This book is dedicated to the memory of

Nicholas P. Berrena
1976-1996
The Mountain Laurels Staff would like to thank the many excellent authors and artists whose work is not represented here only because of space limitations. All works are published as they were submitted to the Mountain Laurels Staff. All spelling and punctuation has been retained. Our thanks to S.G.A. whose financial support made publication of this journal possible.
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Long ago, on a wet, dark, summer day, I was sitting inside when I heard the rain finally stop. Rain on a summer’s day was as near to suicide as a child of eleven years old can come. The whole springtime while you’re in class trying to pay attention to your sixth grade teacher, the sun is just scorching through those windows—like God wielding a giant, eight-foot magnifying glass against your classroom. But no, summer was here, with it raining off and on for a week and a half. To a mother’s point of view, that’s the equivalent of fizz in your can of root beer. The longer it is in there bouncing off the aluminum, the more explosively it is going to shoot out. Mom knew that when the rain stopped, I (the fizz from her root beer), was going to explode out of there. The decrease of the drizzle came while I was watching my third episode of “Bewitched” on the Bewitched series marathon on TBS. It was like hearing the final shot of a ten year civil war. I sprang from the couch as I heard the last of the staggering rainfire hit the house. I immediately tore into the garage where my brand new 1988 Murray mountain cruiser sat. I jumped on my machine as my mom created a barricade between me and the dark summer afternoon. “Nick, I really wouldn’t be riding outside today. The roads are still wet. You might wreck and hurt yourself. I think you should stay home today,” Mom stated in a firm voice.

I thought to myself, “This lady is nuts!”

No eleven year old can resist the opportunity of riding, full tilt, and slicing through freshly made puddles with your feet peddling as fast as they can. Then comes the moment when you make contact and splash the water as high as the speed boats do on ESPN. I surely was not going to resist this temptation. So I made my move by faking left and bolting right like an NFL running back juking the last player for the open touchdown. My Mom’s final threats went in one ear and out the other, and I took off . . . Touchdown!!!!!!

I immediately sped to the best puddles in the neighborhood which were to be found at Houserville school, where the old 1960 asphalt was as warped as
a roller coaster. It was the kind of road you begged your Dad to drive over really fast so you’d get that funny feeling in your stomach as the car takes a sudden drop. I approached the top of the hill, and there they puddled. When the dull sun would break the soot-like clouds, it made each of the puddles shimmer and shine like Lake Placid and the 1,000 lakes of the 1980’s Olympics.

I aimed to hit the three biggest puddles in one single run. Not only were the huge puddles in sight, but also two neighborhood girls against the shore line of the second lake were jumping rope. What a target!! That would be a great accomplishment for an eleven year old right off the couch from watching three hours of “Bewitched.” I backed up the mountain cruiser and took off down the side of the hill. I braced myself for the impact of the first puddle. The waves I made were so high that I felt like Moses parting the Red Sea. As I heard the crashing sound of water behind me, I locked my sights in for the height of the run. The girls turned their heads and saw me, but they knew it was too late. As in a German bombing raid on the defenseless streets of London at midnight, the girls had nowhere to go. I clenched my handle bars and ripped right through the puddle, showering the girls with cold, muddy rain water. The cries of the girls made me smile from ear to ear. I couldn’t wait to tell the neighborhood guys about the incredible raid on the girls. As I neared the last puddle, I could still hear in my head the guys singing praises in my name. I could hear them so vividly that I forgot to brace myself for the third and last puddle. My Murray hit the water, and I was launched from my bike. I slid across the pavement as if I were on a slip and slide, only I left a trail of my skin along the path, a good ten yards. I heard the girls’ cries of agony and disgust turn into laughter and joy. God had punished me for my evil ways, they proclaimed. I didn’t feel the pain at first. I only felt the humility of wiping out on my machine. I crawled around to the other side of the school, dragging my bike, still hearing their echoes of joy. I looked down at the damage to see that my legs were wet and red. Then I felt the burning of dirty water entering my cuts. I got up and limped home the long way so the girls could not degrade me any more than they did.

As I hobbled down the driveway, I saw my Mom at the door­way with a slight grin of pity and happiness on her face. As I came closer to the doorway, I shrieked as I was preparing to hear the words no child that knows everything wants to hear from a parent: “Nick, I told you that something like this was going to happen.”

Later that day, I sat on the couch watching the final episode of “Bewitched.” As my Mom poured the hydrogen peroxide on my legs (she might as well have stuck knives in them) and pulled the gravel out with tweezers, I realized that there really is wisdom in age.
Poetry 1st Place - Tie

Rick Church
we've been young

we've taken all the roads that lead
straight-way from these claustrophobic cliffs.

and we've eaten long sandwiches and
rolled up freedom till we were fat
and you laughed 'cause i was fatter.

i lick my lips every day or two,
and still can taste where yours
came close to mine.

yellow blankets soften our
bed of spiny grass; i'm not like
your muscled lover- i'm not like
his naked lust.

my arms hold your crumbling shoulders
quite like the way his do, but my
clothes are on and i love you like this twilight sunset.

leave me quick while my cheeks are
still parched paper on our final road
away: we can not go together.

keep hold of me in laughing dogs,
and dirty,(little) sexy talk.

but let go of Me and let go of my hand.
Rick Church
my mother's work

frail, elongated bone
loosely covered with stretching skin.

holding her hands now-
i sense the energy i helped drain from them.

These, used to

work her wheat bread, sweetened only by honey
swat her boys like flies with a wooden spoon
shear our heads with unskilled style
roll our visiting birds a pine-cone lunch of peanut butter with seed

can and freeze our winter meals from summer's garden
hem and let-out our tired second, third, fourth hand pants
tape and salvage our tree-torn kites

These, used to dry my eyes and quiet my angry sobs:
this done easiest of all.
She thought that she would make things good
and so she moved her meager dowry
to his quaint abode.
In her mind she fought fear,
suppressed herself
with rolled up sleeves,
as one by one illusions burst and fell
upon the bedroom floor.
And when the warmth in his touch was but a myth
and their gilded joy showed signs of steel,
cold and hard,
she sat there, thinking for too long
of pattern and pain
and soon she, too, could feel no more,
extcept the bite and flow
as she joined the pitted debris
of their deceit beneath her tears.
Rick Church  

where i'd rather be  

lucifer in the back yard on a cool summer night.  

beside the Trees and  
under the universe  

the wind pushing over the leaves,  
as cotton over skin  

hearing Their sighs—  
smooth with rigid bones  

lying on a blanket  
heavy, under the weight of crowded sleep  

-wishing i were in my own bed
Holly Powell
Yesterday's Warrior

Standing, shrouded
the mist contains
Encompassing fortitude
like the strong-hold
In the distance a child
that cries.
A lion's closing in,
hot breath on my neck
turn quickly-
nothing, silence,
Then those must be
the footprints that
my fear left behind.
Hushup-close the door.
Must not let the mist in.
Clouds the mind it does.
And then who will fight the lion?
The child of course.
And I shall claim the prize.
Holly Powell
Antiquity

The trees glimmer with the corresponding of the outside.
Silver light.
Sylvan life.
Is there as yet a difference in the multitude?
Creases in the wind that holds your hair back.
Come out of the trees now please,
It’s time for tea.
The rain’s been through so try not to splash mud on your fortitude.
We seem to have left our friends behind.
Poor things, can’t even hold the teacup.
Gave them quite a fright in the clearing.
Truly.
But the break is over, we must yet again ascend our antiquity.
Mourn not the passing as the light warms your face.
Hold tight the silver and fear only that others should have less.
Raymond Pawlik
The Parson of the Hills

Mr. Irving Richard Silas was a devil of a man bent on making us poor folk suffer took toys away from children for fun he tried to ruin Christmas many of times even tried to take our money once till Mr. Jesse (whose side we weren’t sure he was on) raised hell and demanded the money be given back those times were hard we were always short of money until about Christmas time I remember sitting on the porch with my brothers and sisters and momma when pa was looking for work in town we would lay around trying to catch what was left of the sun’s warm rays and momma would look up and smile one of those smiles that would make everyone around her want to smile the same way and then she would look down at whatever she was doing and say softly:

“Here comes the Parson of the Hills”

Robert S. Thompson
Everyday Tarzan

THE BRANCHES SPREAD AND SKYWARD REACHED
   EACH LIMB A LESSON LIFE WILL TEACH
AND ONCE TRAVERSED WE CAN'T GO BACK
   THE LIMB OF CHOICE IS THE LIFE WE TRACK
LIFE'S CONSEQUENCE IS EARLY SEWN
   BY BRANCH SELECTED LENGTH NOT KNOWN
DIRECTIONS END BY CHOICE IS TOLD
   TO CLOUDS WE CLIMB OR EARTHWARD ROLL?
NATURE TOO HER PART MUST PLAY
   AS BRANCHES THIN BRANCHES SWAY
IF LIFE'S NEW LESSONS WE WISH TO KNOW
   OR HOLD TO ONE AND VENTURE NOT
I'LL CHANCE THE FALL AS OPPOSED TO ROT
   FOR LIFE IS ABOUT THE LESSONS GAINED
FROM CHALLENGING THE WINDSWEPT SWAYS
   CLOSE TO TRUNK ON THICKNESS SAFE
THE BARK IS ROUGH THE VIEW ERASED
   BUT OUTWARD WHERE THE WIND DOES BLOW
LIFE IS LOVED BECAUSE LIFE IS KNOWN
Rick Church
playground noise

my people mourn the passing of the
casket-carcass
playing children, laugh;
make
mean Faces.

an orange sun, beats
down on us(me)
hard,
everything crisply clear.

black asphalt playgrounds-
biting pebbles
help us stay
on our feet; creates
the memory of(in) some-
dark recess.

the mourners have ceased mourning,
the criers are not crying.
They have picked up
speed
to run away.
to find a better home
-room.
Jacquelyn Mkhize
Holding On (Uthando)

Remember the first time we met
I looked up and met your eyes
My heart had already gone out to you
Before my mind told me, I knew you

My heart sang an old tune from within
You understood it, since your eyes
Showed me the overwhelming feelings
I had encompassed.

You know,
Your eyes first attracted me to you
They seemed to be seeing another me
And tearing down my protective shield

For the first time in my life
I felt emotionally fragile.
Araid of the feelings I felt,
I tried to avoid seeing you again.

Ngiyalukhumbula usuku engakubona kuqala
Ngaphakamisa ikhada, amehlo ethu ahlangana
Inhliziyo yami yakuthanda ngalesosikhathi
Umqondo wami wase ungithshela ukuthi
Ngake ngakubona.

Inhliziyo yami yacula umculo owawuwazi
Ngoba amehlo akho angikhombisa izinto
Ezazicshile ngaphakathi kwami.

Uyazi,
Ngachazwa amehlo akho kuqala
Abona zonke izinto engangizifihla
Ase edibhiza irhwu lami.
Breaking the Glass

Looking through the glass,
I can see her alone on the other side.
She looks all right,
But on the inside she’s screaming,
Desperate.
Everyone hears, but only I listen.
She wants in, but no one helps.

I, on the other side, stand alone in that
crowded place.
No one else cares.
I step forward and hit the glass with all my
might.
One small crack—the glass splinters.
Everyone runs afraid of being cut.
I get slashed, but I don’t cry.

I stand no longer alone in that crowded place—
bleeding, but proud.
Ryan Wagner

Meditation 5

A woman lives inside of me
And builds my inner dignity
Her hand astutely cultivates
The native portions of my heart
With arbors of meek tenderness.
With discipline she meditates
On grafting scions to my heart
Of newfound gentle faithfulness
That sprout rich blooms of chastity
Which ripen into modesty.

During times of solitude
I suffer not from loneliness,
Unless I stubbornly repress
My feminine-borne attitude.
Through self-sufficient fortitude
She makes my time alone unique,
For hidden wisdom then I seek,
For depth of thought needs solitude.

My inner-chest was once encased
Within a frozen block of faith
That deemed all virtue of absolute,
But n'er allowed my heart adore
A downtrod person deep in need.
With legalism resolute
I sought out sinners to abhor,
While of their pain I took no heed.

I sketched a floor-plan of my soul
As great concentric, concrete walls.
Entombed within it burned a glow
Sustained by dictates, norms, and rules.

My feminine insurgency
Demolished this hegonomy,
And ground the concrete into sand
To grow a new, organic man.
I sing not hymns from moral threat,
But psalms of joy from soul desires.
Through growth and change my needs are met.
By tolerance my soul respires.
For years I searched for inner-peace
Beseeking heaven’s Entity.
The Entity made it’s reply
By showing what I had inside.

Raymond Pawlik
Iowa

All his comrades had left him,
And as he walked along the long straight dirt roads
That would cut the plots,
He peered into the distance and saw only a solitary
Grandfather oak tree.
An island in a vast ocean.
Passing stuttering Odysseus saying
‘Five d-d-days as the c-c-crow flies, five d-d-days
As the c-c-crow flies’
Looking left and right he saw that it was endless.
The yellow-brown stalks and an orange moon
Made him want the water
This chill dusk, this chill eve...
He watched the sun set on a tossing,
Frothing September sea of corn.
Stephen Emert  
The State of the Union

Profundity? --gone, all gone--  
Extinct.

We sit, mindlessly, staring at images  
that dictate our imaginations,  
and making our obeisance to the sensation  
we conform.

Questions? --lost, all lost--  
Vanished.

We sit, sponge like, absorbing prescription  
that postulates emphatically and absolutely  
the exploded nothing,  
and making our obeisance to the sensation  
we conform.

Wisdom? --quiet, all quiet--  
Silenced.

We sit, aimlessly, projecting our autonomous  
hedonism at all and in all demanding this right  
by nature,  
and making our obeisance to the sensation  
we conform.

Perspective? --our own, all our own--  
Blinded.

We sit, indignantly, asserting our solitude  
as we callously row over the many waves made  
by the hopeless,  
and making our obeisance to the sensation  
we conform.
Karen Camp

Now

You will never be here again
The second is fleeting, the clock ticking
The clouds blowing away into a vast unknown heaven
Never again will the leaves contain the same rich pigments
Or the sun set so gracefully
Never again shall you set eyes upon the same raven perched
upon the dying pulp of the branch that once bore spring blooms
The branches shall never mimic quite the same pattern allowing the
sun
to crete such exquisite rays of its light
Never will the shadows fall the same or the scent of late day
linger quite so long
Stop and observe; for you have just made memory...
and are approaching the next.
Christi Dayton Queen
The Grave Digging

We saw them one day
As we passed by,
Two young men
Trying not to cry.

Heavy-laden in heart
As well as in hand.
With shovel-fulls of dirt,
They opened the land.

Machines would have
Made an easier way,
But by hand and shovel
They readied the clay.

It was their sweat and their
Tears which turned the dirt
Into their mother’s last
Resting place on earth.

When we asked them “why?”
All they could say
Was “How could it be done
Any other way?”
How do you handle the racial attitudes in the south; do you see people as having more of an open mind regarding race relations?

Well, I think you know, I was in France this past year and my wife and I were in Paris for a long time, but I always answer that question with a saying by the French, that the more things change the more things remain the same. I’ve seen changes; for example I’m here as a full professor and a writer in residence at the University of Southwest Louisiana. At the same time, we have people around here—for example I was watching a program last night with a Ku Klux Klansman on an open channel television show for an hour and a half, and he had this robe on and he talked to different people who called him and talked about racial things. He was putting down blacks and Jews and that sort of thing. He had quite a following. At the same time I am a writer in residence at the University of Southwest Louisiana, so you have changes, but at the same time you still have some of the same old problems that have been here since the ‘sixties.

How do you feel when you see people who have the ability to get up and spread their words of hate when so many people have done so much for peace?

I look at these people, and in a way (and I hope this isn’t being sarcastic), I’m glad this guy is doing this because this guy is showing how ignorant he really is and how people with those kind of ideas are. For example, he’s sitting there with his robe on and his pointed hat and he has hung the Confederate flag on either side of him. What I see is that he thinks he is speaking for a certain people, he’s speaking for the south and those people get to know that this kind of despicable human being is using their flag. And if they see that, some intelligent person, an intelligent southerner who stands up for his flag will be more ashamed of this guy than I could ever possibly be. You know I think he’s an evil and despicable person, but at the same time, it shows that there are so many southerners who still protect the Confederate flag. They tolerate it. I mean, I don’t know why they tolerate it. I think they do it because he’s such a fool that they just let him do it. So when I see him doing that, I
have mixed feelings about it. I'm glad he's showing what an ignorant person he is, but at the same time I'm very upset about the whole thing.

How do you feel about the controversy over the Confederate flag issue?

I agree with most of my black colleagues that it represents a certain people who are against my freedom. Of course, I am opposed to it. I think we have one fifty-star flag and then we have state flags. I don't think the other flag is absolutely necessary, and those who defend it are not necessarily defending something that I can be proud of.

How are you received overseas? Do people have a preset conception of a black writer in America?

I met students in France and Germany who were doing their Master's thesis based on my work. My books have been translated into many foreign languages. The books are being read and discussed. I don't think I have the same sort of reception in this country, especially in the southern part of the country. The books are received along with American literature. I was teaching at the University of Rennes under the auspices of the William Faulkner Foundation where they taught southern literature and mine was included regardless of race as one of the writers who should be included in the teaching of southern literature. My books are received and discussed in Europe as well as the United States.

How do you feel when you see students doing their Master's Thesis on your work?

Well, I've gone through this for quite a few years, and it doesn't excite me. It's great to see, it's great to know that you're living in a time when people are taking your work seriously, because so often you have to die before you're taken seriously.

Have you ever written purely from your own voice?
You can’t write entirely out of a vacuum. Every writer uses some of his own experiences, whether its direct experience or vicarious experience. For example, in the short story iThe Sky Is Grey, I had two figures—a child, a kid who has been taken to a small town. It’s not about me, but I’ve had this kind of experience before. In the Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, the young guy, the civil rights worker who was murdered—in his earlier age he used to write letters for the old people and read the comic strip for them and all that sort of thing—I did the same sort of thing. I used to write letters for the old people and read the papers and read their letters when they receive mail, but of course, I wasn’t killed during the civil rights movement. What I’m saying is that you draw from some of your experiences. Every writer is a creator, but he does draw from some experience as well.

Is there anything you’d like to say to the black youth of today?

I was at Stanford University in the late ‘fifties, and my professor asked me, “Ernie, who do you write for?” and I said, “Well, Mr. Stanley, I don’t write for any particular group of people.” He said, “But what if a gun were held to your head?” I said, “Well, I think I would say that I write for the black youth of the south and that I want him to realize that his life is important and he must do everything to get the best out of his life. But I hope that he gets out of my books that no matter how lowly his or his family position was or is, he is important, just as they are important. I’ve always tried to show this in my work. (My professor) said, “Suppose that gun was still at your head. Who then would you say you wrote for?” I said, “I would write for the white youth of the south, because no matter what he thinks he knows, no matter who he thinks he is, unless he knows his neighbor of three-hundred years, he knows only half of his own history.” This is what I’d say to black students as well as white students.
Mary Hood, author of short stories and novels, received the prestigious Flannery O'Connor Award. Her published works include *How Far She Went* and *Familiar Heat*. “Small Change” is an excerpt from her current novel in progress.

**SMALL CHANGE**

“Two to a booth,” she told him, inviting herself in, sliding onto the bench across from him. She’d had a look around, had matched his hat with the logo on the truck in the parking lot, its generator running to keep the cooler in business. Tift County Plate; that would get her through the worst of it, the swamp part anyway. It would be there, not here, that was the main thing. It was time for a change.

He was facing sundown; she had her back to the wall. The sign was just above her: Please reserve booths for 2 or more persons.

He had to have seen it when he came in, if he could read. She pictured him pointing to stuff on the menu. He could read; he had a newspaper folded up by his platter. She watched his lips work through the notice on the wall. He was the sort to suit himself, she decided. Plus he would look silly sitting on one of the counter stools, big guy like that.

“Rush hour’s over,” he said, when he got good and ready.

“I’m in no hurry either,” she told him. She set her cup down on a folded paper napkin.

He went on eating. Everything but the grits; they came with the eggs. He had a separate platter of “scattered, covered, smothered” hash browns. He had a lot of separate platters. Plus a salad bowl, pie plate and extra toast. Only the grits survived. Their drying skin was so impenetrable and tough the melted margarine sat pooled until it too congealed again. The grits were lumpy and gray.

“They make ‘em with that wonky tap water,” she told him. Maybe he didn’t know. She liked hers white as snow, with a little well of red-eye and maybe sawmill.

“Taste like cabbage,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said, looking at the one stray swath his fork had plowed, trying them. Whe wanted to look away, but she couldn’t.

He was about through. Picked up the last triangle of raisin toast and folded it over, mailed it into his mouth. Laid his great shining hairless pink-palmed paw on his spoon and shot it across the table.
to her with his thumb. He gave the platter a shove. "My guest," he said.

She almost took him up on it, but something--some last little flare of goddamn--surged. Wasn’t she buying her own? (Three free refills so far on one slow-nursed cup of coffee, after some crackers and soup an hour earlier.) She still had some change left. And some pride.

She didn’t look at him as she asked. She caught a glimpse of her own dark eye in the bottom of her cup: "Heading west?"

He considered it, and her.

“So does Greyhound," he said.

That was that.

He leaned back, glowering, his brown belly--no undershirt--pushing the strained khaki right against the table edge, a massive thick, shining, stuffed man. If he stood, he’d lift the whole table with him, scattering the chop bones, Texas Pete bottle, salt and peppers, napkin dispenser, menus, stained stainless and the armageddon-proof plates and cup--slinging it all around like water off a shaking dog.

She studied him. He was saltwater catfish ugly. Poison. And not just his looks. She voted him out already because he was mean. She had an instinct. She’d had to try him, though, because he was the only one in there besides the cook who wasn’t white, but she wasn’t about to ride off into the sunset through the swamps and pine with any stranger sporting a born-in attitude, soul brouther or honky bubba either one.

Before she could get up he was clawing a wad of bills from his pocket and peeling off a fifty. He laid it on the check and silenced the waitress mid-syllable on a comment about the weather. "Big ‘un’s all I got. You handle it?” He wasn’t looking at the waitress. He had to lie back in the booth to get that roll in his pocket.

Just the way he’d said it. She swung up out of the booth and started away.

He caught her by the sleeve, gave the muscle in her upper arm a little feel. She jerked herself free. Turned and set up, fists ready.

"You he-male or fe-male, Adams?"

For a moment she had forgotten about the stolen shirt, a man’s shirt, a work shirt with the name Adams embroidered over the pocket. That? And her shaved head, the voice which had never sung soprano in
in her life. All day, then, had folks been thinking she was this guy named Adams? She lifted her hat and rubbed her hand over her forehead, across her shaved skull, and set the cap on, backwards. "Can you stand not knowing?" That was her farewell.

She stepped to the register, paid her own way out, then handed in her pennies, plus one from the change bowl, and asked to have a quarter for Ma Bell. When she got outside, she slipped the coin down into her shoe. She went round to the phones and from behind the hollies, retrieved her grocery bag with the little stuff she was carrying—a rinsed-out and public fountain-filled plastic soda bottle of water, a few saltines from supper, a black plastic garbage liner in case it rained. What else did she need? She’d come about nine miles already, hiking and hitching. She’d hung around the Waffle House at the Interchange for more than an hour hoping to cadge a ride, but every black trucker had been heading north or south, not overland, inland, west. Some had offered her money to get hom on, kindly, not like a whore. Some offered advice. She took nothing. She had her mind made up, and once it was, why mess with it? She’d never been much of one for plan B, C, or D.

The day was still warm, but night was nearly come. She could see a star. From around front the man’s voice found her, bouncing off the bricks. "I’m parked out back, Adams." He whistled like he was calling a dog.

Maybe that was what he thought would happen, that she’d just slope on around to his refrigerated truck idling by the sour dumpsters in a puddle of its own condensation. Instead, she hid, crouched down behind the shrubs and guardrail near the edge of the parking lot, glad the shirt was gray, her hand over her patched eye to camouflage the white gauze and tape. She was still as death. She breathed out, then didn’t breathe in. For a brief moment, she let it all go; folded up like something inside a seed, she was blank, nothing more than what might be, as long as it took. Waiting, she vanished completely, the first time it had ever happened to her without alcohol. He circled the lot; then the truck struggled into the road and went on. West, but she didn’t care. She heard him go, waited till he must’ve been miles beyond her, then she stood and stretched, sat on the guardrail and let her mind turn on again.

First thing she did was find a bit of broken glass. She moved into the streetlight and worked upside down, shipping away at the name patch on her shirt. She was rough and half-blind. She managed to cut the shirt fabric. She hated that. She left off, did some thinking. New
focus: working more patiently now, she began abrading the monogram itself. In the dim light, the threads looked black. She sawed down the middle of each leg and loop of the s and the m. Then she pick-pick-picked, finger-tweezing the cut loops, like little eyelashes, right down to clean cloth. When she had done, the monogram read Ada. And from then on, that was her name. What did it matter what anyone called her? She'd never again forget who she was.
Art - First Place

Steve Burgess
Osprey
Art - 2nd Place

Erin Peterson
Untitled
Brooke Richards
Scotsman
Karen Camp
Untitled
Daniel Leuthner
Stonehenge
Debbie Martin
Untitled
Sally Watkins
Untitled
Erin Peterson
Untitled
Justin Shelton
Untitled
Jamey M. Moore
Lucky Strike
Darrell Brewer
Rough Water
Daniel Leuthner
Cathedral
Leslie Stone
Roman Baths, Bath, England
Sally Watkins
Untitled
Daniel Leuthner
Untitled
Alex Holland was my best friend since the sixth grade. We'd hated each other since kindergarten, when "my girl" went to play with him in the sandbox instead of with me on the swings.

In the spring, junior high hormones seem to triple in number. I don't remember just what happened--maybe he jostled me in the hall or something--but my six years of smoldering suddenly burst into flat-out flame, and I shoved him into the lockers. With all the bravado a twelve-year-old can muster, I got right in his face and said, "You and me, Holland. At Chucklin' Creek. Three-thirty."

Alex was bigger than me by a couple of inches and several pounds, and older than me by about six months. He just laughed, and his surrounding buddies guffawed and punched each other's arms. "Just bring you band-aids, Frady--make'em the Mickey Mouse kind." Alex's friends laughed even harder.

Word go out that Joshua and Frady, a.k.a. Frady-Cat (I hated my last name—it just made it too easy for kids to make fun of my nervous nature), had challenged Alex Holland to a fight. The turn-out at Chucklin' Creek would've made our study hall teacher green with envy.

To make a long story short, I went straight to it. No waiting around—as soon as I saw Alex, I plowed into him as hard as I could. We both ended up in the creek.

I couldn't help it. He just looked so surprised, sitting in that creek with his legs stuck up in the air, sputtering and trying to hang on to both his baseball cap and his dignity. I just started giggling. I guess I must've looked as silly as he did, because he took one look at me and started giggling as well. We started splashing each other and laughing uproariously. All the kids walked away shaking their heads disgustedly, and from that day on Alex Holland and Josh Frady were best friends.

Now, from the beginning, Alex was always one-up on me. He played football and baseball, and once we got to high school, he
wrestled. The only sport I ever did in school was diving, my skinny legs sticking out from my swimming trunks. It’s not that I was a bookworm—my grades were the same as the other boys, and I like moving and riding bikes and climbing trees just like any other kid. It’s just that I had asthma really bad, and most every sport got me to wheezing and choking. I got pretty good at diving, but it didn’t do much for my lily-white stomach and bony chest.

Alex, naturally, was the better-looking of the two of us. Blond hair falling into blue eyes; a dimpled, lop-sided grin that charmed parents, teachers, and classmates alike; tanned, athletic body. Not that I ever look at him or anything, but I couldn’t miss the way girls giggled and nudged each other when he walked by. Alex never did have a problem getting dates in high school—or any other time, for that matter. You’ll remember him “stealing” the girl I “loved” in kindergarten. Heartbreak in the sandbox. It was like that all through school, although more subtle. Girls sighed and mooned over Alex—they smiled patronizingly at “big brother Josh.”

In retrospect, Alex was more dominant in just about everything concerning the two of us. We went where he wanted to go, did what he wanted to do, hung out with who he wanted to hang out with. I wish, just once, I’d put my foot down that day.

Or maybe my arm.

It was yet another spring day, and it seems that a high school boy’s hormones can run just as rampant as a junior high-schooler’s. Alex and I were looking for mischief, same as always. Alex wanted to hang out with a few senior boys who supposedly knew some girls to “score” with. Being only in the tenth grade, Alex and I felt pretty cool as we rode out of the high school parking lot in Jake Anderson’s Mustang. We rode around town for a while with Jake and two other seniors, Doug Saylor and Paul Ardis, and then we dropped Doug off at his house.

Jake, Paul, Alex, and I ended up at Humphrey’s Junkyard right outside of town. The topic of conversation drifted, and suddenly we were talking about drugs. Who was using, selling, that sort of thing. It made me uncomfortable (see Cat, Frady), but I hung in there, pretending it tending it was cool.

Talking about drugs led to talking about gangs. Our town was still fairly small, so it’s not like crack and the Crips were rampant, but we had our share of pot-smokers and small-time gang members. What town doesn’t these days? Naturally, the talk turned to guns.

Ah ha! Here was something I was knowledgeable about. In my opinion, my father was the foremost gun expert of the world. He
collected them, and he could talk about them all day to anyone who would listen. He never let me near his guns, but that day I had to make myself look big.

Finally, I was better than Alex at something. "Did'ja dad ever let you shoot one?" Paul asked me. I basked in their interest. "Oh, sure," I falsely bragged. "Pop lets me shoot at the ranges all the time."

A twelve-year-old's bravado still. Damn my pride.

Paul and Jake looked at each other, and then Jake reached into his glove compartment. He came out with a hand gun. Alex let out a low whistle, and I tried to look suitably impressed, even though my stomach was slowly sinking.

"What kind is it?" Alex asked eagerly.

"A Smith and Wesson .38," Jake replied, caressing the barrel.

"Oh, man," Alex breathed. "Can I hold it?"

Jake grinned. "I'll let you do more than that." He took a bullet from a box, loaded the gun, and spun the chamber. "The game, boys, is Russian Roulette. I'm sure you've heard of it." He leveled the gun at Paul's head and jerked the trigger.

CLICK!

Paul took the gun, and suddenly I found myself staring down the barrel of the gun.

Cold sweat trickled down my back. My stomach pitched and roiled. I trembled uncontrollably.

Paul pulled the trigger.

CLICK!

My body twitched convulsively at the sound. Jake and Paul doubled over with laughter, finding my fear hilarious, I guess.

While they were rolling around on the ground, Alex leaned over to me.

"There's no bullet in the gun," he whispered. I blinked at him. "Really," he said. "Jake just pretended to load it. I saw him pocket the bullet. They're just trying to scare us—and it worked on you!" And then Alex, too, started laughing at me.

It was my turn next. I expected the handle to be cool, but
Jake and Paul's palms had warmed it slightly. I couldn't believe Alex was laughing at me. I asked for another bullet.

They looked at me strangely but gave me one. I loaded and spun the chamber like Jake had.

Alex had stopped laughing.

He was so much better than me, not just in looks and personality, but in attitude, too. He just knew he was my superior.

I raised the gun to his head, holding the gun sideways like I'd seen in gangsta movies and videos. My hand shook slightly.

He had laughed at me. All I really wanted to do was scare him. Besides, what are the chances of a gun firing on the first try when there were five empty chambers? Must be a million to one.

In slow motion, I squeezed the trigger.

There was no click.
Jake and Paul’s palms had warmed it slightly. I couldn’t believe Alex was laughing at me. I asked for another bullet.

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In slow motion, I squeezed the trigger.

There was no click.
Once, there was a Beauty who loved a Beast.

Through long wispy clouds, the moon shone full upon the land to alight all it touched with an icy blue glow. Like a ghost she rode gracefully down the twisting path of the wooded glen. Her mount stopped as the lone, solitary wolf’s cry echoed from the distant heights. With a gentle nudge of her heel, the horse marched onward into the long shadows of the trees. When to the field’s edge they came, she dismounted and walked, gazing longingly at the haunting castle and the small, lonely figure on its balcony. From her memory she clutched the lines of a Browning sonnet and spoke the words of the Portuguese softly aloud to the comfort of her unnerved steed.

“How do I love thee,” the beast growled low as a tear fell from his eye. He watched silently as the angel drifted deeper into the field of fragrant heather, and groaned for what could never be. Never.

Absently his claw dug into the wooden rail until he realized and retracted the sharp nail of his finger, leaving only an elegantly carved “B”. “I must drive her away once more,” he thought, “lest I yield to my weakness.” With sudden fury and feral grace, he leapt from the balcony. Wings flew out grasping the night air bestowing the soaring ability of a great bird of prey.

Down he plunged, fangs bared and claws extended with a lion’s roar coupled with the agony of the banshee’s wail bellowing forth, toward the maiden in the midst of the blossoms. The horse shifted and tugged frantically against its reins at the sight of the demon flyer before breaking from the beauty’s grasp and stampeding into the wood. She took little heed of her fleeing mount, but focused with statue resoluteness at the charging figure. Closer still he plummeted till, she thought, she could see the glimmer of moonlight in his grey eyes below his curled horns. At the last moment, he pulled away scarcely touching fur to fabric when he passed.

Landing at a safe distance beyond her reach he yelled baring claws and fangs in his most intimidating manner, “Why have you returned?”

“I think my reason is plain,” Beauty answered with firm calmness and held her position.

“And it is equally plain that I do not wish you here!” the beast snarled savagely, as he circled her like a jungle cat.

“Rage all you wish, I will not leave again,” she said, making
her intentions clear.

He stopped, impressed by her resoluteness. "Can I no longer
strike fear in you?" he asked in the depth of his normal voice.

"As a scholar, you know that perfect love drives out fear."

"Is that how you feel then?" he questioned.

"Yes, and how you feel, as well."

"Then you lie for I do not love you." His heavy head swung
away with his denial.

"Lying shames you, sir."

"I speak the truth."

"Then please do me the honor of facing me as you speak."

The beast turned, but avoided the depths of her eyes. "I--I do
not love you...not perfectly."

"Say imperfectly then, and my spirit will soar!"

A silent reply.

Why are you pushing me away?" she pleaded, probing for the
answers she knew he must be hiding. "What are you afraid of?"

Neck hair bristled and ears laid back in response. He feared
nothing. But as he glared at her and saw the painful need for truth in
her eyes, he knew better. "Myself," he said truthfully. "Even among
the beasts of the earth, I am an outcast. I will not condemn you as I
have been."

"The curse?" she asked, perplexed.

"Yes, my curse. It is too late for me. The time of my deliver-
ance passed when I first released you. Now I must forever remain a
beast." His head sagged in resignation.

"Man or beast, I'd spend my life with you," she assured him in
a gentle tone and reflected. "That which I have seen in men's hearts
has not impressed me. Vain, greedy, envious, conceited. Suitors have
sought my hand--handsome fellows who looked upon me with lecher-
ous eyes seeking another jewel to wear. None so kind or gentle as
you."

"Was I any different," he added, "before you drove those ills
from me? You were my rose. A replacement for the one your father
stole from my garden. My prisoner."

"You let me go to visit my family," she pointed out, "and I
returned freely."

You are not an object to be owned or a flower to be plucked. It would have been selfish to keep you here while your father was in need."

"Yet, I returned freely and found you near death." She stepped closer, resisting the urge to run and embrace him. No, she thought, I mustn't force myself on him, but rather wait patiently for him to accept me as I have accepted him.

"Better dead than to live like this without you," he said, staring down at his open hands. His sharp claws extended, then retracted again. "The last hope for being a man again passed in your absence. My curse continues."

"All because of an act of kindness on your part," she added softly, reaching out to console him, but he pulled away. "Surely that must count for something?"

"Apparently not," he sighed. "Now will you leave?"

"Curse or no, my feelings are unchanged."

"You put yourself at risk by staying, my lady."

"I accept that risk. Loneliness has been your sole companion all these years, will you now accept my hand and the happiness it brings?" Her hand hovered out before her in patient anticipation, open and inviting.

The beast looked sidelong at the luminescent figure, lovely and fearless. Moonlight had set her aglow like an ethereal being, highlighting the delicate features and gentle curves of her face where strays from long, black tresses lingered. Brighter still, the beast thought, shined her inner light. Aching, he moaned. The hand remained firmly outstretched, a set point in space and time awaiting convergence. Slowly he moved, taking her hand in his softly. His wings expanded and enfolded her as did his great arms in a warm embrace. Her scent, mingled with fragrant heather, filled his nostrils.

"From this night forth shall we be one?"

"Yes," she said with tears streaming down her cheeks from her hazel eyes, "forever."

The flesh that was twain became one as each embraced the other, taking unto themselves their missing half. Then, for the first time, lips touched lips in gentle caress, a single kiss to seal their union--to bind their hearts. All the light of the heavens focused solely on them--encircling and penetrating--for a brief moment then faded to normal. Where Beauty and Beast had stood in a sea of heather, there now remained two beasts clinging one to the other.

"What happened?" the she-beast asked, startled by the slight
coarseness in her voice.

Beast looked upon her. His eyes widened suddenly. In that instant, she became aware of herself, and seeing her newly-formed clawed hands, cried out in shock. The animal's roar that bellowed from her came as an even greater shock, and she jerked away from her beloved's grasp, falling awkwardly upon her leathery wings to the ground.

"What has become of me?" she snarled, then sobbed where she lay. "No, stay back!"

He halted as she requested and waited. "As I fear, the curse has claimed you," he growled sorrowfully. "I am sorry."

"You... couldn't have known. I made the decision."

"A regrettable one, no doubt? I will understand should you wish to leave." His eyes focused away from her toward the stars.

"Perhaps the curse will reverse if you go."

There was a long silence.

"I do not wish to leave," she said softly.

He whirled to meet the familiar strength of her gaze. "Even now, you would stay here with me?"

"Yes," she answered simply.

He smiled broadly. "Before, I did not understand what you saw in this form of mine, but now in you, I see the beauty within the beast." He extended his great hand to her which she took with an equally warm smile. "Come, my love, let us retire to our home. There I will teach you all you need know about being a beast."

Arm in arm, they strolled through the sea of blossoms, angling finally toward the enchanting castle atop the hill where they lived the fullness of their lives contentedly together.
The Choice
by Russell L. Godfrey

Here on this barren plain he stood, desolate and alone. The only illumination, though dim, came from distant lights above, which he perceived to be stars, but they seemed different somehow, and they gave no comfort. They only added to his despair.

He look all around, straining to see anything but saw nothing. To his left, the horizon appeared brighter, at least faintly, he thought. Perhaps the sun rising, more likely a small town, or just his imagination. Whatever it was, he started walking in that direction.

* * *

He remembered racing down the road in his red Porsche, 110 mph in a 55 mph zone. The roar of the engine sang clear in his ears; his was the only car on the road. The slight tug of the steering wheel as he took the curves, the sound of rubber against pavement; it handled beautifully. Wind whipped over the Porsche's sleek body and through his black hair. Trees raced by on either side of the road.

There were no trees here!
What happened? His headlights cut through the night.
The lights; they were blinding!
Yes, the lights, the truck's lights blinked him when he flew around the curve, and he jerked the wheel. Then, he . . . he crashed.

* * *

He stopped walking. Why hadn't he remembered the crash? Beyond a slight buzzing in his head, he felt uninjured. Delirium, he thought, or amnesia. It was unlikely that he knew his own identity or recalled any event in his miserable life, with exceptional clarity.

Vividly and without effort, though, he remembered his fifth birthday and his parent's gift of the candy-appel red bicycle, and how they spent hours teaching him to ride it. It was so happy back then; they all were. Until that day, that tragic day three years later when his mother died in a car accident. During her funeral, his cries grew shrill and sharp above the soft sobs of the adult mourners, growing increasingly violent, until someone finally dragged him out into the hall away from his dead mother and away from his father who sat silently, expressionless. Maybe, he thought, his fear and loathing of death began there.

His father remained distraught, and he had no one to share his grief with: no brothers or sisters who knew his pain. Even weeks after the funeral, his father lingered in misery. Day after day he would come home from work, fall into his chair, and stare absently at the wall or television. "And there he sat," he said to himself. "An unmoving,
uncaring statue. Too caught up in his own pain to see mine." He remembered the times climbing into his father's lap seeking a comforting embrace.

"Please son... not now," was the only response as he lowered him to the floor. Even now the words echoed in his ears.

Not now.
But, when?
"When? He never made time for me. Never," he thought back. "Not when I needed it, at least. And when he finally reached out, all I could say was, 'Not now day... not now.'"

His relationship with his father remained strained, to say the least, from that day forward. He resented his mother dying, and his father living. Seventeen years later, his father died of a sudden heart attack; then, he realized that the years of resentment directed toward his father was the anger that he felt toward himself, and with his father's death he hated himself even more. He didn't attend the funeral.

* * *

He recalled running off the road and tumbling down the hillside, a borage of pine trees and shrubs rolling past. But the trees, the car, the road, and the idiot who ran him off the road, where were they? Nowhere to be seen.

The ground, hard and sandy beneath his feet, stayed unchanged for the past hour he had walked. It seemed like a desert, but he knew over fifteen hundred miles separated the closest desert from him.

He looked toward the sky. No constellations or stars he recognized. Nothing to guide him or indicate his location. Nothing that should have been there. Then to his surprise, the stars began to move, swirling and dancing through the blackness.

"What's going on here?" he whispered to himself.

"Nothing," a voice echoed, "and everything."

* * *

Here on this barren plain, mortal fell before immortal. Mortal was small and paralyzed with fear; immortal was all and awaited mor-
tal's response.

"Be at ease, Jack Holden. No harm shall come to thee," the voice resonated with power, and the dark sky shone as with pulses of heat lightning at every word. "Arise, and have no fear."

Jack rose to his feet and dusted himself off. His hands shook terribly, and his legs felt like jellow, but he managed to stand. The voice, despite its booming, possessed an overall gentle tone about it which in itself served to calm Jack and enable him to regain some semblance of composure.

"Wh... wh... who," he stopped, cleared his throat, and took a very deep breath. "Wh... who are you?"

"I am all that is, was, or ever shall be. I am the seed of life and its blossoming flower. I am the beginning and ending. I am."

A pause followed. "You mean you're..."

"I am who you perceive me to be..."

His eyes grew wide, "Am... am I dead?"

"That is what you are here to decide."

"Me!" Jack gasped. "But, I don't understand."

"You are on the edge of life and the verge of death. The accident brought you here, and now you must choose which path you will take: life or death."

He remembered the accident completely now, the car tumbling end over end down the hill before slamming to a sudden stop against the twisted oak tree, followed by piercing pain and blackness. The memory formed in his mind as clear as a movie filmed in 70mm and projected onto the big screen in every detail.

"But do not linger in this place too long," the voice warned, "lest your body weaken and the choice be taken from you."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, you will perish, and your fate will be sealed."

Jack considered the statement for a moment. He didn't know how much time he had, but he felt a certain urgency to decide soon. But how to know, he thought.

He knew the pain and misery of his own life and didn't want to continue with it, the aggravation of day-to-day life and dealing with people. People, he thought, more like animals, killing and beating each other like dogs. Stupid, shallow, phony people. He could do without all of it. But what kind of choice was death?

"Tell me... what lies beyond this place? I mean, what happens to you when you," he paused, unable to say the word, to say "die."

"What happens after life?"

"First there is only sleep," the voice answered.
“And then?” he asked already feeling his strength fade. “Joy and pain. Peace and suffering. Eternity and oblivion.”

A chill ran through his body. “Do I choose this as well?” he asked, his hands shaking.

“Each person’s life decides their reward. The waulity of each life is reflected in their mindscape,” the response came simply.

“What is this mindscape?” he asked, growing nervous. He felt light headed and weaker.

“Behold, Jack Holden. You stand in your own mindscape. Its soil is the substance of your life. Study it and choose, quickly.”

Jack fell to the ground and wept. As much as he wanted to deny it, he couldn’t. “It’s true,” he cried. Where a garden should be, only waste and desolation existed. Cold and barren: a frightening reflection of his own life. Surely if anything ever lived here, he killed it long ago. How often had he directed his anger towards his father and distanced himself from those who loved him or tried to be his friend, and now he could feel himself weakening further and his chance passing.

“I’ve decided,” he answered, his voice trembling.

“Which have you chosen?”

“Life!” he gasped, a sharp pain cutting through his chest. “I choose life.”

“Well, then,” the voice of immortal echoed, “You must also accept death.”
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