

METAMORPHOSES '99



CERRO COSO COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Cerro Coso Community College

Metamorphoses '99

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Metamorphoses

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Cerro Coso Community College

Bishop, Edwards, Lake Isabella, Mammoth Lakes, and Ridgecrest, CA



Black, White & One Grey

Karen Frick

Graphite on Paper

Reverence

I smell a yellow pencil's fresh-hewn point
to know yellow, to know wood and lead
to remember classrooms filled with small children
and me—sticky with glue and covered with chalk
from writing on the blackboard when the teacher
wasn't looking.

I drag my fingers idly through the dirt
as I sit, lizard-like in the sun, dreaming
of the soil of other countries, other worlds.

I feel each grain of sand, each crunchy twig
so I will know the boulders in a red ant's
stony path.

I sit quiet and listen in my grandmother's house
because she is wise. I listen to learn about people
to know death and joy and friendship and old age.
She slowly tells long stories with complex plots,
involving people from times long past and foreign
places, like Texas. The point of all her stories
is that she loves me.
I listen.

Kate Schober

Dirt Road Dream

I.

Dirt road stretches out, untouched
a lighter shade
of darkness
leads me
beyond sidewalks, streetlamps
and rooms
dimly leaking
sultry yellow light
beyond the reach of
stale city breezes
greased with hamburger vapors
and
gasoline
beyond the shared solitude
of people avoiding
each other's warmth
beyond gray paved streets
stocked carelessly with glass
trash and noise
...I ran.

II.

(I did not run far before
my heavy strides
shortened
and shortened)
i paused...
waiting for the half-moon to rise,
i
looked around
and smelled the spider-stars
spin
and fret their way
to the top of the sky
felt the sage
green-silver growing,

gray dying
and the sand shifting
 grain
 by heavy grain
saw the leaves turning
 toward the moon
and heard their shadows
 moving with them
i
lay breathless in the earth, waiting
to taste
 the dust of moths
 bumping
 through the liquid night
to drink
 the midnight musk of
 fresh bitterbrush
to savor
 the sharpest bed
 of sand and rocks
and to stop

waiting.

Kate Schober

Terrestris, Cubicus, Cumulus

Somewhere out there, in a field, on a tractor, the dusty manure of a thousand cows hangs in the air and infiltrates eyes, ears, nose, mouth. Sunlight hot to the touch on skin burning. Sweat beads, pools, dries. Narrowed lids seek the cat tongue licked patterns in dead grass to sweep the harrow along the right path. And the tractor is loud. Noisy with turbulent monotony, a cacophonous vibration, deafening from the inside out. But below the monotonous tractor tones, a cello strikes up: low, sweeping, slow.

Alone inside my white-lit box and up at the hour of the damned, still sitting up. Fingering the edge of my Vons' wild-flowers patterned coffee cup. Too much of a good thing is still too much . . . still thinking . . . too quiet. No dogs, no noon whistle, nobody's kids playing outside after school, no cars going by on the road. Even the moon is silent tonight. The fire crackles a little. Too hot by the fire, too cold by the window, the fan is on. The fan is on. Constant and quiet, but the loudest thing around, and my attention goes around with it, around. And in between the nice, clean, humming sounds, a violin begins to utter its singsong sweep of sound.

An airplane ride is only exciting when it's not too long. The rest is full of cramped, sleeping, semi-damp people with dry mucous membranes rattling seed-husks as they breathe to themselves. Read to themselves, crinkling newspapers and candy wrappers and diapers. Keep to themselves. Never mind the food. Kinked knees, lower body tingly asleep, might as well let the rest go, too. Head against the window, the wall, the jet engines throb. Throbbing and humming slowly enter subconscious sideways as my head begins to nod. In tune and time but not in fact, only mind, alto, a voice from a dream feeds in around, in between, cello and violin.

Kate Schober



Caruso

Denise C. Black

Ceramic



Right Angles

David Wilson

Photography

Noh Play

I wake in the morning with an anvil on my chest and fine haze before my eyes. I haven't opened them yet—the eyes. When I do, the haze does not lift. The anvil is large and black and invisible. The haze has a slight greenish tinge that is more than a little nauseating. My window blinds are shut tight against the sunlight, but like an unwanted houseguest, it sneaks in through the cracks. I can tell that this is so through closed eyes. It is midwinter in the desert, but it is a warm year and rainy. Even with all the precipitation, the sun shines brilliantly most days, a fool mocking me with his silly grin. Sometime during the two hours that I managed to sleep, my bedroom door was shut tight. Sleep is hard to come by and I revel in its glory. I can see that the door is shut because I have pried open one eyelid so that a razor thin slit appears between upper and lower lids. In a brief moment of ironic levity, I imagine that this slit makes me appear rakish, perhaps even dangerous. I suddenly wish that everybody I have ever known were looking down at me from above, like a patient who is going under anesthesia peering up at the assembled doctors and nurses with their worried brows and the green masks that hide their sardonic smirks. I want them around me because it is rare that I look anything but defeated and they might find my rakishness refreshing. The eyelid goes back down. The sickening green haze remains. The anvil makes breathing difficult.

I imagine that I too have a green mask, only my mask covers my entire face. It begins at my hairline and is form fitting. I imagine that I have an enchanted magic marker that I use to paint the outside of my mask. I paint wide, bright, alert eyes and a gentle smile onto the rough green fabric. I paint faint traces of smile wrinkles on my cheeks. I can feel the contours of the features I have painted. I try to make my real face match the face of my green mask. For a moment I succeed, although not perfectly. My eyes are wide open and subject to the assault of the sun and my mouth is set in a smile. I can tell that my eyes make me look either startled or fanatic and that my smile is ghoulish. It is a face to scare little children with, a face to send shivers up the spines of doughty men. It is worse than my normal face of defeat. I let my face go slack. I think that perhaps that the proceeding few moments might have been somewhat humorous. I try out a small laugh, more of an active grin, really. It seems to be somewhat successful. Abandoning all inhibitions, I try again and actually emit a sound from my throat. What comes out is definitely not a laugh. A banshee would make a sound like that. I stop and take inventory of my situation. I am awake. There is a large, heavy, black, invisible anvil on my chest. Breathing is difficult. The sun is shining. Tears are streaming down my cheeks. This seems to be new information. I focus in on that. I seem to be sobbing. I wish for catatonia. God isn't listening. Fuck it. I gather all the strength I have and sit up. I swing my feet over the edge of the double bed that I use only half of. I stand, trembling and naked and stark thin. Like an albatross, the anvil hangs around my neck by a thick steel chain. The green haze is dizzying. I move to the dresser to find some clean underwear. Another day has begun.

I get up everyday and I shower, I shave, I brush my teeth. I even put on deodorant though I know that I am never going to leave the house. These are the things that you do. Baby-steps. I've said that I have an anvil around my neck, but that isn't really an accurate description. That gives the impression that I am physically tired, which is true enough, but it doesn't really describe what it is like. There is energy in there. Not as much as the normal person has, but there is a reserve and it would be enough to do some things. I guess it really does all come down to meaning. There seems to be no action that one could take that has any sort of meaning. We all move from activity to activity with the belief that we are going somewhere, that we are moving forward in linear progression. We go to class to educate ourselves so that we can get a good job so that we can have money or personal fulfillment or whatever, but all of our actions have meaning to us. We have a place that we want to get to. Life isn't like that for depressives. There is no meaning. There is only incurable loneliness, isolation, and psychic pain. I don't want things the way you want things. I want not to be. Stop the machine, I'm getting off.

I spend my day in my father's office. The curtains are drawn, but in the afternoon the sunlight creeps in through the cracks just like the morning light does in my room. I sit in a big red chair with way too much cushioning. The footrest is of the same material and it is always either too close or too far away. I meld with the chair slowly each day, feeling myself sink further and further into it, hoping that one day I might just merge with it, become one. That night, my father would come into his office, notice that the TV is on and sit down in his oversized chair and never even notice that I was still sitting there, one with the chair, one with the room. He might think, I wonder where Jeff is, but it will be a fleeting thought. One day it will be, Why does the name Jeff sound familiar?, and he will shake it off, and I will finally fade from his memory with a smile.

Cardboard boxes lie around the room, their contents a mystery. A kitchen-sized trash can sits next to the wall unit for easy waste disposal. Most days from my spot in the chair, I can see refuse poking its nose up over the rim of the plastic receptacle. My father's desk is littered with paper. The bookshelves are lined with technical manuals. The carpet is new, but gray and somber. The TV in this room is beginning to fade. For the first hour after it is turned on, the green gun is non-functional, so that everything appears in shades of red. I watch anyway. The sunlight filters in, its crooked fingers laying a malevolent touch on all that it encounters. The TV bathes the room with its blood. I keep sinking.

I try to go for a walk everyday. Whether I feel like it or not. I seldom do—feel like it that is. I do manage to walk most days. I live on the edge of town where the asphalt meets the sand. I go that direction. West, young man.

I tried walking into town once. It was okay for a while but the busier the roads got, the more people I could see. I looked in the windows at the faces of the people driving the cars.

The people in the cars didn't look right. Their chins reached for their laps and they sat hunched over their wheels, like evil gnomes over a bubbling cauldron. I could see something struggling under their skin, longing to be free. The sight was hideous.

I don't think I made it farther than half a mile from the house before I turned tail and dashed back. Once in the house, I rushed to the safe darkness of my room, closing and locking the door behind me.

I don't go that way any more. Dragons be beyond this line.

I go out to the desert to shake my fist at god. God is a black dog that barks at me every day as I pass his residence. It's lonely out there. The sky is huge. Sometimes it seems like a sort of vacuum, lifting away the dirt that clings to me. Sometimes it seems to descend upon me, threatening to crush me into sand like it has done to so much else that has dared to roam these valleys. Creosote isn't much of a companion and god the black dog and god the blue sky aren't much better. Sometimes I walk for hours and think about never going back home. Some days the wind knifes through me and some days the sun bakes the ground. It's all the same. I always come back. Where would I go that I could escape myself?

Every night, I go to bed exhausted. At some time during the day, the green haze lifts off of my sight, but its filmy residue seems to cling to my brain all day long. I get three to four hours of oft-interrupted sleep a night. Four hours if I'm lucky. At night, my head buzzes in a most uncomfortable fashion. It is useless though, lying in bed. I turn the lights out. I leave my door open so that Pippin, my cat, can wander in and out at will. A dim orange light, like that of candle light off of a high ceiling, drifts in from the hall outside my bedroom door. I have become very acquainted with night sounds. Fortunately, most of our neighbors with dogs keep them in at night or they are very well trained. But I can hear dogs howling at a distance all night long. I actually do not mind their clamor, because at that distance, their barking has a kind of low,

keening, musical quality. The crickets, on the other hand, are bothersome. I would love to open my window and let in the fresh desert air, but the crickets have made camp directly below my window. They have mounted their offensive and I truly see no way that I could honorably outflank them. They have won. The window stays shut. It does not keep out their cacophony.

Unlike the dogs, they are no more melodious than an arrhythmic pianist playing middle C all through the night in the next room. The walls of our house act more like megaphones than barriers to noise. I have learned to discern if my father is feeling well by subtle distinctions in the timbre of his snoring. (Deep and rhythmic is healthy; wheezy and broken means his allergies are acting up.) I am constantly on the edge of the precipice of sleep, ready to fall over into that which I most long for, but the smallest sound can pull me into a full state of alertness.

There is a demon that haunts me at night. I see his ghoulish face leering at me in the pale neon light that slips in through the cracks of my dungeon. He is my conductor, my horror show. His face is hideous, his mouth wide and gaping; his eyes black orbs; his nose a cruel blade. I have no fear of him, but he doesn't need my fear to be effective. He nibbles away at the edges of my sanity like a rat on rancid meat. He, like a rat, knows the twists and turns of the subterranean tunnels that are my thought. He swims through sewage and crawls silently over the defiled clutter that litters my mind. He is crafty and patient. He lets me roam through my darkened world for as long as I will, quietly willing me on though I want to drop. He is my carrot. He plants lures in front of me, lights in the deepening gloom. Or he offers the absolution of pure darkness. And when I finally tire and sink to ground, ready at last to sleep, he cues up his demented orchestra. His timing is exquisite. Should my mind finally quiet and rest, his long reed-like fingers point to the dogs in the night, or the crickets under my window, or the cats in the house, and I am awakened, fully alert and staring in rage into his laughing face. I would hate him, but he feeds on my hate, growing stronger with its sustenance. I cannot kill him, for he is me.

I am speaking with Dr. Nagy. I know that I should feel more comfort when I hear his slightly reedy voice on the phone, but I can sense that he doesn't like me much. I wonder why this is. He is good at what he does, though. I am convinced that he saved my life a couple of years back when he prescribed the medication that I am currently taking.

I talk to him on the phone in the front room, which is a depressingly cheerful room. My mom keeps the curtains open. The windows face south and west. It is mid-afternoon. Sunlight floods the room. Plants flourish in here. I can feel the condensation coming off their leaves as I sit speaking with him. There is a picture of two American Indian women sitting in a vast empty beigeness on the wall above me. I sit in a soft leather chair. One of the women is tying up the other woman's hair. Something about this picture is appealing to me, but I hate the women's bare feet, which are hugely out of proportion and grotesque. I wonder if the painter did this on purpose and if so what the hell it is supposed to mean. I want to walk around behind the women and disappear into that world.

"I think that's a great idea," Dr. Nagy's voice pulls me out of my reverie. Earlier I had mentioned that I was thinking about group therapy. I wanted somebody to tie up my hair in a field of beige. "We need to throw everything we can at this right now."

These were not very encouraging words, especially since they had been uttered with complete sincerity and urgency. That was a slip, I think. He shouldn't have let me know how serious he thinks my condition is.

Dr. Nagy had called to check up on me. I think that is awfully kind of him. I think he just wanted to make sure I was still alive. I sometimes think that the doctors aren't telling me everything about my diagnosis. Sometimes I wonder if I am mildly schizophrenic. I'm probably just paranoid.

Winter becomes spring and still the bats fly. The wolves are never silent and the witch is stirring up more brew. When the flowers bloom, I meet my counselors for the first time. There hadn't been an available therapy group for months. Now they have one.

"So, what's your story?" says Counselor One.

Counselor One is a woman, perhaps in her early forties. She speaks softly because she knows that loud noises scare the beast. Her hair is fair and straight and cut with boyish bangs. She is thin, but not in shape. I will later find out that she is a smoker. This will disturb me but it will explain why her body doesn't seem right. Her face is not unpleasant, but she doesn't push any of my hormonal buttons. I want to curl up in her lap and sleep. Her concern seems detached but sincere. I feel that she really cares.

Counselor Two is a man, much shorter than I am. He is balding and likes to wear a French beret that makes him look ridiculous. Don't tell him I said so. His smile seems plastered on. I do not trust him. The way the two of them work makes me think that I am supposed to do a transference thing and think of them as parents. It might have worked if he had been more believable. I keep trying to surreptitiously look behind him to see if on the other side he is just a cardboard cutout.

"Well, I seem to just be getting worse," I say.

"What do you mean by worse?" asks Counselor One.

I find that I can look them in the eye when they speak to me, but I stare at my hands when I am speaking. I don't like the sound of my voice. I feel on the verge of tears. My voice resonates, quavers to my internal condition.

"I just don't feel much reason to go on, you know," I say.

They nod. They know.

"Do you think about dying?" Counselor One asks. I think they have picked up, on visual clues, that I prefer her, so she does the talking.

"You mean, do I think about suicide?" I say. "Yes, often."

"Do you have a plan?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

I tell them about the plastic bag. About sleeping pills.

"Do you have these materials on hand?"

"They are household items."

There is no arguing with that, but it has distressed them. They glance at each other quickly. When Counselor Two turns his head, it almost comes as a surprise that he has three dimensions. I begin to wonder if I am going to make it out of the room. I realize that I have to start telling them what they want to hear.

“Are you planning on doing this?” asks Counselor Two.

“No,” I lie. “These are just thoughts that run through my head. I have no plans to actually follow through.” I don’t tell them that I have the bag and the pills in a special place reserved for them in my closet, almost an altar.

Counselor One says, “I want you to promise me that you will not attempt suicide. Will you do that?” Her tone is quietly urgent. They shift slightly forward in their chairs like theatergoers during the climactic scene. I contemplate saying no, but realize that that would be foolish. They would hospitalize me in a second. Part of me wants that, though. I want the responsibility of my life taken off my shoulders.

“I told you, I have no plans to commit suicide,” I lie again.

“I want you to promise.”

“I promise.”

Somewhere in the room a safety valve is released and everything deflates. The two of them suddenly seem to have jelly for bones. They sink back in their chairs. I stare at the small desk lamp mounted on the shelf over the desktop. It glows unnaturally white. I hate those lights.

I am accepted as a founding member of a group to be formed in a month.

In the meantime, I try to find work. A few months earlier, I was working as a waiter. The manager of the restaurant that I worked at tells me that she doesn’t have a permanent position for me, but that I am free to pick up shifts from other people.

On the first night that I am supposed to work for somebody, I am in my room. My grandmother lives with us. She has arthritis and she takes pills for pain. I have stolen a small amount of these narcotics-grade pills (about five) and, in addition to those, I take about ten over the counter sleeping pills. The idea is not to kill myself with pills. That sounds like a nasty way to die and if I am discovered, I will be taken to the hospital and have my stomach pumped and spend three days in a psychiatric ward. I have already done some time in a ward like that. It was hell and I don’t want to go back. Those are the worst places ever to put somebody who doesn’t feel like living in the first place. The big idea is to knock myself out while I have a plastic bag tied around my head. It is a huge plastic bag so that I won’t have any problems with losing oxygen before I pass out. I have turned off the lights. I am already beginning to feel a little groggy from the drugs. The darkness is nice, enticing. It is peaceful to think that soon it will be just darkness. I put the bag over my head. The plastic crinkles loudly and I am afraid that I will wake my grandmother on the other side of our megaphone walls, but she is hard of hearing and doesn’t stir. I tie the bag shut with twist ties and lie down to await the blackness.

One thing I hadn’t counted on was how hot it would be inside the bag. Beads of sweat form on my forehead immediately. The other thing I’m not prepared for is the demon that lives in my room at night. Even with all those pills, I find that I can’t sleep. All those pills aren’t enough to knock me out. I can hear the demon laughing over my shoulder. There is a dim yellow light shining through the material of the bag. It is the light from my stereo. As I breathe, the bag deflates a little and then fills up again as I breathe out. Over and over I watch this. Moisture starts to form on the sides of the bag. Enough moisture accumulates and a drip forms. Drip, splat says the drop falling from the top of the bag. The demon chortles. My hair has gone limp. It clings to the sides of my head. In and out goes the bag. My breath becomes short. The sides of the bag are collapsing and expanding faster and deeper now. My breath is audible now; whoosh,

shwish says my breath. And the demon laughs on. In and out. Drip, splat. Woosh, shwish. But my breathing is not coming so short that I couldn't will myself through this until I pass out from lack of oxygen.

Then I start thinking about Robin, my wife, and I realize that I am not capable of hurting her like this, even though she left me dangling on a string long ago. It surprises and angers me that she still has such a hold on me; that because of what I feel for her, my life is literally not my own. For a heartbeat or two, I watch the glowing sides of the plastic bag rise and fall once again. Then, swearing, I rip the bag from my head, hating her more than ever.

Soon I pass out. I sleep for a very long time. It is not restful. Pippin sits at my door all night long, mewing softly.

One of the most striking features about depression is that the person who suffers from it almost invariably blames him or herself for the disease. There is no test for depression. There are no x-rays or CAT scans or ultra-sounds that can be held up to the illuminating light of science. There is nothing that can be pointed at and said, "There it is."

People don't believe in depression. People who suffer from depression don't believe in depression. They believe that they are just lazy or no-good or mean. They believe that depression is just one big ol' excuse. Depressives hate themselves.

The first day of my group therapy, I meet five women who suffer from depression in a way that I hope I never do. The room that we meet in is like a cave. There is one small window that never seems to face the sun and the blinds are always three-quarters closed. The carpet is tattered, gray and spotted with the stains of countless unremembered psychotic traumas. Cushions hang loosely on sofas that appear to be purchased at the skankiest thrift-stores in the hemisphere. For some unknown reason, there is a sink in the room, built into a counter-top of Formica the color of my green haze. Plastic chairs are strewn about in a vaguely circular fashion. Welcome to the place of healing.

Into this dark chamber, a line of women marches, as though part of a chain gang, faces ravaged by unknown years of deep melancholy. People talk about long faces and we get the impression that whomever they are talking about is a little sad, kind of down and out; their dog died recently. But I've seen long faces and they are not sad. They are crushed, utterly and hopelessly defeated by life, by friends and family who will never understand, by years of bone-deep sorrow, by a deep conviction that nothing can ever bring them happiness.

Most depressives put on a face, a mask. They paint themselves every moment with their enchanted magic markers so most people will never see what they really look like. This room, as uninviting as it might be, is our sanctuary, our confessional, our body and blood. In here, we wear no masks. I look around the room at the women surrounding me and I see the face of death staring back at me, eyes glinting, scythe poised, canines bared in a mischievous grin.

And as they begin to speak, these gaunt women marked by the black hand, I feel my burden begin to lighten. They tell their stories, one at a time, their mouths moving almost indiscernibly, their eyes cast down to the tattered carpet, their hopes and dreams being cast out into the space in front of them. They are without hope that someone, anyone, can take hold of their words, of their pain and sorrow, and simply understand.

I am the lucky one. I am able to finally understand that what is happening to me is not my fault. And as I sit here, looking from face to face, I feel something shift inside of me and I know that I am on my way.

It is a few months later. I am sitting in the big red chair watching the TV. The green gun is properly warmed up. Everything is coming through in brilliant Sony color. I've opened the blinds, because I've begun to enjoy the sunlight.

In group therapy, we've begun to jell as a group and I can tell that we are all in various stages of healing. We support one another in ways that I would have never thought possible.

On the TV is the World Cup. As I am watching the players run across the grass, I let my mind wander. I am thinking about the group and what I see happening to us, how much I look forward to going each week. And as I think about this I notice that the players on the field have ceased to differentiate. They have become streaks of color. The surface of the TV screen lifts off of its plane and tilts toward me. The green of the grass expands until it fills the entire room and the players on the field are comets racing across my vision. The field envelops me and I am in their midst. My father's office has disappeared. The sky above me is blue and wide. There is no stadium surrounding us, no fans in the stands, no referees on the field. There is nothing but the field of rich green. It is just me and twenty-two streaks of light. I find it strange that all of the streaks are the same color. Shouldn't there be two different colors, one for each team? But I let go the thought and watch the action around me. I can discern no ball but I do notice that at any one point in time, there is a focal point on the field, because the streaks of light tend to hover around something. Soon, I see that they move in complex and beautiful patterns that the players are constructing glorious shapes with their movement. Forms are built in their weaving that linger in the air for me to gaze upon until they float away into the brilliant blue sky, while I am captivated by yet another shape. I can tell that the players aren't really aware of the shapes that they are making, but that they know that they are part of a creative act. They know that what they are doing on the field isn't merely a game, but a celebration of something bigger.

And then I make the connection. This is what we do in group. This is what we do in family life. This is what we do as musicians. This is what we do with friends. This is what we, as human beings, do. We create. We weave magical patterns of interaction. We play off of each other in beautiful ways to celebrate the fact that we are, that we exist and can do this at all.

I am suddenly aware of the process of healing, which is the process of life. I feel myself begin to grow light. I look down at my hands and torso and see that I am becoming transparent, a bundle of energy like those around me. I close my eyes and let myself flow into the action.

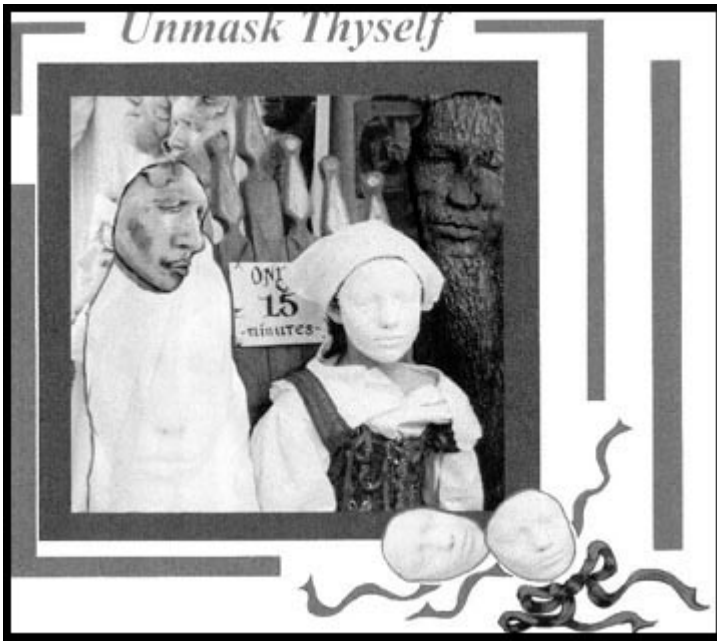
Epilogue

When I open my eyes, I am back in my father's office and, for maybe the first time in my life, I know what I want. I turn off the TV and go outside.

Outside, the sky is wide and blue and I feel as though I could float off the earth. I sit on the curb. A cat I've never seen before, an orange tabby with a wide smiling face and whiskers you could rope a calf with, is roaming the sidewalk. We look at each other. He comes to me though I do not call to him. He climbs into my lap and curls up for a nap. I stroke his fur. The wind plays gently across my face. The cat purrs. We sit like that for hours.

Afterward, when the cat has awoken and moved on, I go inside and lie down on my bed. Within seconds I am sound asleep. I sleep for a long time.

Jeff Fontaine



Unmask Thyself
Peggy Canterbury
Collage

for ally and josh 4-24-99

when stars sprinkle a benediction through glass
a dust will settle on our heads
when moonlight pours sadness from the heavens
the land will rise to meet its fall
when night clouds conjure spirits from the earth
our journeys will be witnessed
when souls are at last moved to their dance
a silence will fall among us
when words and wit finally fail
a sea will swell in our corner
when silhouettes merge into embracing night
in our heads the echoes of music made

Jeff Fontaine

Maddy

You are too perfect

for words

yet

I try:

round pink cheeks

peach fuzz hair

dark brown eyes

so serious

so deep

and a laugh

that sets

my heart

free.

I watch while you sleep

the rise and fall

of each breath

is a ticking away

of our time.

Before I know it

a woman will stand

where you do now

your hand

in my hand.

I steady you now

you will steady me then

and I will still marvel

at this precious child

named Madeleine.

Mykle Loftus



Montana de Oro

Lori Wilson

Photograph

Mind Trip

I cast my thoughts

out

over

the sea's

undulating form

and ride

unto

hard

packed

strand

there

fair-haired children

build castles

in the sand.

I gather

all this in

then cast

again

over emerald

forests

kelly green

fields

crossed

and crissed

by stones

where black –faced sheep

crop tender

slender

stems.

Once more

I'll fling

my mind

onto the mountain

top

it settles

upon the pine

streams
lakes
where silver fish
make shadows
in the
shallows
or sparkling
rainbows
as they leap
to catch
iridescent
dragonflies.

Next

I will throw
a neuro net
into the sky
where hawks
wheel
in the day
and stars
cold fire
light
the night.

Perhaps

I'll possess
the moon
and pull down
the velvety blue-black
of heaven's gown
to wrap around
me
while I
sleep

Mykle Loftus



Untitled

Jan Richardson

Bronze

The Toast

We met before summer set
its fiery seal upon the days.

A quiet exchange
charged with humor
over common tasks
in a common place.

But as we spoke
castles filled the air

Lords and Ladies
assembled near

to dance to

lute & harp

pipes & drums.

They filled the room

with song

and laughter

rustling robes

the clank of cups

toasting us

who follow after

and recall

their lives

their wars

their loves.

As we spoke

in quiet conversation

over

common

tasks.

Mykle Loftus



Funny Looking Shirt

Brad McBurnett

Charcoal

The Beholder

Richmond, Virginia

The burn and birth marks that hoarded
the right side of her face resembled
a raw turnip in an unpruned hedgerow.
And that bulbous nose was more in step
in boxing rings than debutante ballrooms.
It mattered little to loquacious onlookers
that the balance of her body juxtaposed
with the Does and the Joneses.
Or that her daddy was some big-shot
banker at the state's main branch.
There had been a time when her escort
was lured by all those Chanel scents
only to revolt at their petulant poisons.
No one at the galas could galvanize
those graceful glides, from the word
to the waltz, as his date could.
For he, weary of the shallow
and the simperer, would eat and drink
her every syllable; sparing spoken—
and dive deep into her sapphire eyes.

Mike Catalano



Pretty Vases

Karen Frick

Graphite on Paper

The Actor

Greenwich Village, New York

She once held hopes for a Golden Globe.
Certainly her *dramatis personae*,
(and that phantasmagorical physique)
earned rave reviews at loco levels.
And later on, at the Julliard, she could
out-shrew Kate and chirp her Juliet.
She was an aerobics freak, honing
and toning her stacked Strad, as if
she were an Amati from the past.
But she resented those bouncy bimbos
who lured Romeos up their balconies
and snatched those coveted billings.
She called herself an “actor”
as did Katherine Hepburn, her idol.
So it came as a shock, after years
of stonewalled screen tests, that she
took on those naughty, nudie roles;
writhing her way under the lights.
But she concocted a code that confounded
the seedy and the shallow on Broadway,
insisting on clean sheets for love scenes
and hands off at any producer’s boudoir.
“Lots of actors drool for the juicy roles,”
she lamented. “Just like you yearn
for *The New Yorker* or *The Paris Review*
to centerfold your poems.” So she risked
the blacklist, baring her boobs and buns.
She could knock Mae West’s socks off
with her silhouetted sex, taking all
her unfrozen assets to remain employable,
if not bankable—
while withering in the wallow.

Mike Catalano



Black, White & One Grey

Regina Horgan

Digital Imagery

The Conductor

Brandywine, West Virginia

I met my first Amish man today,
deep in the Shenandoah Mountains
where time hadn't shed its sands,
or a watch fob its ticks, in years.
He had but one concession to civilization,
that being an orange, danger triangle
on the back of his black, buggy rig.
He knew the world was passing him
and his brethern by, but that day,
he wasn't about to let *our* geese
goad his twin team of horses
into some tail-exhausted ditch.
So he milked that same, snoozing speed
without a twitch from his whiskers
or a turn from his stovepipe hat.
I cringed and writhed to honk, but then,
he probably heard it from the best—
and worst of road ragers before.
He cataloged every catcall by heart
and all those blue, off-color words, too.
So as the traffic and tempers blared,
I shifted into low gear and wondered
if I could borrow that peace of mind
that clanged shut our car stereos,
cell phones, and screaming kids.
He either stole the patience of Job,
or he was a closet conductor—
orchestrating that discordant chorus!

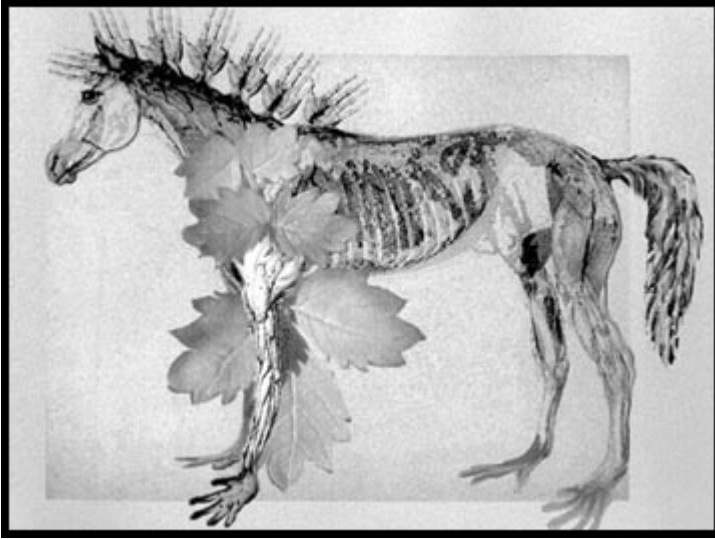
Mike Catalano

David's Shoulder

Owyhee County, Idaho

He wasn't Jewish, lest their progenitors
were blond, blue-eyed transplants. But he
certainly adorned a regal bearing, deep
in the Idaho wastelands, as attested to
by the sand lizards and jack rabbits
near the Duck Valley Indian Reservation.
But I could have sworn he was King David
incarnate, sans the sheep and the lambs.
He took his time to fondle the finest
of leather, slicing the straps and pouch
to fit his somewhat largess physique.
But Boise was no place to cultivate
his craft. Once, an errant missile
shattered a window with such resound,
that the tenants thought a tremor struck.
He would take those canning jars neighbors
deemed too rusty or moldy to recycle
their Babylonian-like garden groves.
He would jeep through a maze of dirt roads
to shun the "Police State" as he dubbed the law.
And surrounded by silence, save the ghost
of Gilead, he would align those jars
like any side-show sharpshooter would.
With sweeping, circular arcs, he lassoed
the last of the stifling desert air, deaf
to the world that scorned his sling
as the second coming of Noah's ark.
Despite the distance of two gridirons,
the impact fulminated those glassy fragments
some fifty feet behind his target.
No wonder Goliath died. His head
was a water balloon to these Siamese twins.

Mike Catalano



Horse 1

Chencha Acevedo

Digital Imagery

Pride

The bus came to a rolling stop. The rain drops hit the windows like someone throwing darts. It was dark outside. I couldn't see much except two figures standing by the curb and a few buildings and trees with light posts nearby. The rain poured. I clenched my duffel bag filled with my only worldly possessions for the time being, five white cotton T-shirts, five white cotton underwear, five white cotton sport-bras and socks, an address book, and a comb for my hair. I hugged the bag so tight, my arms felt like vise grips. I heard the apprehension in the mumbling of the other women. My heart beat so fast, it felt like a stampede of wild horses was running through my chest. I tapped my right foot nervously on the floor and wondered what I had gotten myself into.

Within the wink of an eye, the bus doors opened and a man in a rain slicker boarded. Standing at the front of the bus, this man said two things I will never forget. "You're here now and you're mine. Damn the bad luck!" He bellowed this so loud that his words echoed off the bus walls.

"On your feet. Stand up on your feet and shut up!" We scrambled to stand up and you heard ringing silence with only the rain beating on the bus roof, rat-a-tat-tat.

"This is it," I thought and stared straight ahead with my eyes as open as the roundness of the full moon.

We were told to exit the bus and stand in a single line, next to the grass on the side walk. We were all scared and uncertain about what to expect next. The rain came down in sheets. As I tried to shield my face with my bag, one of the men in slickers stepped up next to me.

"Did I say you could move?" he asked.

"No," I whimpered.

"No, no what?" he questioned.

I didn't answer. I was frozen and confused. The man stepped back and shouted at the top of his lungs, "My name is Chief Britt! I am your company commander and you will address me as sir! Welcome to hell. Welcome to camp, ladies!"

My first night in Naval Recruit Center, Orlando, Florida, I was given sobriety tests, a urinalysis to screen for drugs and hours of lecturing on what boot camp was all about. We finally were allowed to go to bed around three in the morning. I crawled up on the top of a bunk and stretched out. I was so relieved to get away from Chief Britt and the tension and onto something comfortable and familiar. I soon lulled off to sleep.

Clang, crash, clang! I awoke with a jolting start. The lights came on and big metal garbage cans were flying and spinning up and down the walkway between the bunks. I saw Chief Britt, dressed in his khaki colored uniform and ribbons on his chest. There were others, including two women dressed like him. There was screaming and yelling coming from every direction. I was looking around at the other women as were they. Then I realized the people in uniform were screaming for us to get out of our racks and stand in front of them. I jumped down in my sock feet and scurried to the head of the bunk and stood there. As I looked around in a fury, I saw many women beginning to cry. But I stood there like a stiff golf tee in the green with my eyes on the wall across from me.

“Stand behind the black line painted on the floor. Put your heels together, arms at your sides, chin up and look forward, only! Don’t move an inch!” Chief Britt yelled.

We all stood in the correct position as best we could, anticipating our next command. But there wasn’t one. He called out each of our names and hung our necklace of dog tags around our necks and left.

He left us standing there at attention for three hours. Finally, he returned and walked up and down the walkway, stopping to look into each of our faces. He came up to me. He stood so close that I could smell his after shave and hear him breathing. He circled me slowly and stopped to my right side. I had no idea what he was doing. My body ached from the tensing of my muscles. I ached from head to toe. Sweat started trickling south from my neck, down my back. It tickled, but I couldn’t move. I knew if I did that there would be consequences. I pressed my finger tips into the side of my legs as hard as I could. “I have to scratch my back” was all I could think. It started as a light wispy tickling, then as a mediocre annoyance and finally as an overpowering itch. “I just have to scratch!” I grit my teeth and swallowed hard. My feet hurt. My arms and legs felt like water-logged licorice. My head felt like an off-center paperweight. “I want to move,” I whined in my mind. My limbs were falling asleep. The trickles running down my back were intense. I felt a drop of sweat start to slide down behind my ear. Chief Britt came full center in front of me.

“Do you have a problem, recruit?” he asked.

“No, sir,” I squeaked.

“Then why are you shaking, recruit?” he inquired.

No answer blurted from me. How could I answer? Why would I want him to see weakness in me? At that moment I felt like the entire world disappeared and Chief Britt and I were the only people left. I felt like he was looking at me through x-ray lenses. My mind crashed and went blank.

“I asked you a question, recruit,” Chief Britt said in an ominous, warning tone. I still couldn’t answer. These people had a way of letting you know where you stood in the food chain, and I felt like plankton. My throat closed, my tongue went dead, and cotton mouth took hold. My heart began to race and I was breathing like an out-of-breath bull.

“I asked you a question. Do you want to answer me?” he bellowed in my ear, spit splattering on my cheek. The blood rose to my face, and the sweat poured out of me. I suddenly felt like I was rapidly shrinking into nothingness. I tried to answer, but I couldn’t even muster a squeak from my throat. I knew he saw me panicking and it scared me.

“Drop!” he yelled. “Drop to your hands and toes and give me fifty push-ups!”

I fell to my hands as he dropped to his hands and knees, screaming in my ear. I started my push-ups, and he told me to start over and count them out, sir.

“One, sir, two, sir, three, sir,” I said.

“What? I can’t hear you, recruit. Start again!”

“One, sir, two, sir, three, sir,” I screamed to the best of my ability. I kept pumping my arms and counting as he shouted in my ear about how he was going to break me in.

“Stand up!” he shouted. I stood up at attention, my blood racing and my body trembling.

“Now answer me!” he hissed. But for the life of me, I couldn’t talk. I was shocked at the reality of the discipline of boot camp. But even more, I think I was dismayed at my fear and my mental unresponsiveness.

I could not utter a thing. I tried, but the sound caught in my throat on the big lump that was forming. I fought back the tears. I fought hard. I tried not to think of crying, but they began to flow. They were hot streams of liquid lava tearing down my cheeks and dropping off my chin. They gushed, and no matter how much I tried not to cry, they came and by the flood.

“Oh, what’s this? Do you think crying and feeling sorry for yourself is going to help you? Do you think I’m going to feel sorry for you? What are the tears for, recruit? Are you crying for mommy?” he chastised.

That was all it took. I grew up without a mom and his saying what he did hurt me. Being in the situation I was in and having the already flowing emotions, I shot back.

“I don’t have a mom!” I yelled with hate in my eyes.

“Drop, you baby! Give me fifty more!” he shouted with pride.

He got me. I knew he had gotten me, and I bit my tongue and squeezed my eyes shut tight. “Why did I have to react” I asked myself, knowing that I had lost the game. I got down on the floor and began my push-ups, counting loudly, one right after the next. My muscles felt as if they were tearing. The pain was intense. My stomach muscles buckled, and I silently cried. I cried in self-pity. I cried in pain. I cried because I had lost control.

Chief Britt kept yelling at me and spitting. He dropped the whole company because of me. I shook. Tremors ran through my body as if I were one massive earthquake. The sweat rolled off of my nose and to the puddle on the floor. My dog tags chinked every time they hit the cement. I ached. I fell to the floor in defeat and mental anguish.

“Stand up,” Chief Britt calmly but firmly said. I stood with every muscle seeming to bleed. Then, with kindness and strength in his voice he said to me, “Swallow your pride, learn self-control, and be tough, or you’ll never make it out of here.” I stood at attention hearing his words and absorbing them like a sponge. I let out a sigh and realized with pride that this was the beginning of the new me.

Stephanie Lynn Dejewski



Autumn/Fall

Stephanie L. Dejewski

Graphite on Paper

Bundle

“Oh, come on, get over it,” I tell myself. A teddy bear? The most important object you own? Well, discounting such valuables as my grandmother’s pearls, my cat and my passport, yes.

She arrived packed cramped and dark in a box barely bigger than she was, smelling like tissue paper and new material. I was four years old. She was my first, and at eight inches tall, she was an armload of black, fuzzy bear. For years, she lived tucked in the crook of my left elbow, her tan face peering out at the world. I bundled her around with me everywhere, which is how she became known as Bundle.

That she arrived on Christmas strikes me now as vaguely ironic. The Bundle who sits on my shelf now is actually the incarnation of the second coming of Bundle. The first incarnation, after many months of my constant care and attention, lost an eye. I was devastated. Clearly it was a situation requiring Mom.

When Dandylion popped some stitches in his leg, she fixed him. She had created Dandylion to begin with, so of course she knew the anatomy of his seams and stuffing, but eyes were different.

Dandylion’s eyes were just patterns embroidered with thread, anyway. They couldn’t fall off. Bundle was from the land of Store, and had been created by a power higher than Mom.

Apprehensive and doubtful, I approached Mom with Bundle’s dislocated eye locked tight in my pink, sweaty fist, the rest of her secure in the usual half-nelson. Somewhere in the middle of a great deal of shuddering and sobbing, I managed to communicate to Mom the nature of Bundle’s medical emergency.

“C-ca-can you f-fi-fix her?”

“Of course, I can.” Mom sounded totally confident. I wasn’t particularly reassured.

Mom practically had to pry Bundle’s ragged body from my arms. I was pretty sure that the only reason Mom said she could fix her was to get me to let go so she could take Bundle away to be put out of her misery, or have done to her whatever it is that was done to maimed stuffed animals.

I cried for days over my lost bear, then promptly forgot about her.

Weeks, maybe months later, Bundle mysteriously reappeared in the corner of an old crib that I used to store all my animals. And both eyes were firmly affixed to her face!

Not only were her eyes there, her whole appearance had changed. She looked like she had just been at a health spa with a great masseur. Her fur was back to its original plushy softness—no more nubbies. Her body felt more full of beans that it had since they first started leaking through her leg seam. And her eyes. Her eyes were clearer, brighter, and a full shade lighter brown than they had been before.

“How did you fix her?” I asked Mom. “Did you brush her, too? If I brush my other animals will they get softer and fuzzier, too?”

Mom didn’t recommend brushing my other animals. She was also distinctly vague about how she had put Bundle’s eye back on. She said people often looked and felt better after a vacation.

I wasn't really clear on the definition of a vacation, but now I knew that it had something to do with a place you go to that makes you look and feel better. Clearly this was the lower portion of the left-hand corner of the crib, where Bundle had reappeared. That corner of the crib obviously had magical, restorative powers. Just look at the resurrection of Bundle! She was the living proof.

To be fair to all my animals, each was given a turn overnight in the special corner. Results varied.

I tried to categorize the animals by how well they fared. The best improvement by far (even my brother agreed) was seen in Ishi the Turtle. The sheen developed in his short velour was unparalleled—except, of course, by the original Event involving Bundle. But Dad informed me that Ishi was an amphibian, and Bundle was a mammal, which are not related to each other. So I struggled vainly toward a correlating factor.

At last I knew. The animal in the Corner *had to know how to make the magic work!* Therefore, Ishi and Bundle were smarter than the other animals. A new pecking order was immediately established.

Bundle and Ishi were enrolled in the kindergarten-prep course, complete with their own illustrated readers and spelling books. They both did very well.

Along the way, Ishi gradually lost popularity. I suspect it had something to do with his neck getting wobbly. Bundle forever reigned as First Bear.

She is now threadbare and low-bean count, a resurrected receptacle of dozens of study sessions, hundreds of temper tantrums, thousands of tears, and years of love. As such, in the event of fire, she is the first one out.

Kate Schober



Chief Sitting Bull

Karen Frick

Graphite on Paper

Writers' and Artists' Reflections on Their Work

Mike Catalano on his poems "The Actor," "The Beholder," "The Conductor," and "David's Shoulder": "These poems are part of an on-going project to include at least one poem per state that I've traveled (all 48 continental states)."

Stephanie Lynn Dejewski on her essay "Pride": "I have always enjoyed writing and poetry. My poetry in particular has brought me great responses and artistic fulfillment. But 'Pride' was also fun for me to write. When I wrote it, it was an assignment for a personal narrative essay in my English 1a class. It was wonderful to see myself vividly write my memories on paper and to watch the story unfold. The experience of writing this story bought back my remembered feelings of self-pride and commitment and the fear of having to face myself in boot camp during the summer of '94. It is a psychological story of mental transformation and self-realization. It narrates my pride and power, my self-confidence. It tells of my doorway from my naive fragility to the manifestation of the awareness of myself. It may also tell the story of self-realization of many other individuals new to the power of realized self-pride. I'm proud of my story and I hope it touches those who read it."

Mykle Loftus on her poem "The Mind Trip": "The physical form of this poem is important to give it the right 'feel,' the sense of fragments of thoughts." On her poem "Maddy": "'Maddy' is about my granddaughter." And on her poem "The Toast": "[It] evolved from an actual experience of spending time working on a play set and looking about Medieval Times."

Kate Schober on the nature of art: "I thrive on coffee-table philosophy; here is my latest thought on the nature of art. Art is an act, and acts are ephemeral. The process of creation is not always expressed in terms of a concrete product, but when some tangible poem or portrait results from the process, then these remnants of art can to some degree show another being what the art itself involved. By enjoying the by-products of art, we are drawn into the same realm in which the art itself took place. Thus the artists, long after the art took place, can still be inadvertently responsible for transporting an observer to creative realms, but only if the art left some tangible imprint of its happening behind."