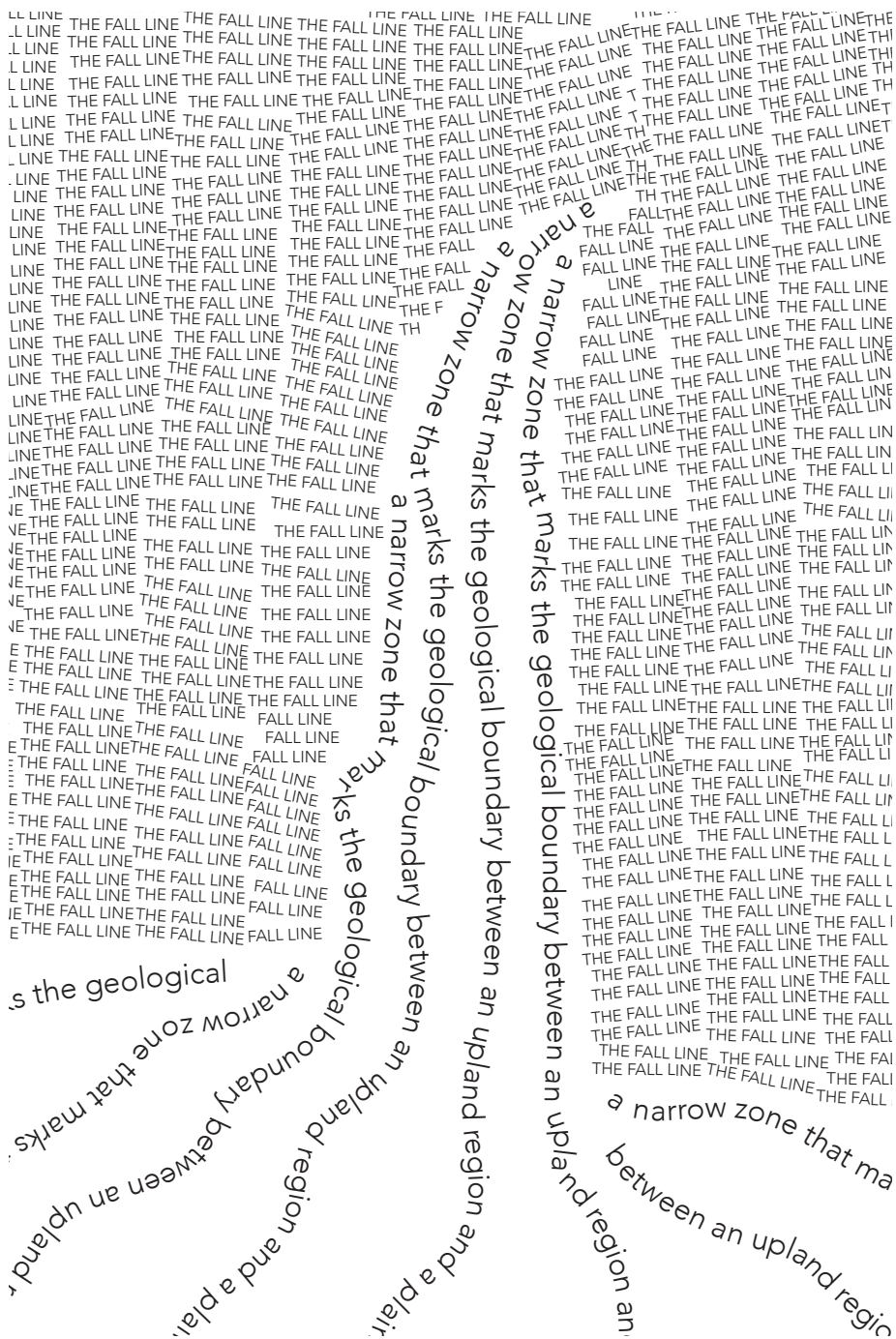
Hack politicians wasting time on dogma
propaganda from a decadent past
war's about profits and rhythm of production
it's chaos and it cannot last
Liberty is banished free speech is suppressed
equality's been thrown in the ditch
by the hands of those who fear progress
the poor stay poor and the rich stay rich
Disdaining fortune with brandished steel
smoked with bloody execution
machine minds and hearts told what to think and how to feel
so you're waiting round for revolution

They dazzle your eyes with lies
that clothe their naked villainy
and with sensors and surveillance
coerce your blind conformity
They'll promise you order, they'll promise you peace
then use you as cannon fodder
lest you be like unto them they sit back and critique
your world from the inside of a bottle
Integrity sells for so little
so here's an Anonymous contribution
no demagogue's gonna solicit my submission
I think I'm gonna go and start that revolution

The truncheon may be used in lieu of conversation
the pigs only free themselves
villains reign themselves to indignation
and sugar over evil itself
Every time this world's changed it's been for the worse
eye for eye and tooth for tooth
truth will conquer the universe
for ideas are bulletproof
Cruelty and injustice, intolerance and oppression,
and ruthless persecution
they're so used to bad times they're unhappy without them
so we're rallying for revolution

Don't play with dice or coincidence
lest you be wise in your own conceit
the only verdict is vengeance, the band plays on
the past is bound to repeat
The soul of humanity's been given wings
and at last is beginning to fly
flying into the future, the light of hope
into the glorious rainbow sky
What's taken from the people will return to the people
to form a more perfect union
there will always be those who don't want us to speak
out on the road to revolution

To remain great takes sacrifice
so the last fight let us face
let us fight to free the world
and unite the human race
Do away with national barriers
that barricade the world with hate
the divine kingdom is placed within us all
and we're standing at the gate
Words will always retain their power
this world's just a ball of confusion
with odd ends stolen forth from holy writ
we're marching ahead in the revolution



The Fall Line by Taylor Abajian and Tori Thomas, Digital

A VILLANELLE TO DAD

by Natasha L. Maready

I wish somehow you were here again
If only you didn't have to leave
We would bump along on a Saturday

You would wake me after the sun
Asking if I wanted to go yard sale-ing
How I wish somehow you were here again

We would lunch at a park
On what we picked up at a random stop
When we would bump along the road on a Saturday.

The radio was ruined by your happy skating
I wonder how your rendition of today's
Music would sound.
I'm sure it's because I wish somehow you were
Here again.

Your absent-minded driving, driving me crazy
And my absent-minded assumption that you
Would always be here
To bump along the road
On a Saturday.

I wish somehow you were here again
We would bump along the road on a Saturday.

BITTERSWEET

by Jude Bolick

The funeral went relatively well. The service was appropriate, although a bit sappy for his taste. Everyone was very gracious about the fact that there was a baby screaming through most of it as well, though that was probably because she was the daughter of the deceased and thus had the right to throw as big of a tantrum as she wanted.

Her tuft of brown hair was stuck to the side of her pudgy cheek, her face sticky from the tears and snot running down her face, despite Wadsworth's best efforts to keep her presentable.

She would let out a howl every thirty seconds or so, her wide eyes closing as if the act gave her voice more strength. The tall ceiling of the church helped echo her tortured voice around, making sure everyone in the seemingly endless rows of pews could hear how upset she was. The stained glass windows lining the two walls on either side of them shook with each sob, the people represented in the artwork appearing to cry alongside her. Wadsworth held her tightly, keeping his own crying silent as he tried to mute her voice by pressing her into his chest lightly and wrapping the blanket tightly around her squirming figure, whispering to her to try and calm her down.

"Shush, Tilly, it's okay..."

But it wasn't okay, even Tilly knew that much.

The pastor had to pause the ceremony twice throughout its duration to wait for a break in the baby's screams. He didn't say anything, he just stared sadly down at the two while Wadsworth apologized to him silently with his dark green eyes. When Tilly paused her tantrum to catch her breath, the pastor would start his speech back up as if he had never stopped.

At a time like this, Wadsworth would usually pass the furious child to his wife, then stare at her with mock irritation when the baby ceased her crying almost instantly. But unfortunately, for both the baby and her father, that was no longer an option. He couldn't be angry at her for acting the way she was. He wanted to react the same way, so instead he just let her vent for the both of them.

The only complaint he had with the funeral service was with how many people came up to him afterward and offered him their sympathy. They came single-file down the long red carpet separating the pews like a crimson river, letting the current take them to where he sat on the far right side of the front row. They would say something generic, like “I’m so sorry for your loss” or “She would have loved this ceremony” before turning away and heading up the low steps to the altar where they shook hands with the pastor and offered the woman in the coffin one last goodbye. They would then make their way against the current to the double doors in the back of the church and exit silently, saving their post-funeral gossiping for outside.

The deceased’s mother was the only exception to this rule, as she stayed and chatted with the pastor for an extended time, complimenting him on doing such a wonderful job. It made sense; she was the one who had organized the funeral, paid for the service, and chosen the violets that were surrounding the corpse. During this phase of the funeral, Wadsworth just sat in the front row the entire time, nodding and keeping a tight smile as he bounced Tilly in his lap, keeping his eyes away from the coffin. He tried his best to pay attention to the people coming to see him, his mind both attentive and wandering due to the conflicting emotions fighting inside of him, but he often found himself falling back into memories, unable to stay in the present indefinitely.

After a while, the crowd died down, leaving him alone in the church. Even the pastor had left, and the body was taken away soon after.

It was just him and his daughter left.

The large church hadn’t seem so vast and ominous with all the people crowded inside its four walls, but now that the massive building was only holding two people, its size loomed in an almost threatening way. He shifted in his seat uncomfortably, gaze slowly moving up to the domed ceiling. His eyes were still puffy from the tears he’d been crying, though he wasn’t even sure why he was, or what exactly he was upset about.

Last week, he had found evidence that his wife, his high school sweetheart, had been cheating on him since college, and that the little girl in his lap may not even be related to him. He had gone into his wife’s room one night to clean it as a surprise for when she got home from her long day at work when he found the proof: a stash of men’s boxers hidden under a pile of t-shirts, several sizes too big for him. Then, two empty bottles of cheap brandy tossed under the bed, hidden until she got the chance to throw them away discreetly.

In her college days, whenever she and her college buddy would hang out together, they'd drink exactly two and a half bottles of brandy between them, and he would take the rest home with him to prevent her from finishing it. Wadsworth was never that good at taking drinks, but then again, the college friend was a much bigger man than he was, his clothes several sizes bigger than his own were.

When Wadsworth knelt down to retrieve the bottles with shaking hands that fateful night, setting the baby in his arms down gently on the mattress so as not to crush or disturb her, he noticed a crumpled piece of paper shoved into one of them. He dumped it out and read it several times to make sure he was not mistaken.

See you next week~

It took him several minutes before he got back the strength to stand, his knees quaking as he held onto the bed for support. His mouth hung open, his eyes never leaving the note clutched in his trembling hand.

Tilly squealed with delight as he scooped her up, racing through the house to the phone, his eyes never leaving the note as he dialed his wife's number.

He had intended on asking her about the note, calling her out on it and venting all of the fury that was rapidly building up inside of him, but when he'd called her cell phone, a police officer had answered it instead.

He had rushed to the hospital, both he and Tilly still in pajamas, just in time to watch his wife flat-line after a car accident had left her nearly severed in half. He stared at her still body, all the fury now mixing with grief, his eyes barely able to register what he was seeing. He was still holding the note in his hand as he slowly approached her hospital bed, taking her cold hand in his shaking one. Tilly was fast asleep in his arms, her eyelids fluttering peacefully as she sucked on her thumb, blissfully ignorant to the fact that her father was now a widower.

He had knelt by his wife's hospital bedside once before, with the baby cradled in his arms, but the last time it had been with great joy that he'd announced they had a baby girl.

This time, he had to be pried away as the doctors came in to remove the body, their baby girl obliviously dreaming as he sobbed in the waiting room.

Even at her funeral, he still had the note in his pocket, the weight of it far heavier than the limp child in his arms, who had worn herself out screaming through the entire ceremony.

He was left with a baby, barely a year old, to care for on his own and the weight of knowing that he'd never know if his wife truly was cheating or not.

Did he even have the right to question her now that she was dead?

The whole situation left him feeling sick and more alone than he'd ever felt, not knowing what to feel, struggling to feel anything at all.

In the silence, the questioning voices in his head got louder, his eyes scanning the room briefly to search for a distraction, though he lacked the motivation to simply go home, especially without his wife in the passenger seat next to him, holding his hand as he shifted gears.

He wondered if the man he thought she was cheating on him for had shown up to the funeral.

He had done his best to scan every face, but he hadn't seen him.

Maybe he'd slipped under his radar, or had been too nervous to come up and offer Wadsworth his condolences.

Great, now his only chance at peace of mind was gone, the church empty, and he'd likely never see him again.

As he looked around, staring at all the empty pews, he noticed something that silenced all the voices in his head.

He wasn't alone after all.

Sitting alone, at the back of the church, her eyes cast up to the ceiling, was a strange woman dressed in all black.

At least, he thought she was a woman. The smiling mask she wore made it difficult to tell gender or expression.

She had bangs that came down to her plastic eyebrows and long black hair, so dark that it put his own shaggy midnight hair to shame, that draped over the back of her bench and almost touched the floor behind her.

Her body was proportioned unnaturally, and she sat in a way that would break a person's back, but not hers. She looked comfortable in her painful position. Her hands were crossed in her lap, her odd body embraced in a tight black sweater and what appeared to be yoga pants.

Something about her intrigued him, so much that he found himself standing up, wrapping the sleeping baby up in her tiny blanket as he walked toward her, cradling the girl in his arms.

The woman didn't move as he approached, but he could tell by the way her head twitched ever so slightly that she knew he was there.

He wondered how she knew his wife, and what had brought her to the funeral.

He stood beside her for a moment, trying to figure out how to approach the masked woman.

Now that he found himself so close to her, he found himself appreciating her height for the first time. She was nearly up to eye level with him seated.

However, despite her classic horror movie appearance, he didn't feel afraid of her.

Maybe he'd simply given up on life, so much that he was willing to make small talk with a murderer.

"May I sit...?" he asked gently, keeping his voice low despite knowing there was no one else that could overhear them.

Something felt so sacred about the woman, something secretive and almost forbidden.

The stranger nodded, patting the seat beside of her twice, inviting him into her hidden world, a secret paradise all her own.

He took the seat graciously, bouncing Tilly in his lap as he tried to figure out what she was staring at so intently. It was impossible to tell with the mask obscuring her eyes entirely, little upturned black slits all that were visible to the widower.

An array of smells filled his nose as he breathed in deeply, the oddly specific scents provoking a collection of strong emotions.

The woman beside of him smelled of roses, but in a different way than one might expect.

Not a bunch of fresh roses, bundled together and given as a gift to a lover on their anniversary, no, but a single rose, left out in the rain, the petals melting away in its slow decay, left to die on the hard concrete, as alone as the person who had brought it, and as ignored; rejected.

She didn't smell of candles, burning slowly on a bedside table, the small flickering light casting long pulsing shadows across the walls. She smelled of smoldering wax, left over from the candles that had burned all night, casting no shadows as the person who had lit them stayed up, checking the clock beside of them, wondering why their lover hadn't come home, or returned their texts, fearing the worst and wondering what "the worst," in their mind, was.

There was a deep sadness in the air, and he could feel it emanating from her. It drew him in, his heart filled with a longing to understand her pain. Not to relieve her of it, but to be a part of it, share in her beautiful suffering.

He glanced down at the baby in his lap, curious to see her reaction to the stranger in the mask.

Tilly's bright brown eyes met his, swollen from all of the tears she'd shed during the ceremony.

She continued to suck on her thumb, ignorant to the stranger's existence.

When he looked up to see if the stranger had noticed the child, he watched her hastily turn away, as if she had been staring at them and didn't want to be caught.

Wadsworth suddenly found himself questioning if the masked woman was just in his head.

The two sat in silence for a moment, basking in their sadness, separate but together, before the woman decided to break the silence.

"A beautiful ceremony," she said wistfully. The small talk seemed so unfitting for her, and he could tell it felt wrong for her to say it. She was simply breaking the silence, wishing for a meaningful conversation, but fearing to scare the widower off.

It made him want her even more.

Her voice rang out like church bells after a divorce, as hard as a pebble against a darkened window, yet as soft as a whisper in the middle of the night in one's sleep, calling out the name of someone other than the person sleeping next to them.

The mask failed to dampen the tone or volume, which drew his eyes over to her face.

As he watched her move, he realized that her chest didn't rise or fall with breaths, and her mask had no breathing holes carved into it.

"Indeed..." he breathed, awed by the woman's air of mystery.

He decided to take the risk, asking what was truly on his mind, not dancing around the point. He disliked small talk as much as she seemed to.

"How did you know my wife...?" he asked, his fingers twiddling with the blanket's hem as he spoke.

The stranger stayed silent for a moment, offering him little more than another head twitch, the movement letting him know she was still listening to him, not off in her own world.

He was a part of that world now, and he never wanted to leave it.

It felt so safe, a place to be himself without shame.

"I didn't," she said after a moment, startling him.

A sick thought passed through his mind and he found himself asking the next question automatically.

"Were you the one who hit my wife...?"

She shook her head, leaning back as she gazed up at the ceiling.

"No."

"Then what brings you here?" he pressed, desperate to understand her more.

She hesitated, still worried about scaring him off.

It suddenly struck him what the confusing emotion was that was in every breath she didn't take, in every unnatural twitch of her body.

She was lonely, seeking out a friend as much as he was.

"I've been to every funeral," she said after a moment, finally turning her head to face him head on.

She had finally let him fully in, taken the dive, laid it all out in hopes he wouldn't reject her.

"I'll be at yours, too, Wadsworth..."

Wadsworth turned to her, trying to process what she'd said, wondering if he had misheard her.

As he met her hidden eyes, he could have sworn that he saw her wink, a smile widening on the lips behind the mask.

Thousands of questions flooded his mind, struggling to be the center of his attention, begging to be let out and thrown at the stranger in the mask. But only one question came out of his mouth, the most innocent of them all, yet powerful enough to beat the rest of them back:

“Would you like to go get some lunch?”



Small Guy by Tara Scott, Digital Art

BACKSTITCH

by Alysia Townsley

you strike me right between the ribs
the gunpowder dusts my chest
gaping heart wound I am
a gunshot in the fabric of this love I
am a tear in your shirt that I could not
mend
every wound is a scar in the making I
fell apart for you but in the end I
came back for you
gunmetal suture holding you together I
promised you

this

A LOVE POEM

by Kari Zacharias

“No fury like a woman scorned”
That fury like a summer storm
The air is hot, her blood once warm
Runs cold without compassion

The wound is fresh, no open flesh
A broken heart through bright red dress
Beats louder now inside her chest
With rage, her greater passion

A path so clear seems hazy now
She thinks of when and where and how
Another breath she can't allow
His skin turns gray and ashen

*Relax, my love, this brazen fear
So unattractive on you dear
Hold still a minute and you'll see
Never again will you cross me*



Zelda the Cat by Carra Hammond, Pen and Ink

SICK

by Gil Somers

When was the last time you were truly sick?
When blood pooled in your ears, and, wrapped in cotton
curtains, you sunk, stoned and solemn, into restless dreams,
waking in wet pools of phlegmy sweat, what might be urine,
and definitely spit.

When you breathed through your mouth for so long you
forgot parched wasn't a state of rest, chapped not a state
of order.

When you lay in bed, eyes closed, tracing the pulse from
your toes to neck to forehead, feeling everything and nothing
all at once.

Hurting.

When you'd wake up again, remembering you were
frightened, that you were close to knowing what it meant,
but couldn't accept that some dreams have no meanings

When your hands were dry, and your throat was sore, but
your nose still found time to run away from you and slobber
itself on your favorite shirts.

When the last thing and first thing you ate was saltines, and
the time before that it was vomit.

When your mother walked in and put her gentle palm on
your forehead and cooed quietly, in one hand a mug of warm
broth, in the other, a mocking bird.

And the bright spirited change of television hues flashed blue
and white on the gray backdrop of your musty cave; while
above you, AquaMan looked out through the misty steam of
your ventilator, ever vigilant in his guard.

And still you can't breathe, and your mother's soup doesn't
help like it used to, and outside the window, stars whirl past
in a promenade of twisted dreamscapes and large walls with
shallow seats where the heater's turned up too high and you
wake, drenched in sweat, again.

Your mother isn't there and you're cold, your pillow's full of
tears and salt and dew and you can't breathe through your
nostrils and the blood pools in your ears and throbs behind
your neck and somewhere inside you know you almost knew
why you were so afraid.

But you still can't accept that some dreams have
no meanings.



Mother by Cheryl Deangelis, Pen and Ink

BLUR OF COLORS

by MyKaela Morris

Stare
The world has become a blur of colors
Black
Gray
Purple
Pink
White

Turn away
I can't look anymore
I don't want to see those colors

Blink
I try to put the world back in focus
It doesn't last for long

Look around
All I see are more people staring
How can they stand to see those colors?

Listen
"How sweet the sound"
I hate it
I want to leave

Leave
Leave the awful sounds
Leave the people staring
Leave the blur of colors

Wait
Down
I see the blur of colors going down
Black Gray Purple Pink White
Gray Purple Pink White
Purple Pink White
Pink White
White

Stop
Where are the colors
Why are they gone

I want them back



Geisha IV by Nathalie Ando, Graphite

COMPARISON

by Rainah Gregory

I heard someone recite a phrase today
That “comparison is the thief of joy”.
I sit and reconsider all my ways
And ponder the frank meaning of this ploy.
Do I forget myself when watching those
Around me, as the world rolls from my sight?
Ignoring open doors for those stood closed?
Allowing happiness to walk right by?
Do I consume my thoughts in little things
That never mattered to my brain before?
Do I escape the essence that life brings,
Greeting negative thoughts into my core?
Alas, I find that this is not my goal.
Instead I long to love and trust my soul.



Haiku by Dara Kupke, Pen and Ink

THE FREEDOM RAILS

by Alex Terpilowski

“I mean, it’s so fucking obvious if people would just take the time to think about it.”

The words slice through my meandering thoughts as assuredly as the crisp hiss that follows the crack of the day’s first Schlitz. The cherry of his Wildhorse Menthol bellows a plume of smoke that briefly masks and distorts his sharp featured face as he drags and adopts an expectant look. In the brief respite of his ranting, I suppose I’m to say something—anything, really—to let him know I agree, or at the very least am following along with the conversation. But I suppose I also must take care to inflect a tone of mild epiphany, as if whatever droll nonsense he was working himself up about had never before been thought by anyone anywhere at any time.

“See but that’s the thing,” I hear myself saying. “People don’t wanna think about it.” Is that enough? I take a purposefully long swig of malt liquor, hoping to give him time to get going again.

“Yeah, no, you got that right. People are content just pushing a shopping cart through life. Buying, buying, buying, but never having. They shop the aisles of life and never leave the store. Never go home, wherever or whatever the fuck that may be. Everyone wants...” It works.

He was looking at his feet, and at the tree that represented the far corner of our staked claim of the American Dream—a small clearing in the forested vee where two tracks of train converge within earshot of the station and the rowdy sport-and-wing joint and the hospital—and at his empty chair, and at every which where but me, which was fine. Piercing was a term usually reserved for the iciest blue of eyes, yet when those darting brown orbs finally ceased their endless wandering to home in on their next victim, they could cower one’s soul to the deepest recesses of cognition.

“...at home watching their precious Steve Harvey propagate the system’s subliminal grated intellectual purging of the public, oblivious to how totally fucked everything really is. That ain’t freedom, man.” He puffs and spreads his arms wide: “This is freedom.” Then he resumes his compulsive pacing. “I mean, shit, man. People like us? We’re the last true vestige of anything unique and original in this godforsaken...”

Distractedly, he uses his cigarette hand to brush his uncombed and oily chestnut hair from his eyes, singeing his bangs and either not caring or not noticing. He props a soiled boot—not the one ducktaped on the left—upon the stump we sometimes use as a stool and leans forward, elbows at the knee, and continues on and on and on. His green-on-orange flannel, rolled to the requisite three-quarters sleeve, hangs loosely over a white v-neck, both splattered with dirt and beer and snot and god knows what else. A torn and frayed brown belt separates the top and bottom grime, the latter clinging to an ageless pair of faded Levi's.

The sun is getting higher. Mid-day is closing in, and I am still no further in my quest to drown away the world beyond our clearings border. The Tuesday morning had started off routine enough: wake up; nurse the hangover of last night's triumphs with the swill of its whisky handle and tap-water instant black coffee; force through a cold shower (heat and electric had long ago abandoned that cursed place); a quick mental preparation and out the door to work. Only there was no work in which to go. The sign on the covered door had left no room for error: Too many new restaurants, not enough profit. I returned home twenty minutes later and found that a similar note had attached itself to my own door, the only difference being the mocking red of the paper. Five days till doomsday. At that I did what any sensible, red-blooded American would have done: I turned right around and walked straight to the nearest alcohol emporium. With the golden nectar in hand, I withdrew behind the barricades of the clearing, where I discovered my present company well into their third forty-ounce indulgence.

I suppose you might say we were friends, if being friends meant that we sometimes got drunk in the same vicinity as each other. Sure, we have the inevitable 'real' talks that come after a long night of self-medication, when the darkness retreats and dawn threatens to carry hope across the horizon. I know vaguely of his upbringings in a well-to-do county household, and of his parents' perfectly wholesome marriage, and of the modest trust-fund he tries to forget. And I suppose over the years he might have picked up on some intimacies of mine on the rare occasions in which he cared to direct his attention farther than arm's length. But was this tantamount to friendship? A cohabitation of misery seemed to be a more apt designation.

I begin to hear the low rumblings of a train galloping along the rails, and for the first time today a pitiful smile betrays my lips. If nothing else, a train always managed to capture my attention, and I could surely use the reprieve. Would it be passenger or freight? Passenger cars brought the exhilaration of their speed, which could certainly help one's frame of mind. In broad daylight, however, with the nakedness of the trees courtesy of a weathered and fading Autumn, any aforementioned pleasure would surely be overruled by the judging eyes of the parasites within. No, better to hope for one of the

freights. They may be slower, but their infinite sprawl was a commanding presence nonetheless. And anyways, there was something meditative about the way they bumbled and creaked along, resigned to the fate of the rail. Never deviant. Sometimes griping, perhaps, but always faithful.

“Oh man,” I hear him start. “Listen to that! Weren’t we just talking about freedom? Sounds like a Chessie, don’t it? When you’ve been around them as long as I have, you pick up an ear for them.” The words feel muted as if from a dream, for the train has already taken hold of me and I am dimly aware that I have risen to my feet and moved closer to the tracks.

“Ah, it’s going west, though,” he continues with a click of his teeth. “Man, ain’t that a damn shame. I need to be getting south before it gets too cold and there ain’t a junction till up around Charleston. East, I just gotta ride to Richmond, then hop off and wait for another if it turns wrong.”

And then the CSX is upon us, barreling down the line perhaps a bit faster than they usually go. The noise and vibration consume me. My peripherals fade to nothingness as I stand mesmerized by the sheer magnitude of the thing. For a moment I forget the events of the day, and my everything dissolves, and there is nothing but me and this big lumbering beast, pushing on and on and on into eternity. I am free. Like the freight I am a vision in the wind, roaming the untamed wilderness. I can be anything, for I am nothing. I can go anywhere, for I am rooted nowhere.

But then the moment is over, and I’m left to watch the immortal freight as I begin to ponder the morose irony of its existence. What perverse depravity, the bittersweet illusion it’s afforded. To be given such an extensive leash so as to reach any height or distance, so long as the paths set forth by unknown entities are adhered to. Yet is a prison bereft of bars not still a prison? The chains may be long, and loose enough to mitigate discomfort, yet see how they constrict and grow taut at the slightest deviation in course. Indeed, here before me in the visage of metal and diesel and cargo lay the tragedy of our God-given truths and the sham of our self-deluded freedom.

In my peripheral, I notice an odd expression form on my compatriot face. The kind where one presses their front teeth against the corner of their bottom lip, and stretches the other side clear up and away towards the ear, forcing an eye into a sort of squint. In a steady motion he brings his mouth front and center, all the while pressing against the bottom lip, the result somewhere between a smile and a grimace.

“Fuck it,” he decides with a slight one-two shake of the head. Then he elevates his voice slightly so as to be heard over the residual clacking of the cars against the rails. “I ain’t been West in a bit, might be something out there worth a damn.” Next thing I know, his Schlitz is stretching its

bottom skyward, and the last quarter of liquid disappears in seconds. With a Wildhorse sagging between his lips he picks his olive-drab pack off the dry dirt, slides his arms in, and secures the clasps across his waist and chest. He pauses and looks my way. "Why don't you come with? No, hold on man, hear me out. You ain't done nothin' but complain about your job for a while now. You obviously hate it, so what's the point? Look, what's the point of working somewhere you hate, giving the best years of your life away to some suit who doesn't give a shit about you so long as the bottom line stays where it's supposed to be—or better yet, it raises a bit and you get a 'jolly good, old sport', a gold star, and a new standard to maintain?"

What kind of life is that? You work your ass off for piss wage and the hope that one day things will magically come together. Well guess what, man? They don't. And there ain't shit you can do about it by playing their game. So,"—He does the closest thing one can do to a shrug with a fifty-plus pound pack strapped to them—"don't. Can't get fired if you don't to work, right? You don't have to pay if you get food from a dumpster, yeah? And you don't need to make rent if you set your bed against the stars. I'm telling you, man. This is freedom. It ain't glamorous and it sure as shit ain't pretty, but you get to live life on your own terms. Hell, I don't know about you, but that's good enough for me."

All the while the rhythmic clack-clack of the train cars seem to accentuate every point. It made sense. Somehow in the midst of all his ranting and raving, he had touched upon the heart of the issue—not that I had bothered to disclose any of the events of the day to him. Broken clocks, right? All that was needed was a yes, and my shackles would be undone. Then I'd deliver unto my Schlitz the same fate as his, and we'd be off. With a running start I'd grab hold of the train car and hoist myself up and into an empty gondola, where I'd promptly crack another forty. I would roam the wild, taking from each city whatever I desired because I was free to do so. I'd sleep under the stars, find food in the decadent wastefulness of society, and call no man boss. I would find clearings like the one between these two train bridges in every town. All across America I would make my claim against the world: I was here, and I wouldn't be subject to their presumptions of what my life should be.

I allow the fantasy to endure for as long as I am able. I try to force out the other thoughts wiggling their way into my consciousness but in the end, they prevail. I see myself sleeping in the heat and wind and rain and snow. I see myself digging through trash for food and stealing when the hunger became too pronounced. No, I admit. I needed a running tap, and clean socks and underwear, and the knowledge of a bed and roof. My life may not afford me many creature comforts, but I wasn't ready to forsake what little I did have, even if it was dwindling to damn near nothing. I let out a deep sigh and a pathetic little chuckle as I tell myself this isn't cowardice.

“Nah, man. I can’t.”

“Suit yourself,” he says with another almost-shrug. “See ya around, man.” Then, with a flick of his Wildhorse and a running start he grabs hold of the train car and hoists himself up and into an empty gondola, and he’s gone.

After a few more clack-clacks, so is the train. I watch the caboose till it goes around the bend and fades away, and then back away from the tracks towards my chair. A third waiting forty is standing sentinel by the legs, iridescent in the late morning sun from the delectable bits of perspiration glacially descending its body. I sit and retrieve it and rest it on my knee. As my other hand grabs hold of the cap to twist, however, I hesitate. The initial devastation of the day is fading, and with the pacification reality is starting to set. I need work; All the rest would fall into place after. I feel the alcohol coursing through my veins, diluting and deregulating my being. Soon the medication will turn a hindrance, but there was time in the day yet, still. I wanted to stop at some kitchens to put out some feelers. Hell, with a little luck I could be starting somewhere later this week. I catch myself making a face not unlike the one I saw made a little while ago and I let out a single, snorted chuckle. With a “Fuck it” the Schlitz is cracked and I hear that soothing, familiar hiss.



Winter by Taylor Abajian, Photography

TO THINK OF TIME

by Isaac Rowlingson

Vague as the night
and form in scarlet folds
under the paling stars
under your boot soles
far beyond the difference
between what's ahead and behind
where there is no distance
oh, to think of time

I rode the limitless and lonesome prairie
and whirled in the hot air of noon
I crossed the ceaseless ferry
under the full moon tinged with blue

To think of time
In the twilight of gleams and glimpses
To think of time
Decked with the robes of princes
To think of time
Thou hast made me endless
To think of time

The farthest course comes nearest towards
this world's great festival
so I strum the chords that please the lord
with whom I loaf and lull
and ply my minstrelsy
within this court of thine
where I'll always have a corner seat
oh, to think of time

Rapid the trot to the cemetery
the earth is quickly shoveled in
What was expected of Heaven, or feared of Hell?
What becomes of now and then?

To think of time
We'll never lie by again
To think of time
We gather pebbles and scatter them

To think of time
Passed on the preludes within
To think of time

People come with their codes and laws
in hopes to bind me fast
but ever I evade them all
with the shadows that I cast
the casket is latched, the gate is passed
and another eye turns blind
I'd give myself up to love at last
oh, to think of time

If you've come looking for answers
for the questions that you've dreamed
I am no necromancer
and I have no exquisite scheme

To think of time
You and your soul enclose all things
To think of time
All truths wait in all things
To think of time
Stars stay aside in their own rings
To think of time

SOURCE MATERIAL

This poem is a collage which consists of many lines. Some of these lines originated in my head while others have been borrowed from various sources which I have listed below.

Literature: "Gitanjali" by Rabindranath Tagore and "Leaves of Grass" (1855 edition) by Walt Whitman.



Madam Butterfly by Melissa Reid, Oil Paint

LINES

by Scott Williamson

Twenty million people live in this city.

And the other day, I think I saw you.

Bathed in darkness. Lying on the couch. Smoke escapes my lips, dancing amidst the lights from the towers shining through the window.

You wouldn't approve. Luis and I always had to smoke our cigarettes when you weren't there. We both wanted you. But he just wanted to fuck you. I respected you. You were smarter than the both of us.

You could be a real self-righteous bitch about it. Tobacco was too far but weed was fine, huh? What about when Luis laced his with cocaine? You could see he was killing himself. Shit, you didn't even go to his funeral.

Smoke pounds my lungs. This is different. I'm not an addict like Luis was. My cravings don't control me. I will choose my death, and the smoke that I exhale adds exclamation.

Was that really you I saw late last Thursday? Did you flee when you saw me looking up at the suicide clinic? I wasn't planning to go in. It was just morbid curiosity. You can see them through the windows, people like you and me sitting, waiting patiently to die. A nurse comes out and takes them away past a dividing white line.

I never saw your face. It was that perfume you always used to wear and that gait you always used to affect. I could sense that it was you. I'm like an animal. I always wanted to touch you, and you never let me. Maybe that's what drove me to you and your scent.

I was slowed by the press of people but I chased you up the stairwell to the empty maglev chamber. You crossed the yawning threshold in the middle of the room, a second before me, and you were about to turn...

The maglev came, silent, and opened on the other side. When it left, you were gone.

I watched it go, mind numb. A strip of neon cut through the world as it left me. The light shined on the side of that maglev so that it could be easily seen in the dark. A line to follow across the city, above the gutters and through the past, decaying with ivy but scented like you.

Was that even you I saw?

I'm going to end up like Luis soon.

I want to see you one last time. Please.

I heard a street preacher once say we're all connected. Twenty million people live in this city, all following their own paths, but expanding from one source, growing like a tree, like the Web, like fiber-optics and ivy. Branches traced in neon and seething with old hurt.

Maybe you can see those lights outside too. And maybe, somewhere deep inside you, you can hear the past calling in a broken voice.

Can you hear me?

I-LOVE-YOUS

by Gil Somers

I wrote today,
on the backs of rocks,
and hid them in your garden

So as you're sun-kissed,
planting 'forget-me-nots',
you might find
'I-love-yous'
among them



Geisha V by Nathalie Ando, Graphite



