

BACKBONE
MOUNTAIN
REVIEW

~ 2014 ~

BACKBONE MOUNTAIN REVIEW

2014

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INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the trustees and staff of the Allegany County Library System I want to say how honored we are to serve as a sponsor of the 2014 *Backbone Mountain Review*. We are excited again to join the Frostburg Center for Creative Writing and the Allegany Arts Council in sponsoring this annual literary publication.

The *Backbone Mountain Review* celebrates the writers of our region and encourages works from all ages and walks of life. The works in this year's *Backbone Mountain Review* serve as remarkable examples of the rich cultural and artistic heritage of our area.

I want to thank my colleagues at the Frostburg Center for Creative Writing, the Allegany Arts Council, and especially our editor Jennifer Merrifield, as they worked diligently to put this edition of the *Backbone Mountain Review* together. I am always impressed by the work and dedication of our poetry and prose reviewers who do the critical work of selecting the poems, stories, essays, and plays. I commend and applaud them all for the quality of this 2014 issue.

This issue does a remarkable job of showcasing the literary talent of our vibrant arts scene and I hope you enjoy the writing and photography in this year's *Backbone Mountain Review*.

Thank You,

John Taube

Director, Allegany County Library System

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MOON OVER MOUNTAINDALE 1

ICE-WALKING

Close, yet not touching,
I wear your shadow on my shoulder
and step lightly as we cross this wilting ice.

We avoid puddles swollen with spring's warmth,
steer clear of cracks, dark spots, and
places you know cannot be trusted.

I long to come nearer and grasp your fingers,
to hold tightly to your years of ice-walking,

yet I wonder—
would we reach home;

would this ice hold
with the weight
of two?

WAX

I recall a collection of vinyl, the music
a riddle from a distant universe,
and saying *I want to know how to do that*.
Cradling my guitar by the turntable,
which grew warm with a few hours' use,
I watched the labels spin
their magic.

While other kids played with Barbie dolls
and made brownies in their Easy Bake ovens,
I was changing from A to D to E.
Chords unfamiliar and strange
spoke of hotels in California,
stairways to Heaven, and
dreamboats named Annie

until I was telling stories of my own—
oceans and highways, diamonds and dust,
in a language imparted by strangers
pulled from the inner sleeves of jackets.

LA MUSICA DULCE

heartbeats are psycho-
somatic, dear;
the ocean has swallowed
me whole.

*hay una guitarra bajo
mi almohada, y
sueño de música cuando
estoy solo.*

you came here with
city smoke in your lungs,
and i
forgot to breathe.

THE GUEST

Cancer arrives like an uninvited guest
Stays on, never changing the sheets.
Uses my toothbrush
Leaving a trail of disorder.

Awakened by unwelcome dreams,
Earlier, and earlier
In the dark morning,
I try to keep order.

Always just out of sight,
Like an intrusive editor
Rewriting the familiar language of my body.
It makes a thousand small revisions
To the plot I once knew.

First the dog noticed, then my wife.
I had taken on the scent of a stranger.
I didn't at first realize
Cancer was wearing my clothes.

There is a stain inside me
Which only the dog's nose
Made visible.

Somewhere nests of anarchists,
Cells hidden
From the rule of law
Are waiting their moment.
Where soap and water
Cannot touch them.

Still, it is spring, and the earth smells as it always has
After new rain.

FORGET ME NOT

When he arrived at the hospital, she was alone in the pre-op waiting room, dwarfed by the medical equipment that surrounded her bed. Her face was drawn tight with a frightened expression that she struggled to keep hidden.

The bitch of Bowery Lane, who had once boasted she could face down any CEO alive, had been confronted by something she couldn't bull her way through or over. She had sounded so alone when he'd spoken with her on the phone that morning.

"They want to operate" she had said, and he had been struck speechless, not by the news itself, but by the tremble in her voice that allowed him a brief glimpse of her vulnerability.

"Cancer," she had answered to his silent reply; her voice had sounded lost as he waited at the traffic light.

"What's the prognosis?" he'd asked. They had both seen enough medical dramas on TV to understand the weight of his question. The pause before her reply said more than any carefully worded medical report could ever convey.

"They won't know for sure until they're in there," she said.

They always said won't know for sure until we're in there. In where? He wondered.

"When?" He'd asked instead.

"An hour" was her reply.

It was like her to wait until the last minute to let him know what was happening. Her excuse, of course, being that she didn't want to bother him with the mundane details of her daily life. But this wasn't a mundane detail one would normally overlook in a conversation. This was serious business. If the doctors felt they had to go in before they could offer odds on her chances of survival, it was serious indeed.

There was no time to exchange anything beyond brief hellos before a cadre of nurses arrived to take her to the operating room. With silent efficiency they disconnected her from the machines gathered around her bed, and wheeled her toward the door. As she passed she reached out and touched his arm, their eyes met, and the years of mistrust, the months of anger and discontent dissolved into the realization that he was still very much in love with his soon-to-be ex-wife.

The sheaf of papers in the breast pocket of his suit jacket became very heavy. It was the divorce agreement from his lawyer. He had been after her for a month now to sign them. This morning when he got up he had decided it was time to bring it to a head, his intention being to confront her first thing this morning. Only he had never made it; her phone call had come just as he was turning down the street her office was on.

He took her hand into his own, so small and frail, and gave it what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze. Then she was gone, whisked down the corridor as the ghostly reflection of her bed, mirrored in the polished floor, followed at a respectable distance.

"Watch the screen," the nurse had explained as she handed him a small slip of paper that contained all of Cloe's information. "The progress of her operation will be updated every five minutes. When she enters recovery come see me and I'll take you back to her."

Surrounded by total strangers, he had never felt so alone in his entire life. Sure their marriage was on the rocks. They hadn't spoken a civil word to one another in over six months. A divorce was one thing but this was different. There was a finality to it that exceeded any amount of paper their respective lawyers could throw at them. This was real.

"Is this seat taken?"

Randy looked up at the wizened face of an older gentleman who stood before him. Laugh lines radiated out from his eyes to vanish beneath his white sideburns.

"It's yours if you want it," Randy said.

The old man smiled as he turned and lowered himself carefully to the cushioned seat. In one hand he held a stub of paper like Randy's.

"Gotta be careful with these old bones," the old man said as he turned to face Randy. His blue eyes sparkled as his smile revealed a row of even white teeth. His gaze dropped to the slip of paper in Randy's hand.

"It's a shame isn't it?" the old man said.

"What's that?" Randy asked.

The old man held up his slip of paper. It was faded, discolored slightly, as if it had been fondled repeatedly for an extended period of time.

"That which we love the most reduced to a single slip of paper."

Randy glanced at the paper in his hand with a bemused smile as he tried to recall the last time they'd had a civil discussion that didn't end in an argument.

When had that been?

A year ago?

Maybe two?

For the life of him he couldn't remember the last time they'd been civil aside from this morning. But given the circumstances today's lack of hostilities was the exception, not the rule.

"I am so sorry," the old man said. "Where are my manners? My name is George, George Manning." He extended his hand and Randy took it into his own, surprised by George's strong grip.

"And this" George said as he held his piece of paper up for Randy to see, "is Rosalie, my wife of," he paused as a brief cloud of confusion crossed his features.

"Oh my how long has it been now?" George looked up at the ceiling as he mentally counted the years.

In that brief moment Randy had seen something else on George's face. A sense of loss that awakened his own feelings of helplessness. The news of Cloe's cancer had been like a kick in the gut. Sure he'd called her names one would never repeat to his mother. But that had been between them, and as far as he was concerned twenty years as her husband had given him the right to call her anything he wanted.

"Sixty-five years," George said, intruding upon Randy's thoughts. "I can still remember it as if it was yesterday. We'd finished with that nasty piece of business in Europe. Hitler was dead, and Truman had dropped the big one on the Japs. I had survived and was coming home to my Rosalie. We had our whole lives ahead of us. And I swore on the day I came home I would never leave her side again. And I've kept that promise until now." George shook his head as his eyes grew misty and his lip trembled.

Randy didn't really want to ask, preferring to keep to himself, but before he could stop himself he asked the one question that promised to open the floodgates.

"Why is she here?"

George shook his head again. "Cancer." The word dropping between them like a heavy stone that then lay on the floor, waiting for one or the other to shoulder its burden.

"Same here," Randy said as he raised his slip of paper.

"It's not fair," George said. "It should be me in there. She always took care of herself. Watched what she ate. Never smoked, nor drank more than a few beers at a time."

Randy could relate. Cloe had always kept a close eye on her weight, watched what she ate, and had only ever smoked as a teenager. He felt the same way. If anyone belonged on that operating table, he was the prime candidate. Drinking, smoking, eating whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. Yet he had remained active and slim, always on the go, never stopping for even a moment to consider what lay ahead of them. Until now.

Even though they had lived apart since he'd taken the small apartment over his office, they kept in touch, and he wanted her to remain a part of his life.

A muted ding signaled an update and both men looked at the screen upon which a list of numbers appeared. Randy noted that the number assigned to Cloe was now listed as in the operating room. He imagined how frightening it must be for her. Surrounded by strangers, not even sure if she would awaken, as she was wheeled into the sterile room. From the corner of his eye he saw George fondling his slip of paper. The silence between them grew. Randy focused on the text messages filling his phone. He'd only told his secretary he had to go to the

hospital. He didn't offer any further explanation. She was messaging him now, wanting to know if everything was all right. He replied, skirting the issue of Cloe's cancer, not ready yet to acknowledge it. As if to do so would only serve to confirm its existence.

"We had some good times together," George said, interrupting the silence that had grown too long between them. "But we had our share of bad times as well. You can't have the good without the bad."

"Did you argue?" Randy asked.

"Oh yeah, we had some dust ups. My Rosalie was once a real firecracker. When I was overseas she worked in a munitions factory and became very independent. It was like she didn't really need me anymore. She didn't take anything from anyone. Not even me. Don't get me wrong; we had a good life together, but we had our differences."

"I know the feeling, sometimes I just don't know what to do. Cloe can be so demanding. It's almost like she goes out of her way to get into a fight with me."

George was nodding his head. "Rosalie is the same way. But I learned a long time ago to just go with the flow. Most of the stuff we'd argue over was insignificant anyway. If she wanted something a certain way, who was I to disagree?"

"Did you ever think of leaving her? Getting a divorce?" The weight of the papers in Randy's breast pocket had gained weight.

"Once or twice, but once I reflected on my reasons I realized they weren't valid. She never cheated on me, at least not that I know of. And I never cheated on her. She was my one and only, and I came to understand that to have the good that was my best friend, my love, my wife, I had to take the bad as well. It's a give and take. There's no two ways about it."

The television dinged again and Randy saw that Cloe was being transferred to recovery. He glanced at his watch and realized that he and George had been talking for the better part of an hour. He stole another glance at the slip of paper in George's hand, trying to make out the number so he could check on Rosie's progress as well, but George's thumb was in the way.

"I better get going; they've moved Cloe to recovery." He stuck out his hand and George grabbed it with a firm grip that belied his age.

"It was a real pleasure to meet you," George said. "I hope everything works out between you and your wife."

"I'm sure it will now. No word on Rosalie?"

George shrugged. "She was always a stubborn one, probably in the operating room telling the doctors exactly how to do their job."

"Good luck."

"And to you young man."

Randy nodded as he made his way to the nurses' station. He'd already come

to a decision, and as he reached the desk he slipped the papers from his breast pocket and dropped them in the waste can. Cloe was the love of his life. To keep her he would learn to let her have her way.

The nurse met him at the desk. "All ready to go back?"

"Yeah, but what about Rosalie?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Randy pointed at George sitting in the waiting room watching the television screen intently, comparing the information on his slip with what was on the screen.

"That is so sad," the nurse said as she shook her head and a single tear traced a wet path down her cheek. "He lost his wife a month ago. Every day he comes in to check the screen. Waiting for her to come back." She turned away as she brushed aside the tears and motioned for Randy to follow.



WATERSHED

BREAD SONG

This is the field.

This is the scythe.

These are the stalks gleaned and threshed.

Water-spun wheel, stone on stone, sack full to bursting.

This is the scattered flour on the board,
your steady breath, muscled arms driving
your hand heel into the dough,
folding it toward you, the quarter turn.
Here are your fingers dipped in oil,
anointing the bowl, the satin skin.

In weak winter light perfume rises:
grain and yeast,
water and salt,
egg, honey, poppy seed, fennel,
cinnamon currant,
cranberry walnut,
sourdough, challah
baguette linen-wrapped—

soup-drenched,
crowned with butter or brie

crust we tear with our teeth,
softness dissolved on our tongues.

Hearty plenty and salve, hold us.
Hold us here.

PEONIES

First mow of spring, ground ivy's spread
where red furled leaves and stalk should crack
the winter-hardened dirt, and though I lack
a gardener's skill, I kneel beside the bed,
pry loose clumps of errant grass, pull
purple-budded vines until my jeans
are soaked and stained. As for the peonies,
I think my puny efforts matter little

but this is order I can finally claim.
I couldn't stop the brutal wedge or bind
your life to mine. Sky splits, hail
strikes, a black branch breaks. Yet
peonies pierce the ground, unfold a crumpled
fragrance—petals white, exposed, frail.

THE ROSE

—Maria Oakey Dewing, 1905

Was it *The Rose* that turned time,
reliable guide, to a grate I could drop through?
I was already displaced, all day driving
West Virginia's wrinkled hills,
coal-grit snow, to Virginia's tamer land.
Maybe it was Frieseke's *The Nursery*,
1917—did I see myself, lawn gown brushing
my ankles, pearls clipped to my ears?
I could be rocking, book in my lap,
while my baby—twenty-six this month—
sleeps in a yellow cradle. Sunlight splashes
my white-heeled shoe, crown of my hair.
And what more could memory claim?

But the woman in *The Rose*
had a face so present, so recognizable
as *someone* I should know, might have met,
or might yet meet, though Dewing
didn't name her, only gave her a rose:
bloom at its peak, outer petals blush pink—
only one curling back, two thorns,
stem's sharp cut—its milky white hollow.

She holds it high, tips her head to consider
so her hair falls from her face and nothing
interrupts the long line of her neck,
which, standing below, I follow
from one pale shoulder
and can't turn away.

HAVEN

In a glass case,
across the counter,
there are delicate lines
of confection
dainty squares and wedges
of perfection
calling her attention away
from this half-forgotten
philosophical conversation
when he was Socrates
and she was Sally
wondering if this poison
was passion made
from each failing expectation.
She would rather pour her love
in sticky icing
release her sorrow into
filling flowing and
falling from a lattice crown
trade every desperate convocation
for each little slice of heaven,
in a glass case,
across the counter.

THE APARTMENT

Although it was hard to discern
from the street below

With the cage door
and the windows flung wide open
I thought it reasonable to assume

that the immobile bird
was made of wood

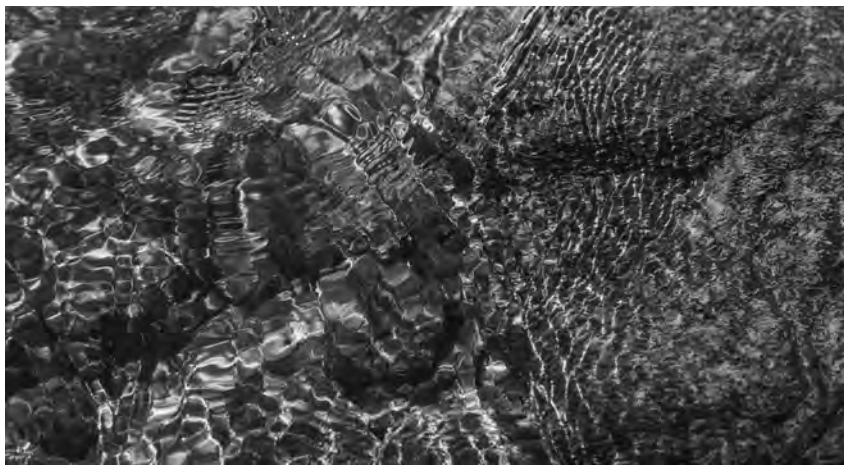
As for me,
I felt a restless fluttering
in my chest
that continued throughout
the evening

ON NOT REALLY FISHING

Kooser quoted Weeks quoting
Newton about Wilde.
Wait they all said, be patient
cast your line out
and sit still.

How, perhaps, it's across the lake
or around the fallen tree
resting on the water.
Shift the line just so
draw it in slightly or
change the lure,
the bait ... and wait.

You may not need a bite after all.
You may only need
the sun on your cheek,
the blue white over dome,
the silver blinking liquid.



THINKING ABOUT THE RAIN

I'd like to think
there's meaning
in the gray cloud bank
drifting west to east.

That the coming storm
on everyone's mind
will help me understand
the following sunset color
above the cityscape.

Or that someone's been
organizing them
one after another
like cards in a deck
or dominoes on a table.

But truth does break in
so matter of factly
about the weather
and the rain.

We do get wet
in the downpour
run from shelter to shelter
and shake off the water.

Only thinking about the discomfort
of soaking clothes
or sodden shoes,

only aware of what is on us
what is about us
and how to get warm
and dry again.

MILES MEASURED IN HOURS

Tour has been rough on you. Night after night, you've played in dimly lit clubs and punk houses for donations, usually around \$40, slept only a couple of hours a night, and then drove for more hours than that. Sometimes you tell yourself that this is exactly what you expected and always wanted, but at this point you think you're lying to yourself.

Time leaves you increasingly estranged. It's been a month and a half, and you've mostly stopped calling and texting everyone back home. Your family. Your friends. Your girlfriend. Are you even still together? Sometimes she calls you, but usually while you're driving (you keep it short because you don't want to annoy the rest of the band) or during a show (you shout over the music that you will call her back later, which you know won't be until 3:30 a.m. when she'll be asleep). Despite being around Noah and Josh, the other two guys in your band, nonstop, you spend more time listening to your iPod, pretending to read, or flat out ignoring them. Just three weeks left.

Muncie, Indiana, is about as plain as you thought it would be. Run-of-the-mill, flat, Midwest, college town. The punk house tonight is called Kashyyyk, which you remember is the Wookiee planet from Star Wars. You show up early ... real early. Long story short: the promoter from last night was a junkie, so you drove through the night rather than stay at his crack-den of an apartment. But it's okay that you roll in at six in the morning because you had texted Morgan, your contact for the house, and it's okay with them.

When the door opens, it surprises you that Morgan is a girl. Punk houses and Star Wars references usually add up to a bunch of dudes. She lives with some guy though, some dude named Derrick, but they aren't dating. Morgan repeats this several times as she shows you and the guys the way around the house. Some reason, this relieves you. Falling for some girl you'll never see again is the last thing you need, but she has short, blonde hair, which you've always been a sucker for. While Josh and Noah immediately claim the couches and sleep, you drink coffee with Morgan. She even likes the same bands as you.

When was the last time you felt like this? Well, you remember a dozen other crushes on girls at show, but you never talked to any of them because you're sort of shy and they looked like they had boyfriends. Maybe it was back when you met your girlfriend last year. She didn't want you to leave. But this thing with Morgan feels different from what you have and had with your girlfriend. Morgan seems to "get" you. Though, it irritates you a little that she booked the show without ever listening to your band. Apparently she books often and prefers to be surprised

with odd, mish-mash shows where the opener is a pop-punk band and the closer is an extreme black metal band, which is the case for tonight.

At some point, Derrick walks passed wheeling a bike down the hall. Seems like a pretty typical bike punk to you. Avoiding your gaze, he says, "Hey. I'm off to work." His messenger bag probably has a 40 ounce of Old English or a six-pack of PBR in it on more days than not.

The lack of sleep hits you around noon. Morgan takes you to a burrito place when you start to feel silly and make puns about how black beans have a lot of "amigo" acids. She rolls her eyes. Spending \$11 on food isn't in your budget, especially when you have some bread and peanut butter in the van, but you do it anyway.

Just before you ask whether you should head back to the house, she asks if you want to go swimming in a "quarry." At first, you think she is joking; when you realize she is serious, you decide it sounds like a good enough idea. You don't like the idea of falling asleep and missing a chance to spend a little more time with her. Forty-five minutes later, you are both in your underwear jumping into an abandoned, flooded mining quarry. The water is so cold that you immediately tense up, but it does wake you up. The water is clearer than any river or stream you've seen back east. This is the closest thing to a shower you have gotten in the past few days; you imagine that you see the icy water wash away the sweat from the previous few gigs. Through all of this, you can discern her form in the glassy, still water. You imagine what she would feel like pressed up against you.

On the way back to Kashyyyk, your girlfriend back home texts you, "I heart you." She literally spells out "heart." You imagine her reaction if she knew that you were alone with a girl. You imagine the shift in the contours of her face if she realized that both your and Morgan's underwear were drying in the back seat. You imagine how you would try to explain that you changed on the opposite sides of the car and that you didn't even look, but your girlfriend wouldn't buy it despite its being true, because you know that this sort of situation was exactly what she was afraid would happen when you left. You don't respond to the text, but you do decide that you will later. Maybe after some sleep. Maybe after there are a few hours of distance between you and Morgan.

When you get back to Morgan's house, the other guys are awake and eating some chewy granola bars that were in the van and making some peanut butter sandwiches. Morgan goes to her room. Josh tries to high five you while Noah, obviously mocking you, says, "I can't wait to hear what you've been up to." Josh laughs.

"Nothing happened," you say. You look away and then add, "Or will happen."

Waiting around for the show seemed to take forever. You couldn't sleep because Josh and Noah load some of the gear in and begin playing some riffs.

When the show starts, things are pretty ordinary: no one showed up on time, the show started late, and Derrick sucked at collecting door money. At least the kids at the show seem excited.

As you load in what is left of the gear and the merch, the sleep deprivation hits you again like bricks. The foldable chair set up beside the T-shirts and albums seems way more comfortable than it should.

The set blurs by as you stand motionless, concentrating only on hitting the right notes. You scan the basement for Morgan, but she is nowhere to be found. For 40 some days in a row, you've played the same set. You're confident you could play these songs in your sleep, but you know the intensity just isn't there today, which you can't really do anything about now. Regardless, a few dudes come up to you afterward while you roll up your instrument cables and say that they were real into it.

As the black metal band loads in, Morgan says she loves your band. You ask where she was. She says that she was right up front, which you know is a lie. Despite the lack of sleep, you are positive that she wasn't anywhere around.

You find yourself talking to the bassist of the local pop-punk band that opened. At first you both are just talking about bass gear, but then you talk about Muncie, then Kashyyyk, and then Morgan. He tries to select his words carefully because he definitely doesn't want to offend anyone who sets up shows, but he does tell you that every time there is a show she ends up taking ecstasy and spends the bulk of the show in her room. He says she only really comes down between bands to hang out. You're not sure what to make of this because she definitely didn't seem like the type of person who would do that.

Right before the last band starts, Morgan comes and gets you at the merch table. She grabs your hand and leads you to her room. Old show flyers cover the walls, and her bed lies on the floor without a frame. Alone, she leads you over to the bed to sit and kisses you. You don't kiss back. It strikes you that she smells similar to your girlfriend. At least, it is how you remember she smells. Having not seen her in over a month muddles her in your mind. More than anything, the physical distance, the miles measured in hours, parallels your memory of her. The further away you went, the more of a memory she seemed, but with the tour wrapping up in the next two weeks, she is more tangible. She seems more real than she had back when you were in California. In a way, you feel the same way about Morgan right now that you felt about God right after your grandmother died back when you were in high school. You wanted a connection, but nothing connected. Morgan puts her hand on your thigh. Her eyelids are puffy, and her pupils look bloated. Never before have you recognized anyone as being so utterly desperate. You don't even bother coming up with an excuse. You just stand up and leave.

The next morning, she says she was really “out of it.” She claims she doesn’t remember anything from last night. You can’t tell if she is telling the truth. However, you nod and thank her for the show. Josh jumps in and tells her about how much fun you all had playing. Today you play Chicago, and Noah wants to get a deep dish pizza beforehand, so you all gather everything up, climb into the van, and head out early.

Over the next few days, you and Morgan send each other a few texts, but within the week she is just another number under the “tour contacts” category on your phone.

It hits you that on tour towns and faces blend together. Every day there is a new set of names that you forget mid-conversation. When everything is memorable, you have a hard time remembering anything. Was it Charlotte or Durham where the crust punk with the face tattoo tried to trade a six-pack of PBR and three loose cigarettes for a patch and an LP? But sometimes it takes Muncie, Indiana, to make you remember just how much you wish you were home. You miss watching TV with your roommates and complaining about how nothing good is on. You miss sleeping through class. And you miss her. You respond to her text with “I heart you too.” You miss everything. And something like that ... well, that stands out.

FAR AND AWAY

The sun beams on the taut,
fragile skin of the balloons
tethered to his thin wrist.
Gazing upward, he smiles,
throwing up his arms to grasp them.
But they float higher than
tiny fingers can stretch.
He jumps on matchstick legs and grazes
a swollen orange that bounces up
and away from his grasp,
bumping and jostling with a
grape, a cherry, and a lime
far from the points and edges
that prick and pierce.

A LITTLE FURTHER

Things are coming apart.
The siding is falling off
and the screens need
replaced. But, it's too
expensive, and he says
no one is looking besides me.

The roof leaks, but only
where the floor is stained
and warping. He says it
needs washed anyway.
I scrubbed it last week
with my hands and knees.

He says the ants that track
across the linoleum don't
eat much. So I feed them
with little black discs,
spreading poison
through their population.

He says it don't pay,
that death is cheap
and often quiet.
In the dark with nothing
between us but our thoughts,
I know he's right.

Hope is a prize in a cereal
box. Dreams are a mound of
scratch-off tickets. Time
is measured in a line
of ash hanging off a
cigarette like a spent fuse.

But, with my face pressed deep
into the suffocating comfort
of my pillow, listening to life
coming out from between
the separating seams, I wait
for something a little further down.



TREES HOLD UP THE SKY

A FIRE ON A SNOWY DAY

Watching the flames curl flickering
teeth around charred oak, gnawing away
ashes and cinders that fall mutely
between the slats of the black grate,
my head is full of shades of blue,
wisps of smoky wishes and dreams,
a vagrant's halo.

CANCER

An hour of rest on the porch at night
The shine inside my body

The blue jay in orbit around the yard
He stops to speak of nothing

The priest half-remembers what I told him last week
I couldn't resist lying a little

Bold shoulders of trees with yellowing leaves
A single leaf at the end of a branch

I think of God as living upstairs
A woman without courage

BIRTHRIGHT

*I was born at the old Bellevue Hospital,
she tells me, to keep me grounded
in the unfamiliar geography.
I fell from a three-story building at the age of five,
not the other way around as it was crushed in my memory.
The loose screen, the picture from the newspaper
kept in her uncle's wallet,
the tiny cane left hanging in a closet
during one of the many moves.
She speaks to me of these things
as she tells the beads of memory.
Some things she keeps locked
in a metal fireproof box—
what her father did to her,
how her mother found the courage
she lacked—to leave,
to tell the police, to save her daughter.
I leave my body at night
and travel to shrouded places—
My mother's mother cowering
in a neighbor's house deciding
to do this or that in exchange for food.
I lose my way.
Who will wave away this smoke of a legacy?
Misted memories long forced to be forgotten.
A string snaps and beads fly, no markers to follow.
Bellevue was a regular hospital back then.
Precision perched just behind the full truth
and nothing but the truth.
I don't want to talk about that
she says, her feathers glistening
with droplets of water.
Let the water flow. This wellspring ends at my feet.
Let the doctor remove both halves of my fertility.
I will throw them from this rooftop, crush them to dust
in these hands.*

ON LOOKING FOR ANSWERS IN THE CEREAL BOX

The cereal box said The Answer was inside,
but all I found were fruity pebbles crushed
to dust, sugared specks spilling
from my hand, life's answers ground up.

NIGHT MARSH

Here between cord grass
and cat-tailed greens,
where quiet wavelets
lap roots suspended
in mud and green juices,
where oyster shells
glow just below the ebb and flow.

Such is the place for moonrise
watchfulness.

A gentle madness
creeps out of the marsh
and settles on skin,
a heady feeling
of suspension,
of here
and nowhere,
as low sky sunset
sends the last yellows
to bed with the blues,
fine shale moon sliver
appears and indigo
is indulged
by evening,
tossing her hair
lightly over water,
releasing stars.

MELANIE MICHAEL

POEMS FOR ADULTS

I stole this halo
To get into Heaven
It's three sizes
Too big
But what the hell.



POTOMAC

EVE

I lied. But before you judge me, consider that Moses hadn't even been born yet, hadn't seen his river basket. It's the mother of all double negatives, there were no "thou-shalt-not's," a perfect crime. Adam didn't know what hit him. The poor fool had no dad to explain about women, and by the time that crazy lawyer the evangelist got hold of our story, it had become "The Sin of Adam." The First Man hasn't shown his face around here for millennia, which is hard when you're built to live forever. Me? I'm still Miss in-your-face. I'm going for the perfect "24" look. Why not? I have a bodice worn by Helen of Troy and these great open-toe high heels of mother of pearl, and I'm not talking Hester Prynne here. I mean these pretty pumps shine like a full moon on the ocean.

I didn't mean to bring Hester back into this, that most infamous single mom: "thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her as the reality of sin." She's the reality of sin? Get real. How do you think I feel? This sin thing was a scam on my entire extended family. Look, I didn't even know what an apple was until I was walking through freakin' Kazakhstan centuries later, but the image stuck like that chunk in Snow White's windpipe. And when you slice an apple sideways you get a pentagram of seeds, a perfect devil sign, like a medieval Procter & Gamble, and people saw Satan in everything then like they see Mother Mary or Elvis in a blob of jelly today. The apple was just recently rehabilitated. It was like yesterday that Appleseed was pouring his hard cider out across the American frontier, but now apples are like health tonic, and I'm still just getting by on my girlish good looks.

So I lied. The whole snake thing. The he-said she-said God thing. Men are so gullible. Original Sin? More like innocent deception. I was bored out of my skull. I mean, I enjoy sex as much as the next girl but seriously, there was nothing else. The food just fell off the trees, no thorns, no "oh, I'm allergic to this" or "gee, does that have gluten?" or "I can see that on my hips already." I was going crazy. Childbirth? Don't let men tell you it was ever easy. Sisters are too smart for believing that shit. It's an allegory, for heaven's sake. Men can be dense as a stone. Allegory. Hel-lo? The universe doesn't judge you, it like doesn't even know what morality is. The universe knows energy. It knows balance. Not like old Augustine—talk about not knowing balance. He cried about suicide being a sin because he dreamed of doing it himself, just one step out of the confessional. That's the dude the Western world learned sin from. So speak to me. Let me know when you're through having your mind totally messed with.

The truth is, God made me and then freaked out because I was too perfect. Little less than the angels. Truth is, my skin glows too bright, my vision is too

clear, and my logic too sound. Truth is, Original Sin was a mistake God made, not me.

Check it out. I have my mother-of-pearl spike pumps on. What do you think? The black hose stripe up the back of my leg? Some fashion never goes out of style. Trust me, I've been doing this a long time.

And you know the truth. I whisper it in every ear not long after you take your first breath. That thing at your core is not sin. The strangler fig of allegory can't cover up every view of beautiful me. We owe God gratitude. We owe each other morality. But what we owe ourselves is to shine, because that thing at your core is nothing less than the next generation.

DUPLEX

Twenty-sixth Street duplex,
Left door, black leggings and cowboy boots.
Right door, I drop my keys in my pocket,
heat water for pasta on the two-burner stove.

Even now
I don't hope for miracles.
Even now,
knowing a miracle is only
wishing for the right thing.

Left door, my inner eye still sees me walking through.
Right door, my two round shot glasses of light
watch a vertical shadow
open and close.

In the narrow room
her bass shakes the books from my shelves.
My favorite music, I don't know,
at five o'clock
the opening notes
of All Things Considered.

She's stacked like
my washer and dryer;
I could have said
that better.

Left door, when she moves
I may look at the empty rooms
just to see.
Right door, the keys are in my pocket.

And I went to hear her read,
with the courage of a dog
behind a good fence.

Left door, the universe outside my skin
is both real and imagined.
Right door, even bruised
the skin keeps me warm and dry.

When she moves I'll go,
and see both sides of the wall.

LOVE IS NOT A MICROSCOPE

Love is not a microscope,
not even a magnifying glass,
more like the wavy glass
of an old window
that lets you see enough
to know you want
what's on the other side.

Love is not a mirror,
nor a bright bulb
in a cell where a prisoner
is being interrogated.
It is the bedside lamp
by which you read,
and if the book is really good
the lamp stays lit
deep into the night.

Love is not a decoration,
a column of bangles,
a dog in a purse.
It's more like food—sometimes
a banquet, sometimes a single truffle,
sometimes a steady diet of meat and potatoes.
Often you think
it's making you ill.

Love is not a cruise, not a movie,
not a love story,
but it is a story
whose ending is vitally important
to the protagonists.

Love is a puppy
that takes over your life entirely,
and then, before you know it,
it's an old dog
with its head in your lap
your fingers deep in its fur,
both of you nodding off.



NATURAL PIXELATION

RUNNING INTO A WALL

It's not as easy as it looks
when your instinct for self-preservation
is screaming and your muscles are doubting
they can attain the necessary burst of speed
and the wall looks impossibly far away.
Your mind is telling you your wife
will say you're too dumb to die
and even the air seems to resist you,
the ground to grab at your feet,
and the horror of the crowd—
ah, those fascinated screams:
how they always spur you on.

SO WAS I DRIVEN

As the deer to water in the last bout of green on the interstate,
dodging great, aluminum, oil-eating beasts to quench its thirst,

as the geese lettering the sky with an autumn's migration south
when the air, sharp and white, begins to take on the burden of winter,

as the lover wakens to her bedfellow when he turns
to shift his weight in the hours sleep should own

as they find each other's arms, lips, toes curled under a sheathe
of plastic-tipped feathers. As we are driven to the fodder

of necessity: to food, to water, to warmth as the year grows old,
so was I driven with the seams of my suitcases bursting

as my each belonging drew closer to you, with bequeathed
cream-tinted chinaware rattling in the back seat darkness, catching,

every so often, the glint of a headlight growing near
and the moon propped against the alpine edges of Appalachia.

SONNET AFTER NEARLY A YEAR

Like any other city, it is strange,
this mining town the locals picked bone dry,
these mountains' music lapping at my tires,
these lilts and lifts to voices I can't find,
parades for names I haven't heard before,
where every wall's the color of the Team,
this Southern town I only yet half know.
But there, behind the first door I've called mine,
a body lounges barefoot, sipping pop,
waiting, blue-green eyes latched to the lock,
to open it for me when my hand's full,
to tell of libraries he's found, new neighborhoods,
to trace this city's map across my skin,
its every contour more, and multiplied.

SWEET GOTHAM

Boogie blues on a cold night.
Jersey train caught the gig.
Anita O'Day goin up the country.
Flakes sweepin down White Way.
Cabs swirl through green and red.
Night storm played the rhythm.
Sweat cooled the brow.

Caught a ride uptown.
The Carlyle waits.
Vibes playin the walls.
Murals are dancing.
Black and white smokes.
Bobby Short holds court.
Madison swings.
Two shows nightly.
I caught the late one.
Then never let go.
Least I could do.
Cause I like the likes of you.

Along the East Side.
A song played on Park.
If my friends could see ...
Cy Coleman, if you please.
Traffic hugged the curtain.
Blues down the corner.
Drink on the table.
Beat in my heart.
The eyes follow.
But the soul digs in.

Late downtown.
Annie Ross takes stage.
It's dark in there.
Julie lights the corner.

A horn plays hot.
Annie sings cool.
Took me away.
Man, I'd love to stay.
Smooth lights dim.
Call it a night.
She rounds the corner.
Clear out of sight.

Hotel Chelsea.
Down 23rd Street.
The halls are deep.
The paintings are, too.
Hangovers on.
Room divine.
I fell into it.
Read every line.

So goes the Rainbow.
As it danced the night.
Above all Manhattan.
Man what a height!
I saw forever there.
And never knew.
Till the curtain closed.
And the night turned blue.
Now the day has come.
The room fell still.
Where's my beloved?
Now what's that chill?

I hear Sonny Rollins blowin.
So is the train.
Sweet Gotham fades.
But the smile remains.
Paris Metro carries blues away.

A poem is knocking in the cold.
I think I'll let it in.



FULL MOON SNAGGED IN THE TREE

JUST DOING MY JOB

It was 3:30 p.m. on Monday, Feb. 3, 2003 (I like to get in a half-hour early to check my truck out before my shift starts). As I pulled into the State Highway Yard in LaVale, Maryland, and got out of my green Ford Explorer, I looked up at the sky toward Frostburg. It was a nasty gray color that reminded me of a winter storm that closed in on our fishing boat in the North Atlantic in '72. Luckily I swam, with the rest of my crew in tow to an oil-drilling rig, where we were rescued.

On my way into the shop, I was approached by a hard-looking man about 6 feet 2 inches tall and 250 pounds. He was dressed in a work uniform with the name Dink-Adoo on the embroidered name tag. He looked like the Incredible Hulk, except he wasn't green. He grabbed me by the left forearm with a hand as big as a catcher's mitt, and accused me of sleeping with his wife. I spun around to the left to slip his vise-like grasp and gave him a right uppercut to the jaw that would have dropped a baby beef. He staggered back about six feet. I told him he must have had the wrong fellow. As I turned toward the shop, he jumped me from behind. Using his forward momentum I flipped him over my shoulder and he landed with a bone-jarring crunch on the asphalt parking lot. He didn't move as I turned and strolled into the shop. Ten years of karate and judo had paid off for me again. I took no shit from no man.

I scanned the shop for my snowplow. It took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust to the light, and then I spotted it at the far end of the garage. The big yellow International stood out like Arnold Schwarzenegger in a gay bar, with its 10-foot blade and 11:00 X 20 tires. This is the truck I dreamed of driving all my life; I can't believe they pay me to do this job. Three hundred ten rompin stompen diesel horsepower, mated to an Eaton six-speed transmission with a two-speed rear axial. It made me feel like John Holms at a girl's pajama party when I sat in the driver's seat.

I pulled the hood forward to start my engine check. As I reached for the dipstick, a cold chill went up my back when something caught my eye. I looked in horror to see my windshield washer reservoir was empty. I immediately filled it from a gallon jug I kept behind my seat. I finished checking the rest of the fluids. Next I did a walk-around inspection, checking lights and general condition of the truck. I hit the tires with a steel pipe. I noticed the left rear inside tire sounded a little low on air pressure; checking it with a tire gauge I found that it was 1 pound low. I filled it to the proper pressure with an air hose.

I opened the door and climbed into the driver's seat. As I slid behind the big steering wheel and buckled my seatbelt it was 10 after 4 p.m. With the key in

the switch, I engaged the starter. All six cylinders came to life with a growl not unlike a rhinoceros in heat. With a tap on the throttle the RPMs settled down to around 200. Clutch in: I slipped the transmission into low gear. As I let the clutch out my big Clydesdale on wheels eased out of the shop, and I headed for the salt dome.

With each bucket of salt the loader dumped into my bed, I could feel the back of my truck settle that much more. The loader operator blew his horn when I was loaded, and I pulled out toward Vocke Road.

The snow was falling with flakes as big as Krispy Kreme doughnuts as I pulled onto Route 68 East. By the time I got to the Route 220 exit off Route 68 there were already 6 inches on the ground. As I geared down for the off-ramp from 68 my truck began to slide. I saw my life flash before my eyes, and I knew I had to take drastic measures. Out of instinct and years of training I immediately double clutched and shoved the transmission into reverse. As I was sliding forward my tires were spinning backwards. After a few harrowing seconds the truck finally stopped before I got to 220. With a sigh of relief I turned south on 220 and headed for Cresaptown.

As I passed Shooters Lounge, my mind drifted back to last Friday night when I met this cute little brunette. That ended with me taking her home to my place. She said something about being married to a guy that looked like the Incredible Hulk, but she was in such a drunken stupor by that time, I thought she was talking out of her head. I was brought back from the good part of my daydream when I saw two pairs of lights coming at me. Some clown had decided to pass in a no-passing zone. I jerked the wheel to the right, and as I did, I heard a loud KAWOOP!!! Out of the corner of my eye I saw a mailbox flying through the air like a cruise missile headed for Baghdad. It went straight into the front window of 523 Macmillan Hwy. I was sure this was going to spoil somebody's evening. I stomped on the gas pedal to get the hell out of there before anyone could spot me. As I sped away I remembered the name on the mailbox was Dink-Adoo.

By this time the snow was falling so hard my windshield wipers and defrosters could not keep up with it. I retrieved my pickax from the dump bed and climbed onto the hood and chopped the ice off my windshield.

I continued to plow until I came to the intersection of 220 and the road that goes to Allegany Ballistics. There I came upon a new BMW Z3 with its 4 ways on. I stopped to see if I could be of any assistance. As I walked up, the driver's door opened and the most beautiful blond I had ever seen stepped out. She was dressed in a fur parka, but I could see she had a body that could have been in the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue. I was so taken by her beauty that she had to tap me on the shoulder to snap me out of the trance I was in. She said, she had hit a small bump in the road and the car just shut off. I knew immediately

what it was and got her to open the hood. Just as I had expected, the coil wire had popped off; I replaced it and told her to start it up. When it started, she jumped out of the car and threw her arms around me and gave me the best kiss I've had in years. I could feel that gorgeous body pressed up against mine, even through that fur coat. It made me wish that I didn't have any more snow to plow. She asked me how she could repay me for my kindness, but I told her that as a state highway employee, it was my duty to help damsels in distress. We exchanged names and numbers and in a minute the BMW had disappeared in the blinding snow. She said she was from Miami and was headed for New York City. I remember thinking that I would probably not see her again.

I traveled a few more miles and got behind a tractor-trailer carrying Lincoln Navigators. I followed him till we got to the hill just before the Chat & Chew. He hit his brakes and jackknifed right in front of me. By the time I got my truck stopped and ran up to his tractor it was too late. I opened up the driver's door and he was gone. Evidently as the tractor slung around to the side of the trailer, the sudden stop ejected him out the passenger window and threw him through the side window of one of the Navigators he was hauling. He was sitting in the front seat behind the wheel as if he was driving it. After I pulled him out and laid him on the shoulder, I gave him his last rites, having been an ordained part-time minister. There was nothing more I could do for him, so I left him there with a blanket over him, because I had snow to plow and salt to spread. I called the hospital in Keyser so they could send someone out to get him. I told them not to rush as he would keep in the cold.

I made two more rounds between LaVale and Keyser. The snow had stopped and at around 2:30 a.m. I pulled off the road under the 220 bridge at McCoolle for a well-deserved break. I could not get that blond out of my mind as I drank a cup of hot chocolate and munched on an Oreo. I must have dozed off. I awoke at about 2:50 a.m. and began to plow again.

I was on my way back to LaVale when I spotted an overturned car on the side of the road, about where the old Hi-Rock Drive-In used to be. I managed to get the woman out first. She was in her late 60's and suffered from a broken arm. I quickly set her arm and put a splint on it made up of two frozen sticks of deer bologna I was saving for Chuck McCrearey but had forgotten to give to him. Lucky for her!

I then turned my attention to her husband. He had lost a lot of blood from a gash in his forehead. I remembered that there was a needle and thread in my wallet. It took 10 stitches to sew him up. I used a crosshatch stitch pattern, as it makes a better seal. His wife informed me that his blood type was O+. The same as mine. I knew what had to be done. I walked over and opened the hood of his upside down car and tore a length of vacuum hose from the engine compartment. Just as I had finished giving him a quart of my blood, the ambulance arrived. The

EMTs quickly loaded the old couple up and headed for Sacred Heart. I was feeling a little weak, but I managed to climb into my truck and finish my shift.

I pulled my truck into the shop and hosed it off. I hate to leave road salt on it, as it is my responsibility to the taxpayers to keep their equipment in tiptop shape.

As I wearily walked to my Explorer I could not wait to get home and to bed. But as I opened the door there was a bottle of champagne and an envelope on the front seat. There was a note in the envelope that said to my knight in shining armor from your damsel in distress. Along with the note was a key for room 102 at the Best Western in LaVale, and three packs of Trojans. No matter how tired I was, I was going to swing by room 102 before going home to Cumberland. As I put the Explorer in drive, I thought this might not be such a bad day after all.

P.S.: A few weeks later I got a letter from an attorney in Baltimore; the old couple I had saved on 220 that night was putting me in their Wills!!!



EATON POND

I WRITE THIS

hunched over a desk
much like a cellist,
a batter over the plate,

it is late

skinny-stemmed wine glass
waits to be filled, two avocados
one hard and green, one soft
for the knife

no noise.

my kitchen two hundred miles away
in the dairy land of Pennsylvania
with my humming wife;
there, heads of roses
bow as bare-headed monks,
wrinkle, dry,

darken.

SIGN BY THAT RESORT POOL: NO SMOKING, NO COOLERS, NO KIDS

Thank you to all of the workers
who dutifully drop their dollars into the tax kettle
Thank you to the many dead seamstresses
who stitched my shirt in stagnant swelter before the factory collapse
Thank you to the oysters
whose shucked white shells pave the way past the exclusive pool
Thank you to river mists above the Choptank
which hide the cool spring 7 o'clock sun
Thank you to unseen ones
who will tidy the deluxe hotel rooms
Thank you

FIREFLY COMPETITION

"I loved being outside. We'd hold lightning bugs in our fingers and pretend they were diamond rings." —Loretta Lynn

I was nine and you were five the night
nature's nightlife came alive.

We each snatched a jar and poked holes
in the lids for the breathing bugs,

then ventured into the dark. The warm, summer
air caressed our cheeks—

there was no need for shoes or light once the lightning bug dance began.

There was only one rule: "collect and chase,"
the girl that grabbed the most was princess for the night.

We'd dash and dance across the grass
as our jars began to glow,

until we sat silently in the cold grass to catch our breath, jars in hand
as the fireflies flickered, the glass shining with the sparkle of little yellow diamonds.

The night would end, and we let them fly free, one at a time,
holding their little bodies gently in our tiny fingers,

watching as they sparkled and glowed our skin yellow gold.

WHERE I LIVE

I can walk to two art galleries
and a stage theater.
The bus can take me to
the mall, which has a movie theater.
We have a bike trail
and a store that rents bikes by the hour.
There are special events, free events, through the year.
Some for occasions like Halloween and New Year's.
Some simply because it's summer and
the weather's fine.
The bus goes to the college several times a day.
Classes offered vary from nursing to
learning how to hula-hoop.
The Continuing Education Department
gives anyone a chance to submit
a course idea
and teach it too.
There are three libraries
and interlibrary loan means
finding a book you can't borrow
is near impossibility.
My friends complained to me yesterday.
They swear there is nothing to do.

MATRYOSHKA

The mother holds in her arms
an urn,

which holds in its hollow
a cumulation of ashes.

The ashes hold in their bits
carbon, calcium phosphate,
salts of sodium and potassium
that she thinks of as her son.

SIRENS

When the ground opened
like a greedy mouth
and Persephone was taken,
screaming, into the dark,
wouldn't they have been in shock,
the nymphs, her friends?

Demeter gave them wings
to search the earth,
but they were cursed,
doomed to their rocky islands.

What if their songs were not
songs of seduction,
but laments for their loss
and for their lost Persephone?

Did the shipmates of Odysseus
curse the wax in their ears?
It saved them, after all, from death,
but it kept them from knowing
that alluring, inescapable song
had nothing at all to do with them.

LESSONS IN BALLAD-SINGING

All that your teachers have taught you before: unlearn.
Come to this singing green, fresh, newly-minted;
or else tired, broken. Surrendered. Either will serve.

First, the breath. Deep, if you can. Steep trails leave little
to the lungs for singing. Stay a while, rest here. When you are ready,
sigh. Let the phrase catch; let the highest tones hitch and weep.
Let the breath sift low through chinks, strained wild
by tangled bittersweet. The higher, the harder. Trust:
what makes it through will be enough.

Then, the palate. Few cathedrals and vaulted spaces here;
our openness is a more homely kind. Use the spaces most familiar:
dim overgrown path, narrow gap of ridge-bound sky;
low mineral roof burrowed into black rock. Vowels twist and flatten,
shorten to conform. We sing the way we dream.

Finally, the lips and teeth. Quiet and closed, they should not
emote or draw attention. Grit them against the song,
against pain, against the force of breath. This sets a fine edge.

And now, the final alchemy, the gold no one has yet mined:
sing a place for yourself into even the oldest song—
the sweetest room that is yours alone.

THE RESURRECTION, WHEN IT COMES

The resurrection, when it comes, will not blaze forth in glory-light, all halo and wing and shouting trumpets; nor will it arrive, agreed-upon, with the clashed swords of long debate, souls wrestling with words until darkness yields to dawn and stone rolls away on cue.

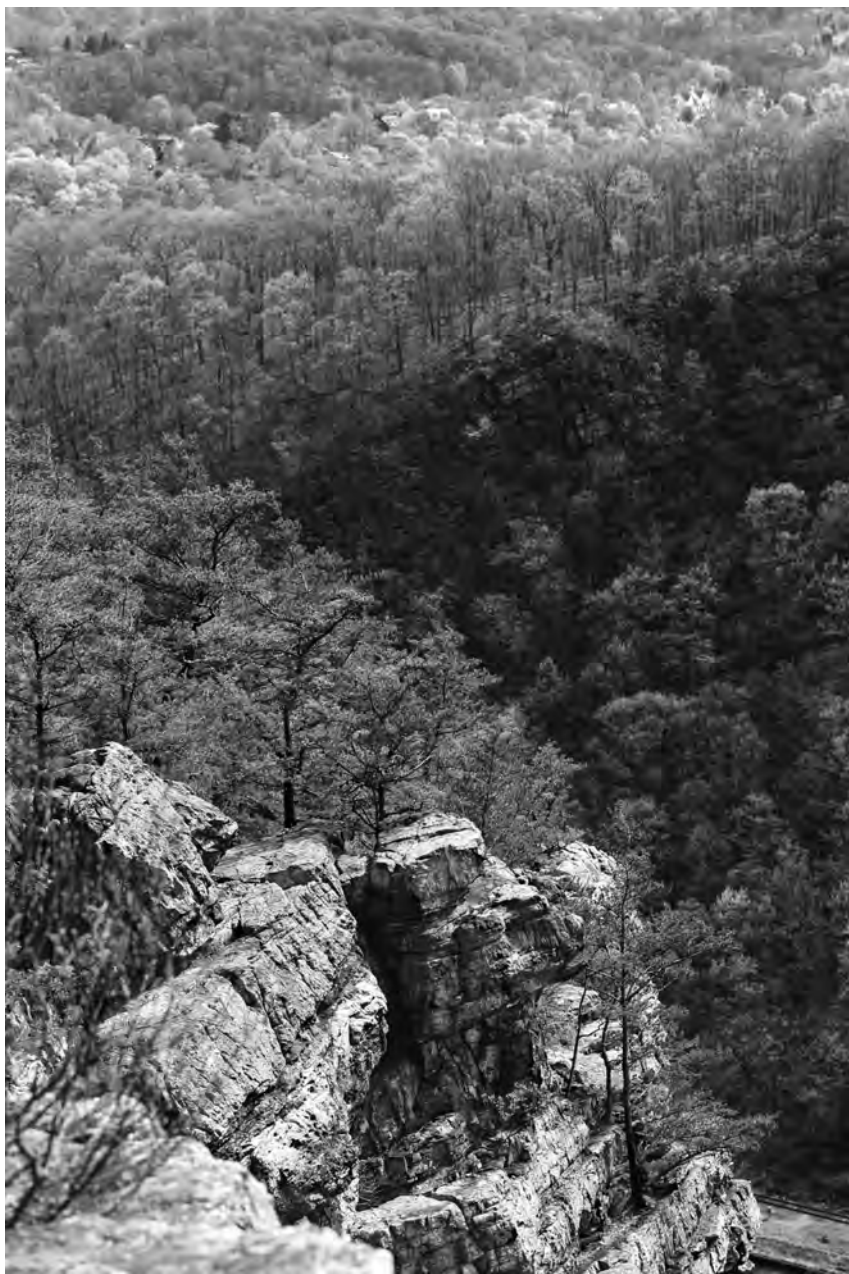
Instead, you will stand in your kitchen, stock-still, as though listening intently to the night—raucous katydids, and spring peepers, and the one bullfrog who rules the goldfish pond—you will absently run a butter knife through the spilled biscuit flour on the countertop,

waiting, waiting for your carefully-scripted moment. Not then will it come, not when the space between you shrinks to an aching ragged breath; not when the lamp clicks off and the bedroom door clicks shut for the thousandth time between you, when something brittle

and bruised inside you finally breaks; nor when the animal cry wells up from some deep place, twisting face and body until you are bent, there in your kitchen, into a silent screaming prayer. Lost. Lost. Lost. No maps for these dark roads; gripping this wheel breaks and crazes every nail.

This prayer will pass through you like a fire; and through the blowing ash that remains, a whisper of a voice long-forgotten, heavy and warm as a quilt stitched by every mother you have known: *Peace, child. Go lay thee down. The body knows best the heart of us.*

And as you turn the knob of a door that has been shut a thousand times, you will hear it again: the maddening siren of the cicadas, the yearning call of every animal body; and you will step through a door, a wall; a fear: a fall. Only then will it come, that first new breath. You will breathe it together.



LOVER'S LEAP

SAMARITAN

Alfred cursed under his breath as the back of his car listed to starboard: *thump, thump, thump*. He eased over to the shoulder of the lonely back road and the thumps spaced out, and then ceased. The shadow of a jagged mountain to the west, stretched by the afternoon sun, obscured the three-point star at the end of the hood. Gazing in his rearview mirror, mind dwelling on the situation in the trunk, he said, "Bloody karma."

Alfred had motored past the Tramp with derision, looking down his nose at the thought of a hitchhiker in the Mercedes. A tingle ran down his spine. Why must the lower classes always be so needy, always with their hands out? He pressed the lock switch and dug in his pocket for his cell phone. *No Service*.

A rounded yellow symbol flashed on the dash and Alfred fetched the owner's manual from the glove box. Stealing a glance at the rearview, he saw the Tramp growing closer and turned the pages faster. Just keep walking you dirty hobo, nothing to see here. As he read about something called a *tire pressure monitoring system*, a shadow moved over the manual. Bollocks. Just keep going. He refused to look up. At the rap of knuckles on the window, Alfred jumped in his seat. The manual fell from his hands and wedged between the seat and the door.

The Tramp leaned over the driver's side of the car, an unwashed fist resting against the window, black grime caked beneath untrimmed nails. Sweat washed over his broad brow and a week's worth of beard covered his darkly tanned face, wrinkles black with dirt. His faded khaki coat was worn and tattered, a patch of cloth missing from above the left chest where a medal or insignia might once have been. It hung open over a hairy chest and rippled torso, covered only by a coating of grease. The unwashed and unworthy.

Worrying about the smell, Alfred lowered the window less than a centimeter and drew back toward the middle of the car.

"You's got a flat, mister," the Tramp said. Through the gap in the window his breath smelled of rancid garbage, tinged with something unidentifiable.

Alfred grabbed the manual and tossed it onto the passenger seat, pulling back from the odor. "Yes, I am aware of that," he paused and rolled his eyes, "sir."

"Road pretty empty out this way, happy to change it for you."

Alfred looked at the screen of his phone again and hesitated. It wouldn't do for this man to go rooting through the trunk—not now. Yet he did not exactly know *how* to change a tire. And he couldn't leave the car with the problem in the trunk. Alfred sighed, and then nodded.

“Pop the trunk then.” The Tramp strolled toward the back of the car.

Alfred climbed out into the cool mountain air and put the key in the trunk, worrying again about the odor. Had she ripened yet? Maybe the Tramp’s stink will cover it? He turned the key, his gaze flicking between the trunk and the menacing stranger a few feet away. He lifted the lid and snatched at a large suitcase—the sole object in the trunk—before the Tramp could reach for it. Alfred dragged it to the edge of the trunk, but could not lift it up over the lip. Clutching at the bag, he distinctly smelled iron—by morning there would be new, more pungent odors in its place.

Damn. If he couldn’t get it out of the trunk alone now, how was he supposed to get rid of it later? It’s not as if he could ask anyone to help him. Not wanting to let the Tramp near the bag, and yet seeing no alternative, Alfred turned to the man. “It’s a bit heavier than I remembered, lend a hand?”

The Tramp nodded and took an end. Together they lowered the bag gently to the road. The Tramp then hauled out the full-size spare, the jack, and the lug wrench. Alfred could hear humming and the clanking of tool on tool as the stranger set to task, but he paid it no mind. His gaze, his focus, his every thought rested on the large, scratched, and faded brown leather suitcase lying on the dirty shoulder beside the bumper.

It was the suitcase that Alfred’s then-blue-collar grandfather had carried across the Rhine to war-torn West Germany—to reconstruct cities and factories and build a massive family fortune. It was the suitcase that his father had carried around the globe after reading Kerouac—wanting to be on the road, but preferring Europe and Asia—in search of some overarching truth to life, the makings of some great unwritten novel or grandiose barroom tale, or merely a god-awful waste of time and money. Alfred’s father had never settled down, never lost that manic need to always go—fancied himself Sal when he was so clearly Dean. Alfred had been raised by the masters at the boarding school and prep school rather than by a proper parent. But in familial tradition, Alfred himself had carried the same suitcase as he boarded the 737 to cross from England with a tender young bride less than a decade ago, in search of a future for his own family. The suitcase had always been there when times were rough or uncertain—a talisman for all life’s journeys.

But the fortune Alfred’s grandfather had worked so hard to build with his hands and wits was squandered—not by his father’s wanderlust and whore mongering, but by Alfred’s *good* judgment. Alfred had contrived to set his life’s path as far from his father’s as possible. Grandfather had built the family fortune in construction, but real estate was the safe bet. The properties Alfred had purchased were all worth a meager fraction of their former value after the crash of 2008. In the depths of Alfred’s depression, his tender young bride had found

the welcoming arms of a Beltway insider. The lowest form of scum-sucker. When he'd needed her the most, she'd fled. Alfred looked again at the tattered suitcase. Even his precious Mercedes, the last vestige of his once vast wealth, now rested in the care of the lowest underclass. What a queer place!

Alfred stared at the dirty creature bent over his precious Mercedes with its rear end twisted awkwardly in the air like a dog at a hydrant. From where had this man come? What had led him to this sort of life? He must have been born on an Appalachian farm somewhere not too far from here. There existed in Alfred's native Britain a certain fondness among some of the upper-crust for the folk music stylings that sprang out of such humble origins. He would have none of that, and saw no romance in the music, or the lifestyle. The sick wanker probably grew up bugging sheep and molesting his sister, his father off in the woods working a still. One night dad came home after sampling his product and did something unspeakable, unholy. The Tramp could never stay home after that. Set to trekking, he scraped his way across the countryside, working any odd job to keep his stomach less-empty. And then somehow he found his way to the side of some godforsaken mountain in Garrett County, in just the right place to *help*.

The clunk of the Mercedes coming off the jack drew Alfred out of his reverie, and he looked around. The sun silhouetted the peak of a distant, forested mountain, amber light glowing through autumnal leaves.

"She shouldn't give you no more trouble," the Tramp said as he stood and wiped his brow with a dirty sleeve.

"Thank you, ah ..." Alfred said, with a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Jimmy," the Tramp said. *His* crows' feet deepened as he smiled. He picked up the flat tire and put it in the trunk. The sharp tang of weeks-old sweat intertwined with pine, manure, and grease.

Alfred bent to lift the suitcase, but he was too slow. As the Tramp struggled to pick it up by the handle, Alfred retrieved the jack and the lug wrench. The suitcase gave at the handle's seam with a loud rip and landed with a dull wet thump. Alfred's heart skipped in his chest. So close!

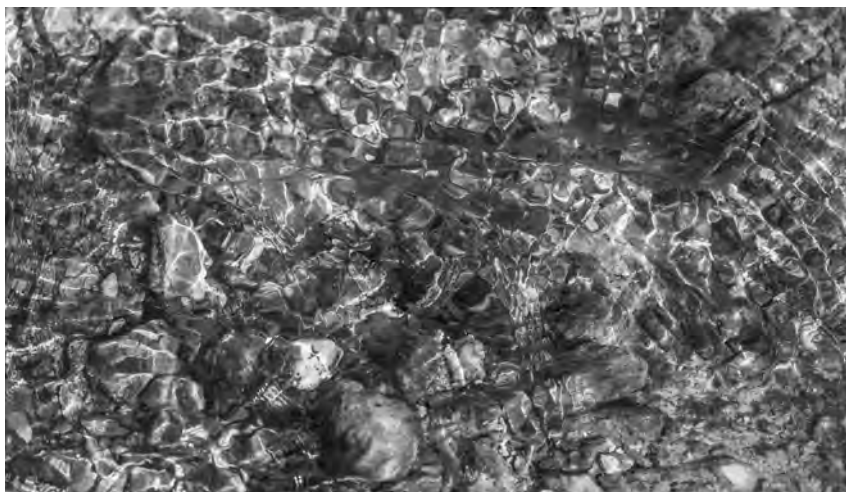
"Awful sorry 'bout that, sir," the Tramp said. He bent low and got a hand beneath the case and then hoisted it over the lip of the trunk, pushing it to the back. Alfred set the jack in the trunk.

"I think you got some oil on that suitca ..." Alfred turned to see the Tramp staring at his hands. The dark red color, the faintly ferric scent, it was unmistakable. Alfred felt a calm come suddenly over him—he knew what he needed to do. The Tramp's hands began to shake.

Clenching his teeth, Alfred drew the wrench back. He felt its heft pulling at the tendons in his shoulder, the knurled grip digging into his fingertips, the weight of the moment seeming to slow the passage of time. The Tramp turned to

face him with a slack jaw and widened eyes, sweat trickling down his neck, cheeks quivering. Alfred sneered at the Tramp in all his unwashed, malodorous glory. The Tramp backpedaled, his face contorted in fear, eyes fixed on the wrench.

Alfred looked at the cowering wretch before him and dropped his arm to his side. Too much to bury already. He tossed the wrench beside the suitcase enclosing the still-warm corpse of his unfaithful bride and *her* unborn child—not *his*. The trunk closed with a gratifying sound signifying fine German craftsmanship, and Alfred silently stared at the Tramp, then smiled, stepped into his Mercedes, and motored off, ever deeper into the wild.



DITCH WATER 2

LIKE A LOVER, LIKE A MOTHER

After a weekend chock-full
of spackling cracked plaster,
stacking barrels of oil in the boiler room,
and scraping chunks of chewing gum
from a concrete staircase,
the Maintenance Man wants nothing more

than to unwind in the basement
with the bottle of scotch he stole from 2B,
burying his purple knuckles in the rubber pulp
of his quadriplegic punching mannequin, whom he named Michael
whom he jokes with, dresses in a ragged baseball cap,
whom he kisses.

The tenants don't know everything.

They don't know he talks to the pipes he fixes,
that he marks cartoons into walls before he paints them,
that he cleaned up dog shit in 2B,

or that some nights
when the basement's submarine windows flood
the dusty cement floor in moonprints of trees,
he gently wipes down the scotch and sweat soaked chest of Michael,

like a lover,
like a mother.

THE MOTOR MILE

There is a city with avenues that sigh off
toward obscured horizons
in perfectly straight, well-planned miles,

a florescent grid of grocery store aisles
with a flickering dream-sequence of choices,

a city with small buildings, each window
back-lit like vending machine buttons,
the lives inside waiting to be bought,
waiting to roll out onto the sidewalk

where strange new rhythms once leaked from sewer lids
but now only dance with the hum of angry cursing
down the dark alleyways of this drunken place,
with its undone belt-buckle mornings,
its dizzied evening eyes,

a city with no streetlamps
beneath which to serenade a lover,
so there are no lovers,
and were it not for the slow fireworks of cigarettes,
the city would be blind at night

just as the children there
who sleep through their youth
who have strange, lid-lit nightmares
of turkeys made of their own living hands,
children who grow too wild to fit through
the rectangular mouths of their apartment buildings, children

who no one there would pay for anyway,
who scan the brick skyline until they manage to leave,
some only looking back every now and then

to reinvestigate why they left, or why
the morning traffic always felt
like an emergency evacuation,

even though day after day,
it was always the same cars,
the same people.

REAL JAZZ

In about 60 seconds, I'm going to turn
and ask the old woman sitting next to me
what her name is.

I want the question to be a baseball
smashing through her living room window,
her stern gaze breaking from the middle space
to fold around a smile. Matilda. Loretta. *Eunice*.
She has a thousand names.

I'll comment on the weather, of course,
but in a way that makes today seem like a day so nice
that people typically too cool to have a comment
suddenly can't shut up about it.

She might ask what I'm up to. Why I'm sitting alone
here on the bench.

I'll say that my girlfriend
went into the arts-and-crafts store behind us a few days ago,
and never came out. I'll make a joke
about creative ways to end relationships.

Maybe she'll laugh, adjust her dentures
and say that it's a nice enough day
for a few assumptions here and there.

And we'll just sit on the bench together,
quietly enjoying the spritz of light
shopping-plaza jazz straining
through rusted hi-hat speakers above us.
There's a good chance

we'll both be imagining that we're in a night club,
at a small cocktail round listening to a real band
slip through Coltrane, *Lonnie's Lament*, *Naima*,
the spotlight sun refocusing toward the sleeping pianist,

leaving us in the smoky dark to hold hands across the table,

free to sit quietly and mine the youth
from feeling so undiscovered
by the rest of the room.



SUMMER CLOUD

AN IDEA FOR A TATTOO

The mayor of some mountain city
stares out of a window on the top floor of a hotel.

Behind him, a woman unbuttons her dress,
wonders if it's worth her time
to ask what his problem is.

He counts the cloud shadows inching across his constituency
from water tower to water tower, bruising random towns
in patches of temporary evening.

He's fixed on one place in particular.

It's a neighborhood with a street called "High View,"
with a little red house at the end.

In the basement, a man floats
in his new sensory deprivation tank.

His wife is standing by the door, incrementally
turning the water temperature dial toward boiling.

He's in too deep to notice.

And upstairs, that man's angry son
flips through old photo albums, finally
arriving at a shot of a younger version of his father
posing like he caught a Frisbee in his mouth.

Oh, and everyone is smiling.

MASSAGE THERAPY

Votives flicker. Buddha watches,
golden voyeur, from his wicker stand.
The sheet luffs across my back,

light as the masseur's breath.
I close my eyes, my mind adrift.
His hands will have to do for now.

As he rubs out kink and knot,
drums away at ridge and marl,
my muscles yield to knead and touch

to hum in softened symmetry.
Passageways, furrows, nerve endings,
grief, all lean into his fingers, elbows, palms.

Silkened in oils—of lemon balm and sage—
my thirsty dermas blush. When he lifts
the sheet for me to flip, I turn, graceful

as a seal who spins through piano
music sea. He strokes and skims my hips,
lines the length of my limbs, asks,

*Are you too tender? Is this too much, too hard,
too deep?* He purls my chakras and toes,
circles my ankles, moves back and forth

then holds my feet, silent and still.
The room is filled with all that's between us,
and all that is not. Then the doorknob clicks.

ANTLERS

When I started growing them
you were not surprised. I must
have had deer in my family,
which explained how I nibbled
the grass and demanded to jump
over bushes, other obstacles.
I started to panic as the antlers
became bigger and heavier,
for it became hard to keep
my head up. I cut into them,
but my mind screamed.
I had to stop the sawing.
Then other stags started
to appear: they scraped dirt
with their hooves, snorted
hot breath into the yard's air.
You cheered me from the window,
but also feared I'd crack. I stared
at my opponent, preparing myself
to leap at my challenger's horns,
so I'd hear them split and break off.
I was ready to feel what feeling was like.



G R E A T F A L L S M I R R O R

Edward Bernton lives in Cumberland, Maryland, and in Washington, D.C. He is a retired U.S. Army physician who enjoys hiking and biking in Western Maryland and occasionally other locales. His interests are photography and writing, when he isn't busy working to keep his old house from falling apart around him.

Alan Bogage is a local poet living in Westminster, Maryland. He is the library director and an adjunct English instructor at Carroll Community College. His poems have appeared in periodicals and publications, including *One Tree Many Branches* and *Gentle Strength Quarterly*.

Jennifer Browne's professional life has consisted of work with and advocacy for underprepared and educationally disadvantaged students. Teaching at Frostburg State University, she has been described by one student as "kind of a spaz." She has previously published poetry in *The Potomac*, *The Peninsula Review*, and *Maryland Poetry Review*.

Robert Evory is a creative writing fellow at Syracuse University. He is the poetry editor for *Salt Hill* and the co-founder and managing editor for *The Poet's Billow*. His poetry is featured or is forthcoming in *Spillway*, *Spoon River*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Wisconsin Review*, and *Water~Stone Review*, among others.

Jamie M. Fisher is fascinated by fairy-tales, the paranormal, mythology, and the wonders of the natural world. Previously published in the *Backbone Mountain Review* and *Bittersweet* literary magazines, Fisher is working on her first four-book paranormal series with horror elements and a fractured fairy-tale short story.

Nina Forsythe has an MFA from Bennington and her poems, translations, and reviews have appeared in various magazines, including *Nimrod*, *5 AM*, *Chiron Review*, *Taproot*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Review Revue*, and the anthology *Knocking on the Door*. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and is a three-time winner of the *Backbone Mountain Review* Poetry Prize. She conducts creative writing workshops for students of various ages in Western Maryland.

A native of Grand Rapids, Michigan, **Vickie Griffiths** earned her Bachelor of Science in English from Frostburg State University. A guitarist and songwriter, she released her first CD, *Six Miles to Lovely*, in 2009. Griffiths is a staff photographer and writer at the *Cumberland Times-News* and resides in Cumberland, Maryland.

Nicole Houser is a professor at Frostburg State University where she teaches Spanish and English as a Second Language.

Donald Illich has published in *The Iowa Review*, *LIT*, *Rattle*, and many other journals. He lives in Rockville, Maryland.

Anthony Mangos lives in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. His passions are traveling, experiencing different cultures, and writing in all forms. He contributes to various film magazines, including *Classic Images*, and is an arts and entertainment reviewer at *People's World* online. He enjoys creative fiction and continues to work on his first novel.

Richard Maslow lives in Cumberland, Maryland. He had an earlier poem published in the 2007 *BMR*. Between 2007 and 2013 he wrote several plays (*Cricket in the Snow*, *Midwinter, and Service*) and two short books: *Dear Buddha Bubba: Letters Never Sent to the Dalai Lama* and *Cooking Alone* (culinary character sketches).

Melanie Michael is the author of the children's book *Nerfnerd*. She lives in Cumberland, Maryland, with her daughter Millena and two poodles. She enjoys taking her book to schools for readings, parenting, visiting friends, family and new places, gardening, writing fantasy and reading the classics. She is pursuing a creative writing degree.

William "Buddy" Miller lives in LaVale, Maryland, with his wife Brenda. He is a heavy equipment operator and has never written or had anything published before. Buddy got the idea for his story from his friend Carl who drove a snow plow for SHA. Once he got started on his little tale about his friend, he could not stop. He would wake up in the middle of the night with a new chapter on Carl's plight on the snowplow and could not get back to sleep until he put it to paper. Writing this story was really exciting for him, and he hopes the urge to write another will strike again. He would also like to thank his friend Jim Ballas for his help getting this story to the *Backbone Mountain Review*.

Corey Oglesby studies creative writing at Frostburg State University in Frostburg, Maryland. His poetry has been published in *The Broadkill Review*. He is a song writer and avid music lover. He is a native of the Washington, D.C., metro area.

Jolene Paternoster works as an editor and publishing assistant in West Virginia. Her poetry has been featured in VerbalEzse Press's *Young Writers Anthology*, as well as in the online literary magazine *Vox Poetica*. Her poem "Sonnet After Nearly a Year" was recently awarded second place in the Morgantown Poets' 2013 Contest.

M.C. Pratt is an artist, writer and teacher whose imagery most frequently reflects a closeness to the earth, conjuring her transitory nature. Pratt directs the Environmental Arts Education Program for the Evergreen Heritage Center Foundation. She writes, paints, and teaches in Maryland and North Carolina.

Tiffany Santos is an avid writer, new media publicist, event planner, producer, and educator and has taught various types of writing classes for numerous programs. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in gender studies with a minor in Asian studies and has completed graduate-level work in poetry.

"Forget Me Not" is a departure from the norm for **Richard Schiver** who has spent his entire writing career exploring the darker side of reality. A strong supporter of self-publishing, his available work has been well-received in the U.S. and abroad. He maintains a blog at rschiver.blogspot.com.

Tracy Seffers lives with her family on the Shenandoah River, under the shadow of the Blue Ridge. Her poetry has been published in several regional literary journals and publications. She recently attended the 2013 Appalachian Writer's Workshop at the Hindman Settlement School in Kentucky.

Lisa Sheirer is a digital printmaker, photographer, designer, and art educator who works with pixels, paper, clay, glass, metal and wood. She is program manager and professor of computer graphics and photography at Frederick Community College. A native of Allegany County, Sheirer has a BFA in painting and printmaking from West Virginia University and an MFA in sculpture from the University of Notre Dame. Over the past decade, Sheirer has produced large ceramic and glass murals for the Baltimore-Washington International Airport commissioned by the Maryland Department of Transportation and a glass mural installed in the Western Maryland Health System lobby in Cumberland, Maryland. Over the past two decades, Sheirer has exhibited her work in numerous solo shows from Chicago to Washington, D.C.

Sue Ann Simar is about as urban as someone can be who has always lived in the mountains. Simar edits *10x3 plus* poetry journal and participates in the Madwomen in the Attic poetry group lead by Lori Wilson in Morgantown, West Virginia. Simar's most recent publication is a poem for Trayvon Martin in *The Montucky Review*.

Robert Spahr grew up on Long Island but moved to Garrett County in 2006. He is a Frostburg State University alumnus, former president of FSU's 3AM Society, and member of the FSU Center for Creative Writing Board of Advisors. He typically can be found writing, reading, golfing, or traveling.

Brendan Stephens teaches English. He graduated from Frostburg State University through the Master of Arts in Teaching program and earned a bachelor's in English with a focus on creative writing. His band is called Perfect Future. He grew up in Garrett County before making the big move all the way to Allegany County.

Pia Taavila-Borsheim has a doctorate in the fields of English, sociology and philosophy from Michigan State University (1985). Her 30 years' collected poems, *Moon on the Meadow*, was published by Gallaudet University Press in 2008; a chapbook, *Two Winters*, was released by Finishing Line Press in 2011.

Brittany Tabler is developing herself as a writer. She is pursuing a degree in creative writing from Frostburg State University and enjoys every moment. Her non-literary interests include gardening, cooking, crafting, and photography.

Jonathan Treece moved to Cumberland, Maryland, at the age of 7. He wrote his first poem at age 10 and has been writing sporadically ever since. He is gainfully employed, in a happy relationship, and quite well-adjusted, for a writer.

Mike Weddle lives in the magic-filled woods of Garrett County with his wife Sandra and works as a physician in nearby Meyersdale, Pennsylvania. Weddle has published poems and short fiction in several literary magazines and has published in the *Backbone Mountain Review* each year since 2008. His other passion is playing the Native American flute.

Jennifer Whitman lives in Cumberland, Maryland, with her husband. She takes classes at Allegany College of Maryland and is working toward a degree in human services.

Lori Wilson is the author of the poetry collection *House Where a Woman* (Autumn House Press, 2009). Her poems have appeared in *Salamander*, *Georgetown Review*, *Cerise*, *5 AM* and elsewhere. She teaches a poetry workshop in Morgantown, West Virginia, in affiliation with the Madwomen in the Attic at Carlow University.

Chikita Wright is twenty-two years old and lives in Grantsville, Maryland. She is an English major at Garrett College, and has been writing all her life.

Sharon Yoder, a native of Garrett County, taught in Manitoba's far north and in Northern Virginia before returning to Western Maryland. She now teaches composition courses at Allegany College of Maryland and finds poetry, like life, rich in struggle and joy.

CONTRIBUTORS

EDWARD BERNTON

ALAN BOGAGE

JENNIFER BROWNE

ROBERT EVORY

JAMIE M. FISHER

NINA FORSYTHE

VICKIE GRIFFITHS

NICOLE HOUSER

DONALD ILLICH

ANTHONY MANGOS

RICHARD MASLOW

MELANIE MICHAEL

WILLIAM "BUDDY" MILLER

COREY OGLESBY

JOLENE PATERNOSTER

M.C. PRATT

TIFFANY SANTOS

RICHARD SCHIVER

TRACY SEFFERS

SUE ANN SIMAR

ROBERT SPAHR

BRENDAN STEPHENS

PIA TAAVILA-BORSHEIM

BRITTANY TABLER

JONATHAN TREECE

MIKE WEDDLE

JENNIFER WHITMAN

LORI WILSON

CHIKITA WRIGHT

SHARON YODER