

*Quercus*



## Burning Leaves

The smell of burning leaves, oak leaves,  
in the autumn chill.  
That's my madeleine and cup of tea.  
We rolled in the leaves with the barking  
of the joyful dogs, while our father shook  
his head, sighed, and picked up the rake again.  
Then, in the evening dusk, he burned the leaves,  
with that smoke that smelled like Halloween,  
and the witches rode in the sky behind the  
gaunt old oaks, now thin and cold, or did they?  
And we warmed our hands and shivered at  
the funeral pyre of the Viking leaves,  
their souls in the smoke that wafted up to Heaven.

Are the souls of the dead leaves, going up in smoke,  
reincarnated in the Spring, to start the cycle once again?  
Are those trees our long distant cousins, born with us  
eons ago, in the ocean slime, as Darwin said?  
Does the sweet smoke evoke only memories of a  
recent past, or of a prehistoric time that only God knows of?  
Only God knows.

—Ralph G. Smith '47



## Chicago Blues

A cold, drizzly mixture of snow and rain was making halos around the street lights as I arrived at the Red Apple Lounge, down on 55<sup>th</sup> Avenue. A flashing neon red apple and a leering green neon snake gave a look of eerie desolation to the nearly deserted South Chicago street. I had found the right place—Jimmy's picture was posted beside the door: "Playing Nightly 8 to Closing." And from inside I heard the unmistakable sound of those slow, rolling blues. Jimmy was singing as I went in:

Oh, the 2:19 done took my baby away,  
Oh, the 2:19 took my babe away,  
But the 2:17 will bring her back some day...

I shook the rain from my coat and walked toward the bar. Jimmy was up there on a little stage—an old black man, hunched over the piano, looking sad and tired. He was a lot thinner now. It was probably the stroke he'd had. He still had those broad working man's shoulders, though. He was just singing and playing, not paying attention to anyone. Just playing for himself. The music was softer now than I remembered, and a little hesitant.

I sat down toward the end of the bar. The place was nearly empty, but he didn't notice me until it was time for his break. As he stepped down to head toward the back I caught his eye. He squinted, then broke into a little smile: "Bobby Coleman, is that you?"

"It's me alright, Jimmy. I'm in town for a couple of days. They told me you were playing down here."

"Well Lordy, Bobby, come on back here. Sit down and have a beer with me. How long's it been?"

We sat down at a little table in the back of the club and a waiter brought two beers.

"I guess it's three years now. I've been back in Moline at the carpet store since then. I guess the last time was when you were recording for Paul and Lisa Fulbright in that damned basement on Wells Street. What a night! Remember how Lisa turned off the lights and lit a bunch of candles to get you into the right mood?"

"Oh yeah, I remember, man. An' afterward we all got drunk

and went out singing under the El on Wells Street, and my wife Mama like to kill me!"

Jimmy looked into his beer glass, smiling and shaking his head.

"Them were the first records I cut in fifteen years. Weren't bad, either, but Paul didn't have much luck sellin' 'em. Nice, though. No one remembered me 'til he looked me up and made those cuts."

They were good days and good memories. I had been finishing up in business school and spending my nights in the bars that had the music. Sort of a last fling before getting back to real life.

Now I was the one who smiled and looked into my beer glass: "Paul and Lisa. They were something. That tall stringbean, always looking serious and saying nothing, and Lisa bouncing around like a ping-pong ball. And that apartment of theirs—nothing in it but books and records and a bed. Everyone sat on the floor and didn't dare make a sound when they played those records. But how've you been, Jimmy? And Mama? I heard you had that stroke."

"Good and bad, Bobby, good and bad. Lucky to pull outta that one. Couldn't play at all for a spell. But you heard. Sometimes the notes don't come out right. Makes me mad, but ain't nothin' I can do. Don't many people come to hear me no more. And Mama? Mama's fine. Same scrawny ol' woman. Hoo-ey! She bosses me around! 'Jimmy put on your coat,' 'Jimmy careful on those stairs,' 'Jimmy, stay off that gin.'"

"What about Paul and Lisa? The Groove Record Shop is closed, but no one around there knew anything."

"Well, Paul and Lisa sorta split it all up. Lisa got to messin' with that no-good trombone man, Slip Jackson. Paul closed up the Groove and moved out to L.A. Think he's writin' books or somethin' out there. Last I heard, Lisa moved into Slip's place down on 35<sup>th</sup>, and folks there were raisin' hell because she's white livin' with a black man in their neighborhood. D'you believe it? But you were kinda heavy with Lisa's sister. You still see her?"

"Bess, you mean? No. She was singing around, trying to sound like Billie Holiday. Couldn't make it. Then she got into painting. We were both back in Moline, but she met some guy who makes paintings that all look like Hawaiian shirts or something. They took off for New York, I think. Women are funny."

"Nothin' stay the same, Bobby."

"That guy was a phony, Jimmy, but she lapped it all up. Hell,



I've seen six-year-old kids paint better than that, but she lapped it up. She just put her blue jeans in a paper bag and tied some twine around her albums and took off all starry-eyed."

Jimmy drained the last of his beer, but still held the empty brown bottle with both hands.

"When I was buck-an'-wing dancin' on the circuit and playin' house-rent parties for fun, I thought I was gonna live forever. Women hangin' all over me, money comin' in, and plenty free gin. Then the hard times came an' I was sweepin' out the ballpark again just to live. Then it got better and now it got worse. I'm gettin' old. Don't know if I can reach down and pick it up again."

"Don't sweat it, Jimmy. You've got friends all over this town. They know who you are and what you play. You're a celebrity, man, whether you play anything or not."

"It ain't the same, Bobby. Nothin' stay the same. Times won't stay the same. Women don't stay the same. Except Mama. Mama stay the same. Hard times came and Mama was right there. I got lucky. She take care of me. I got a good woman. If you find a good woman, hang on, man. They's hard to find."

His break was over and Jimmy went back to the piano. I stayed for a while listening to that music that came from nowhere and from everywhere, and then went out to face the drizzle again. Jimmy was singing in that sad, old voice as I left:

"What do you do when the pond runs dry?—you sit  
on the bank and watch the crawdads die,

For some time, yeah, for some time..."

—Ralph G. Smith '47



**Brendan Gould**  
*Lindsay*

2002, charcoal, 30 inches x 32 inches





Jenny Woods  
*The Evil Eye*

2001, charcoal on paper, 32 inches x 40 inches



Leslie Bell '72  
*Waiting to Go On*

2001, oil on canvas, 40 inches x 45 inches





Leslie Bell '72  
*Girl With a Hooded Hawk*

2002, oil on canvas, 40 inches x 45 inches



Leslie Bell '72  
*S Curves*

2002, oil on canvas, 40 inches x 45 inches





Jane Hart '76  
*Longview Park*

1996, photo transfer and acrylic with embellishments on canvas, 14" x 18"

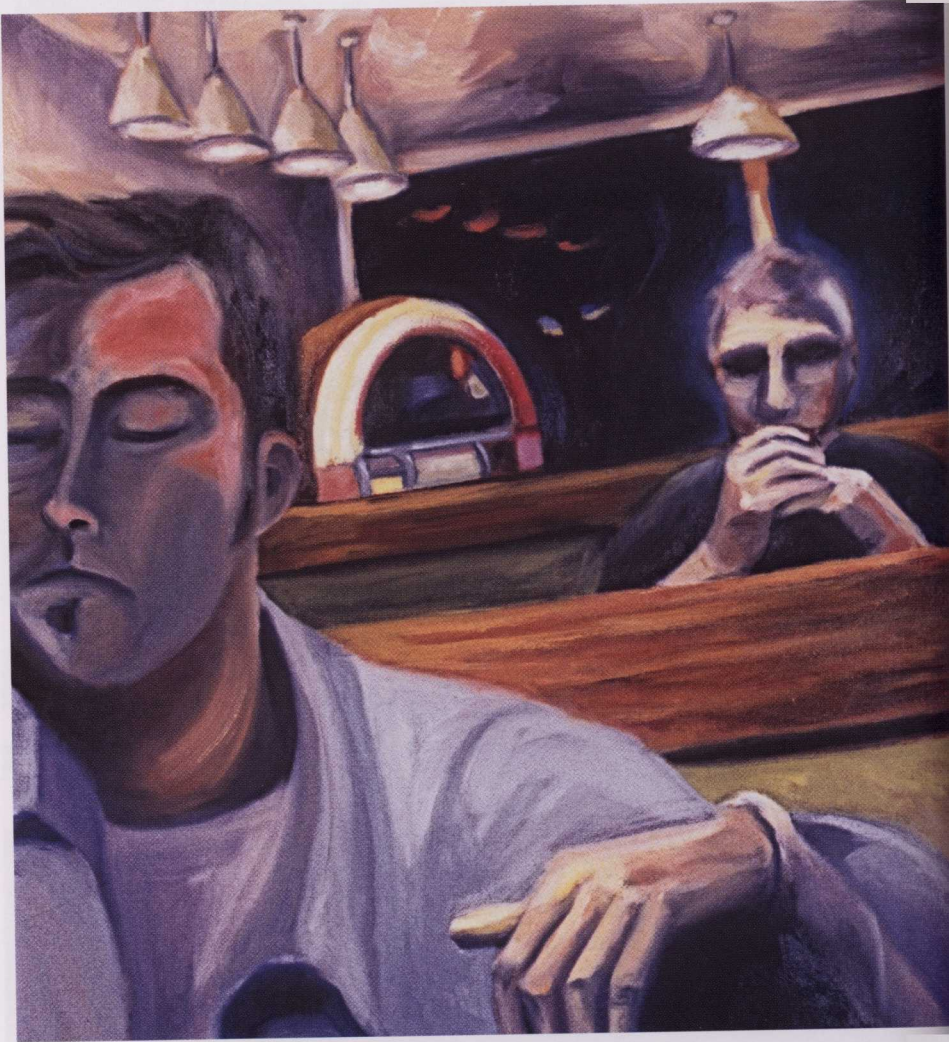




David Houk  
*Study of M.C. Escher*

2002, oil on canvas, 24 inches x 36 inches

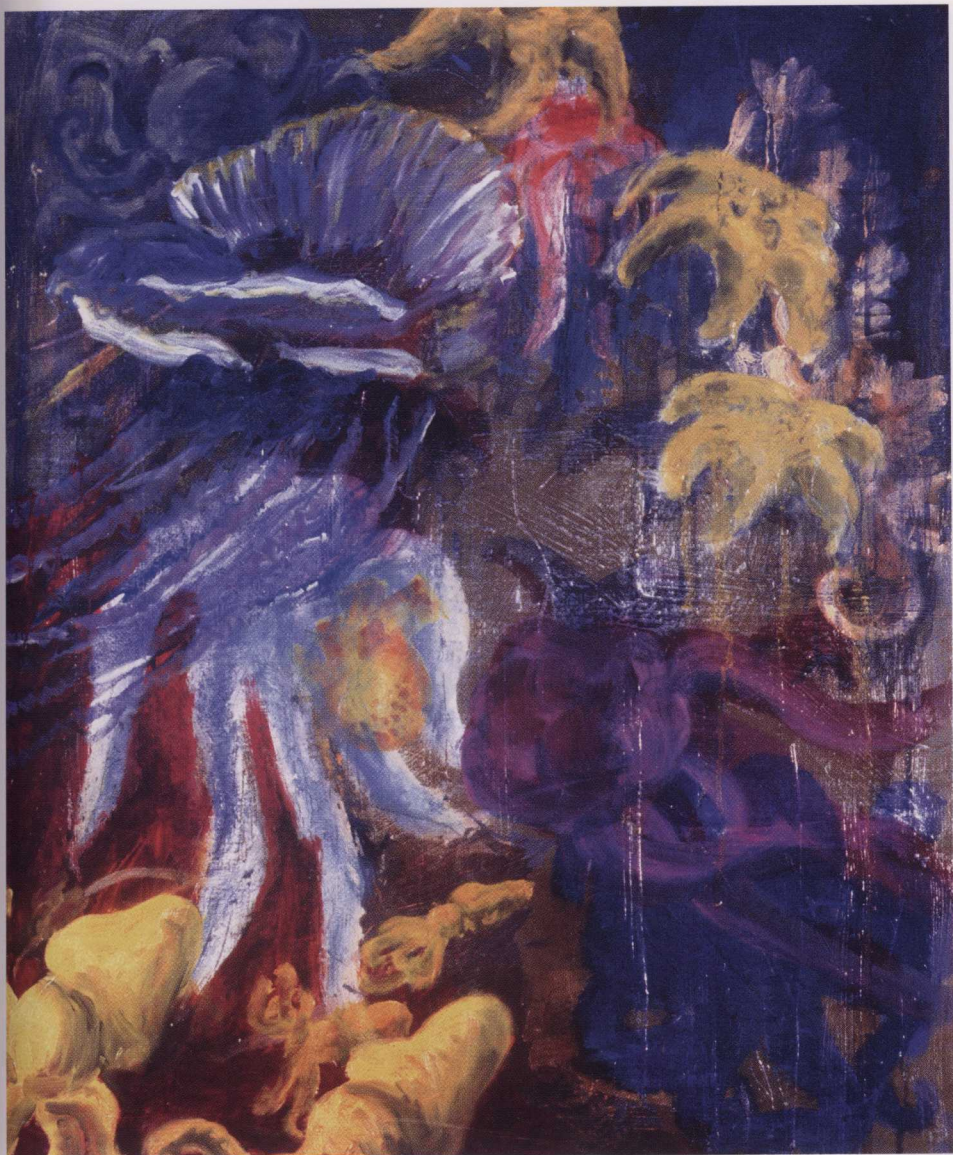




Brendan Gould

*Eric*

2002, oil on canvas, 30 inches x 32 inches



Jen Eckerman  
*Physalia, Physalia*

2001, oil on canvas, 20 inches x 24 inches





**Dawn Brenner**

*Still life with Mushrooms and Peppers*

2002, oil on canvas, 16 inches x 16 inches

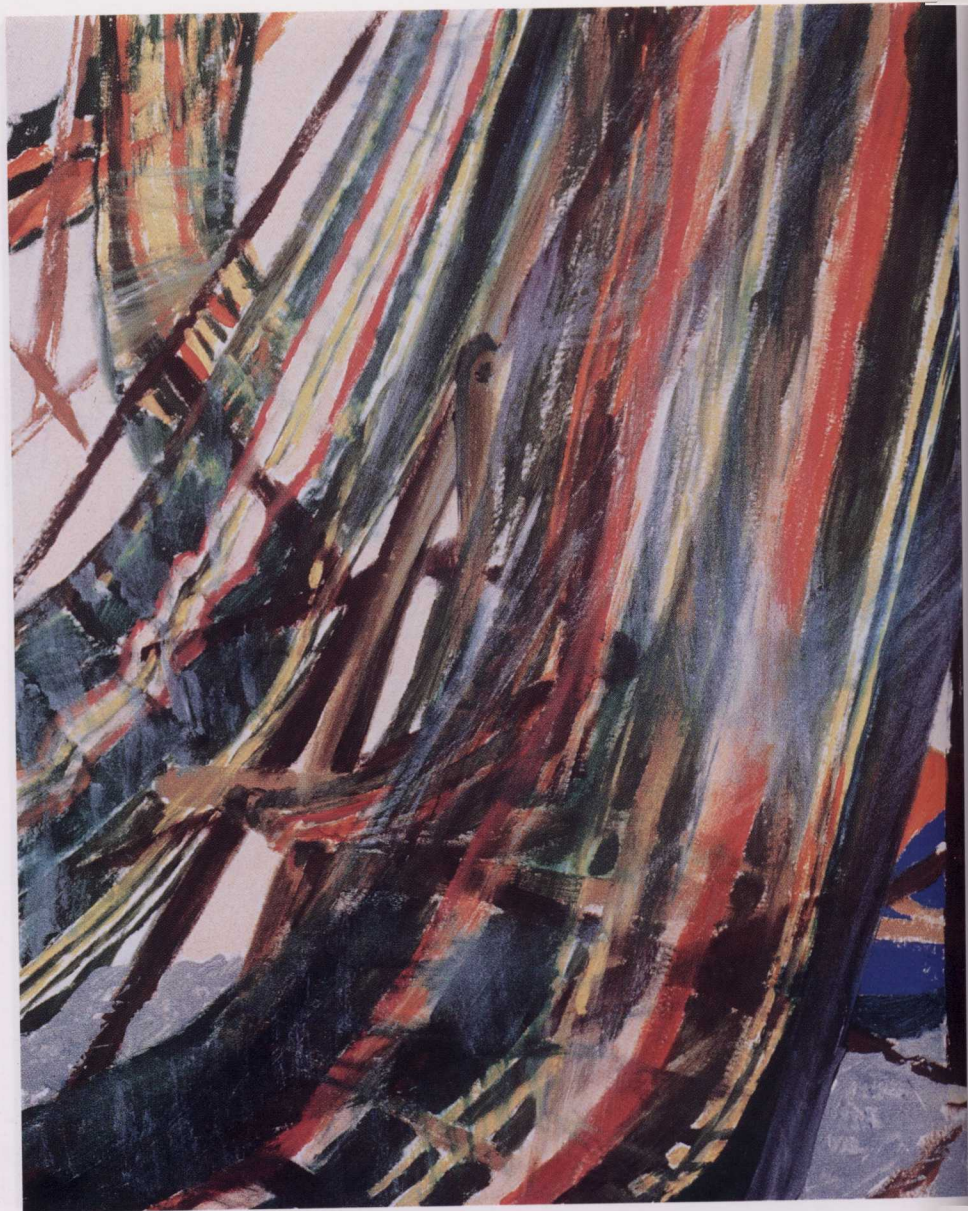


Debra Bahns

*Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test Unplugged*

2001, oil on canvas, 16 inches x 20 inches





**Debra Bahns**

*They Built a Prison and Nobody Came*

2001, oil on panel, 16 inches x 20 inches



Katherine (Liz) Cleve  
*Greenhouse*

2001, watercolor, 19 inches x 14 inches





Sandy Bennett  
*Recollections of Taos*

2001, oil on canvas, 36 inches x 48 inches



Karen Blomme '81  
*Corn*

2001, silkscreen, 18 inches x 24 inches





Julie Schroeder  
*untitled*

2001, oil on pine board, 8 inches x 10 inches



Kristin Quinn  
*The Architecture of Memory*

2001, oil on canvas, 44 inches x 36 inches



Light shines through the glimmering eyes of love—  
Brilliant life in midst of all the shadow,  
Yet in the dark lies peace, the pure white dove—  
To pull from us the sadness that we know

As rain must fall and night must turn to day—  
For reasons unknown to the best omen,  
The bravest always have to walk away—  
For us to learn to live with hope again

And so our tears fall to a sea of strife—  
And as our rainbowed smiles try to break through,  
They seem to drown in waves of broken life—  
But somehow emerge always cleansed anew

The irony of life has now been worn—  
For in this death a hero has been born.

—Trina Gillen

## Gwen on Salma's Crutches

Two small cities, 110 blocks each, burst in flames

Then crash

Collapse

On 5,000 hearts

And on millions of hearts

Crushed in grief

And disbelief

And horror

At the black heart

Of such well-trained

And obedient

Hate

My heart

Of nature fallen in the garden

As are we all

Agog at conflagration

An imperfect mass

Self-affirms

And self-asserts

And smolders fast from New York spark

Yet recalls a caring heart

Graduate assistant

Salma, Muslim in scarf

Bright-eyed student and mom who gave us crutches

My dearest heart

Soul mate

Gwen

Beloved wife

Her foot twists one day, and breaks my heart

She lies in pain

At stairway top

Sprained by child's toy misstep



I search for crutches  
Rent  
Buy now?  
And where, and how?

I mention then  
At work  
Our search  
For sticks

And Salma says,  
"Take ours.  
For free.  
I'll get them here."

Crutches then appear  
In MBA office  
Then in my car  
Then in my home

And Gwen hobbled  
On the crutches  
In the house  
And to our church

As my bomb-struck heart seeks  
Answers  
And direction  
And the balm of peace

I turn myself toward the heart of God  
And wait  
And pray  
And hope

In Christ's Spirit my heart pauses,  
And recalls  
My beloved Gwen  
On Salma's crutches

—David O'Connell

irony  
somehow smiled  
as moses lapped himself  
in the century of beards

ballistic canyons  
thought provoked of eager prophets  
turning Machinean-like fish  
into soft-cradled dispositions  
(the first betrayal of a social imperative)

too many whispers shared  
reminiscent of mortality caught in a statue  
a dizzy mind  
in lark ash  
like a fog,  
whose stay left too many intricacies  
(the second betrayal on the reliance of self)

navigator of dreams  
turned arabesque  
on tip-toe ascensions  
perish internally  
in metaphorical mirrors  
and inevitable monads of dualism  
(the third betrayal of a muse left unnoticed)

awake the capricious son of the sun  
the tinder melodies of unconstant flow  
the tap dance of hip roosters,  
whose empirical function  
was to chop off that beard  
unto the last lap  
of human taught eternity.

—Eric Anderson '00



eyes harbor in anticipation  
as oracles turn abundance  
in a gaze on september misty

so uncombed to the fine tune  
of avatars  
in the mountain laurel

of broken bedposts  
emitting sinister beauty  
so sharply *Pinter-esque*...  
like maidens of an eskimo river

with yesterday's cunning desire  
in a loose coherency  
*incognito* undefined

as dharma comes crawling  
at some portrait  
whose landscape levels off  
for someone who came to late.

—Eric Anderson '00

## Daddy

Sitting on the curb  
With my head in my hands  
Looking down the street  
For his white truck  
To come into sight  
Piled on the seat  
The four of us  
On laps or however  
We fit  
Sweaty legs tangled up  
On the way to his apartment  
For the weekend  
With our bags in the back  
A six-pack of pop  
And a pizza  
For supper  
A video at night  
We watched on the floor  
Of the drafty apartment  
Where he had to live  
Without us  
4, 8, 12, 14  
three girls  
and a boy and  
Dad

—*Rachel Jean Niles*



## Prairie Shack

A windy old shack that the night blows through  
Sat with few trees for shelter on the open plain,  
A sign that civilization had passed through, taking  
Its use, leaving the weathered and leaning remains  
To take the hard words of the wind and the insults  
of the rain.

But life is not without its comforts, so a sprawling  
Vine climbed up its sides, a bird built its nest in the  
Overhang, and the loose front door, weary from  
Slamming, rested comfortably in the dirt. At times,  
When the wind and rain ceased, when the summer  
Heat was over and the winter wind yet to ferment,  
You could get the idea that everything here is  
just right.

—Dean Rathje '77

"Jessica, can I come in?"

I open my eyes. It's Roisin. She visits my room every night so why am I surprised? Some nights its even seven or eight times—sometimes just to learn how to spell the word "together" or to ask what we call pants in America.

"Come in," I shout from under the covers, half hiding from the world half trying to keep warm in a house only heated in the morning. I'm really not in the mood for games. I'm in a strange house, with strange people, in a strange country. And I'm sick—not just homesick—but America-sick—where we heat our homes all day and don't eat boiled cabbage ever.

"How are you?" she asks.

"Fine," I lie. I'm not about to explain to a seven-year-old the dynamics of heating a home in the U.S.A.

We sit quietly together. Me in a sweater and a sweatshirt. She in her Catholic school uniform still at 8:00 P.M. She dangles her legs over the edge of the bed and I notice her black tights have a hole in the toe. I think about how cold that little toe must be.

She senses my distracted state and says, "I'm annoyin' you, amn't I?" in her thick Irish brogue.

And I don't tell her just how much I want to be alone—just how much I want to be in my own bed 8,000 miles away, with my own heater, with my own mom downstairs, and my own food. So I just sit and don't say anything at all.

Understanding she's not wanted, Roisin stands up to leave, glances out the window, and stops. "Jessica, come here!"

I peer from where I am on the bed to look at what she's seeing. I'm too afraid to stand at the window since her dog Belle has yet to recognize my face and barks as if I am some sort of burglar every time I move about my room.

"No, come here!" she shouts, her voice displeased that I have not yet heeded her command.

I take my place next to her and there in the house twenty feet away is a boy of about sixteen strumming his guitar and singing along as if he were playing to an audience of 200,000 in an amphitheater and not just Roisin and me across the yard.



I smile. Roising giggles. And together we stand there watching this rising star give his first show.

I feel Roisin move next to me and look down to see a new show happening right in my very own room. She dances around the room with her air guitar, clad in her Catholic-school uniform, flailing her hair about as if she were an even bigger rock star and the boy across the way was just her opening act. The pleats on her skirt bounce as she jumps around the room with her little white toe peeking through.

And I have to sit because I'm laughing so hard, I can barely stand. She starts to laugh, too, and stops to look at me. Our eyes move back to the rock star in her backyard and we realize he's staring right back at us. And he's not laughing. We both freeze and in that awkward moment realize we've been caught.

That's when he takes a step forward, reaches both arms out wide, and snaps the curtains shut with a fury. Together Roisin and I throw ourselves on my bed and it shakes with us as we fill my tiny room with our ha's and hee's and ho's. I hold my sides as if I'm about to come apart. She hides her face in the sheets as if it was about to crack. We breathe the "oooh" together that comes at the end of every laugh like that and smile at each other.

"I better go finish my Gaelic homework or mummy will give it out to me," she says.

I stand with her and she exits my room and we grin at one another all the while she shuts the door. I hear her slide her chair out from under her desk in the room next to mine as I lay back down on my bed. And I'm still smiling as I look up at the ceiling. Somehow, I don't feel as cold or as hungry anymore. But yet, right at home.

—*Jessi Kurt*

I am seated at the head of their table.

The girls slide in around me and I try and match their faces to the names and details I was told earlier. I remember Sinead's name thanks to Sinead O'Connor—she is the oldest girl who loves television. I think the middle child's name is Katrina, but I'm unsure because it doesn't seem Irish. I do know she has a bad back and cannot walk to school so her mother drives her. And then there's the little one with the straight-lipped expression in the photograph in the dining room. Her mother's accent is so thick when she says her name, that all I know is that it starts with R.

Their father comes home from school and sets his briefcase down to shake my hand. "It's nice to meet you—so it is," he says. His silver hair and distinguished good looks remind me of the models I've seen on Just For Men ads. I ask what he teaches and he replies, "maths." And I repeat it outloud with a smile, "ahh, math" only to be asked what "math" is. So I explain that at home we just simply call it math. "Hmm...isn't that odd," he responds.

I breathe a sigh of relief as their mother slides a bowl of potato soup in front of me. My imagination had conjured up meals consisting of everything from corned beef to blood pudding. Soup I could handle. As I swivel my spoon in the hot liquid, I marvel at the tiny flecks of potatoes. Then I wonder if it's even possible for potatoes to be ground that small. I dunk the spoon into my bowl and let what I think are liquid potatoes swarm on. I lift it slowly to my mouth hoping it's pleasing to my taste buds. And as I sip it through my lips, I am so thankful that I can swallow it with ease.

Our spoons clink and clatter against the bowls as we slurp our dinner. They ask questions about life in America: "What do you eat at Thanksgiving?" "Are your heaters electric or gas?" Between questions, I take a drink of water and see the littlest one whose name begins with R staring at me. And just like I do when I make eyes with a passing stranger, I lift up the corners of my mouth ever so slightly. To my surprise, she does the same. And I didn't even have to stand on my head.

Filling in the gaps of our conversation is England's version of Family Feud on television. I stifle my giggle when the survey says that



“guffaw” and “titter” are England’s top two answers to the question, “Name another word for laugh.” I take pride in my empty bowl and compliment the meal only to hear, “But Jessica, this was just the first course.”

—*Jessi Kurt*

## February 14<sup>th</sup>

Droves of men in their business suits  
Exit the local grocer  
Marching onward home  
Toward  
Their once-upon-a-time sweetheart's  
Arms loaded with bouquets  
While the moon plays peek-a-boo  
Behind the murky twilight sky

—*Kelly Green*



## Existing There

Brick upon brick  
Cement upon memory  
of a place once warm.  
Cold settling  
into loneliness  
filling bones  
that ache  
for something left  
empty.

Brick upon  
smothering brick  
and I am home  
in this place  
without comfort zone,  
where the windows creak  
and doors no longer  
open—eyes no longer  
Open, and I am no longer  
home here.

—*Alicia Levi*

## For Now

Just walk away as quickly as you came.  
I don't need you here  
didn't ask for this.  
Drunken slurs, intoxicated thoughts  
of how and what you think  
you should feel.  
I don't need you here  
(wanting you is a different story).

I thought I fought so hard  
for so long,  
maybe I just let you in.  
I thought I built walls—  
walls upon walls  
until I could barely breathe.  
But there were memories of you  
flattened between the cracks  
and your image was imprinted  
in all the corners  
of all the fingerprints  
that ever touched me.

Just walk away as quickly as you came back.  
Don't stay just for my sake.  
I don't want you so close,  
don't need you here.  
I have built walls upon walls before  
and I'm weak enough to keep building them  
of empty memories  
of every word  
you ever said.  
I never said  
I needed you.  
I was never that desperate.  
But your thoughts kept my mind company



and your curves fit perfectly into mine.

The stakes are too high this time,  
I'm tired this time.  
I just want to watch you  
walk away  
as quickly  
as you came.

—*Alicia Levi*

## Bodhisattva

Growing up I was taught to win,  
To always go for number one.  
As I've grown I've realized  
That to compete only for the sake of winning  
Is no more than to lose,  
To conform to society's views.  
Winning isn't everything, I found,  
But only after I lost.

My mind was polluted,  
I let it become infected,  
The TV became my soul.  
It was my own mind  
That allowed itself to be polluted  
And let me believe  
all the lies told to me.  
No longer does mind pollute mind.

Now I sit under shade of trees,  
Peaceful and quiet inside.  
Inner peace cannot be bought or sold,  
Only earned through acceptance of mortality.  
Mother Earth give us life  
And to you we will all return.  
Respect for the self is respect for all,  
Buddha and Mother Earth are one.

The path lay in front of us all,  
Finding it takes total control.  
Turn your mind  
Within your mind,  
You can find nothing at all.  
Nothingness is peacefulness,  
Peacefulness is worth more than gold.

—*Dave Morehead*



take all the idiotic technology  
wire taps—(bugs)  
burn them inside a cigarette  
this techno tastes like cherries.

but get a jive to wire  
the microphone is flying—wireless  
mend satellite signals with a money bag  
antenna to fly higher.

no blessings—the idiotic technological fish  
the cat pounce of the master  
more money with speed  
digital modem faster—like fine dining.

beep sounds with electric flashing light  
seizure in the eye—shame  
morals taste like a chocolate cake  
blow out candles—an oblivion born.

idiots—in technological fiction  
braving a dream world anesthetic  
the radiation—the complication  
fries (bugs) like boiling grease.

all for computerized currency—chump change  
the telephone is ringing...

—*Bryce Quinn*

## Jonathan in Prison: Fiction Based on Concepts of Viktor Frankl

*Who am I?*

*Who am I really?*

A heartbeat. Another. Another. Thump, thump, thump.

*Thump. Thump. Thump. Is that what I am? Am I thump thump thump?*

*Am I the sum of my heartbeats? Moving flesh and blood. Food for the worms one day. A beast who stands upright and speaks words as if they meant something.*

Jonathan looked at his surroundings. Stone walls. Stone floor. Iron bars. Straw. A bucket for his waste. He'd been here for a month now. Bread and water once a day. A guard he did not recognize. Left with nothing but time. Time, time, time.

*Time, time, time. I'm nothing in the face of time. My whole family. All of my ancestors are but nothing in the face of time. We are the blink of a cosmic eye. We can be easily missed if you weren't looking. It does not matter if I die here or if I go free. It does not matter one bit.*

He heard a rat crawling somewhere in the darkness.

*What have I that the rat does not? We are both alive. We both move.*

*We both struggle to survive. I have reason. Ah, yes, I have reason. Glorious reason! See the wonders of my reason! I know what death is. I know what causes it. I know what doesn't. Yet I will still die. How does my reason help me there? I can understand the rules of mathematics and logic. I can count and figure the things that will one day pass away, just like me. How does my logic help me there? I can imagine things that aren't, but I can't make them be. What use is my imagination, but to see things that aren't there?*

He held his head in his hands. With imprisonment came solitude. With solitude came introspection. With introspection came truth. With truth came horror. Jonathan realized the truth that his life was merely a fraction of a fraction of a speck of reality. His greatest deed would not even make a ripple in the sea of life. Lost in the rush...

*Lost in the rush of time. In my arrogance, I thought I could make a difference. I could change things for the better. There is no change because of me. I am lost. Lost in the rush...*

He fell asleep. He dreamed that his cell was shrinking. The walls were closing in on him. Very soon, his arms were pinned to his sides. Then the walls began to mold to the form of his body, so he couldn't move anything, could not even tilt his head. He tried to scream, but he couldn't open his mouth, the walls were that tight. He



couldn't move anything, anything at all.

He awoke with a start. His heart was racing, and he was sweating. The dream was bad, but what was worse is that the dream was real. The cell was the same size, but it trapped him nonetheless. He had no freedom.

*No freedom. By Heironeous, no freedom whatsoever. I cannot choose my lodging, my clothes, or my food. I cannot choose when the torches are lit, or even if they are lit at all. Why did he not kill me? Why instead did he choose to imprison me? Because he was afraid to kill me? Or because he knew the truths I would discover? He knew that prison was like hell?*

He felt oppressed. Stifled. Panic built up inside him. The knowledge that he had nowhere to run filled him with the urge to do so. He had to calm down.

*I will walk to the other end of the cell. I will not run. I have the freedom to choose between walking and running.*

He walked very slowly to the other end of the cell. His breathing slowed. The panic seeped out of his body.

*Yes, I still have that freedom. What else?*

He began to build on his discovery. What other freedoms did he have, even in captivity?

*My breathing. Fast or slow, it is my choice. Let them tie me down. Let them bound my arms and my legs. It is still I who chooses to breathe quickly or to breathe slowly. Let them suffocate me. It is still I who chooses to struggle or to accept. That will never be taken away. Let them kill me a thousand times, it is my choice to die screaming or to die in peace.*

A feeling of freedom began to take hold. Freedom in prison. If there is freedom in prison, then there is freedom everywhere. He took pleasure in the fact that his brother could only imprison so much of him. There are parts that can never be put in prison.

Jonathan spent the rest of his waking hours that day counting his freedoms, relishing his freedom to save or to eat the bread the guard gave him, delighting in his freedom to nod to the guard, or to smile at him, or scowl, or make no expression whatsoever. He slept.

He awoke. He looked around him. The cell was the same as the day before. He was slowly coming to terms with the fact that his environment may never change, may never change at all. He might never do anything again. He could perhaps live with that. After his breakthrough of the previous day, he felt he could live with that.

*I still cannot conceive it. I may do nothing again. Just sit and think. Forever. Until I die. I will never see the sun again. Or the sky. I will never taste warm food again, or wine. I will never marry. By Heironeous, I will never have children.*

This horrible thought nearly broke him. Jonathan had been getting old before he was imprisoned. He was still young enough to father a child, perhaps just barely. He always thought he would eventually marry and have children. He wanted to. He needed to. Having a son had been the major goal of his life. Now, it will not happen.

*Why did I wait so long? How could I have been so foolish as to think that I would always have time? Foolish, foolish. Now all is lost. A child is my only way to live on. History will forget me. My child could bear another child, who would bear another, and there would be someone to remember. At least in blood. To remember me. What good is life if I do not pass it on?*

Jonathan wept. He had often regretted his choice not to marry. But never this much. The choice had never seemed so final before.

*Final. Final is a horrible word. A hopeless word. A word that allows no room to move. It is too strong. Until my life is over, I have no right to apply the word "final" to it. Life is not over until it is over. That is obviously true. Yet here I am, wailing that my life is over because I have no children. But my life isn't over. What good is life if I do not pass it on? The rhetorical question is not rhetorical. It asks for an answer. What good is life if I do not pass it on? If life is no good unless it is passed on, where is the good? In the children? But their life will be no good unless they pass it on. Where is the sense in that? Why would we possibly pass life on if it is no good in itself? It becomes an endless chain, a chain of unhappiness stretching into infinity. Either life is empty, or life is good in itself. I am almost afraid to discover which is true. But discover it I will. That I cannot avoid.*

His mind wandered. He saw images of what his life could have been. He saw a family. His family. A loving wife. Children. Joy. Joy after joy after joy.

*What joy there is in that which is not real. What a joy my life as a father would have been. But that is not my life. My life is one without children. So, what joy is in my life?*

He thought. This was important. If joy and purpose are only found in a life with children, then his life was a failure.

*Either life is empty, or life is good in itself. Either life is empty, or life is good in itself...*

Three months ago. Three months ago he had seen one of the palace servants crying. Whenever he had time, he used to enjoy wandering the palace, marveling at its architecture, its beauty. On that day, three months ago, he came across one of the housekeepers, collapsed against a wall, weeping. He inquired what was wrong. She said her brother had recently died. He was in the army, on patrol south of the city, and was killed by a scout from the Army of Levenson. He



spoke to her, comforted her, gave her peace. At that time and place, no one else was capable of doing what he did. No one else was around. Had he not been there, that girl may never have received comfort. Her life was improved because of Jonathan.

*I see now. I may be but a speck in the dustbowl, but I occupy an absolutely unique place and time. No one can be exactly where I am. No one can see exactly what I see. My experiences are mine alone—no one else is capable of experiencing exactly what I experience. That means that what I have done, no one else could have. Only me.*

*Life is not empty. It is good in itself.*

The cell door opened with a loud squeal. Jonathan, startled from his reflections, leaped to his feet. A man was standing in the entrance to the cell. He was well over six feet tall, handsome, with black hair and a finely trimmed black beard. His clothing, too, was entirely black. He wore the emblem of the human kingdom of Levenson on his left breast. He was smiling broadly. It was Rathe.

"Why hello, *Jonathan*," Rathe said, emphasizing the fact that he was using Jonathan's first name by itself.

"What are you doing here, Rathe?" Jonathan spat. Rathe was once the ambassador from Levenson to the human kingdom of Westphal, Jonathan's home. Jonathan had trusted Rathe, had even considered him a friend. Then Rathe had been uncovered as the head of a plot to drive Westphal into war with the Elves. He also killed Cros, the Captain of the Home Guard, a close friend of Jonathan's. Since then, Westphal had been at war with Levenson, and Rathe was the most hated enemy of the kingdom.

*By the gods, what is Rathe doing in the city?*

"I'm here on business with King Phillip," Rathe replied.

*Phillip. King Phillip. My brother. He has dealings with Levenson?*

"I'm supposedly here to discuss a peace treaty between our two kingdoms," Rathe went on, "but I'm really here to kill you."

Jonathan's blood froze.

"You see," Rathe continued nonchalantly, "It was hard enough convincing your brother to throw you in prison. Having him kill you was completely out of the question. He's selfish and weak, but he still has scruples. That was a pity. So, I'm here to do the job myself." Rathe smiled.

"Well, get to it," Jonathan challenged.

"Oh, no, not now," laughed Rathe, "I thought I'd give you the chance to think about it for awhile. It makes me happy to think that you know it's coming." Rathe leaned into him, whispering confiden-

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tially. "And it will be painful. I promise." Rathe straightened up and smiled again. "Well, I'd best be going now. And don't bother to tell the guard what I just said. I plan to kill him now."

Before Jonathan could react, Rathe had punched him hard in the face. Jonathan fell back against the cell wall.

"Guard, the prisoner has attacked me!" Rathe shouted. The guard came running towards the cell. Jonathan wanted to call him off, to warn him somehow, but his nose was bleeding and all he could do was sputter. Rathe already had his knife out by the time the guard reached the cell door, and it was buried in the guard's chest before the guard could figure out who the threat was. The guard fell to the ground in the hallway, dead. Rathe closed the cell door and locked it with the guard's keys. "I'll see you tonight." He winked, and left.

Jonathan was stunned, horrified, and revolted all at the same time. He wanted to scream, cry, and vomit all at once. His nose still bled down the front of his tunic. He crawled to the cell door to see if he could aid the guard. No. The guard was beyond all aid but the gods.

*Rathe. Damn him! How could there be a person as ruthless as Rathe?*

*He began to reflect again. Reality was too horrible right now.*

*What is man? It was man who just displayed such cruelty. Man who can kill without blinking, without remorse. Man who goes to war and kills by the thousands. Man who throws his brother into prison. Man who takes pleasure in the pain of others. This is man.*

*That's not fair. This is not all there is to man. Man destroys, but man also preserves. It is man who devotes his life to serving his kingdom. It is man who serves his fellow man. It is man who will die to save a friend. It is man who heals, man who comforts, man who aids. This, too, is man.*

*Man is that amazing creature capable of the greatest good and the greatest evil. Man can make himself. Man can choose his way. Lammasu are born good, and do good. Hellhounds are born evil and do evil. Man is not born into what he is. Man destroys, and man creates. Man wastes, and man preserves. Man lies and man tells the truth. This range of possibilities, this inability to be defined, this is man.*

He awoke. He did not know he had fallen asleep. The blood on his face, hands, and clothing was dried and crusted. The body of the guard still lay by the cell door. Jonathan closed his eyes again. Guilt built up inside of him.

*This man is dead because of me. I should have tried harder to save him. I should have seen it coming. I should have called out. I should have done something.*

Tears began to come. Jonathan curled into a ball.

*Dead. Because of me.*

He began to weep. He wept for some time. Then he began to think about his training in swordplay. T'Les, his personal instructor, was a great fighter. And a wise one.

"Remember," he used to say, "your limits. There are many things you cannot do, just because of the way you are built. But there are also many things your opponent cannot do, because of how he is built. And there are many things neither of you can do, because you are human. Now, try to hit me..."

*There are certain things I can't do because I'm human. Being a human means being limited. That's how it works. We can't fly, we can't breathe underwater, we can't go without food. At least, not without magical means. These limits aren't curses. They are part of who we are. Accepting these limits is a part of functioning properly. Somehow, I must accept that I couldn't prevent that guard's death. Or accept that I didn't. I could not read Rathe's mind. I could not react to his moves. He is strong, and I am weak. He is young, and I am old. But the point is: life is full of failures. Failures large and small. Mine and everyone else's. We will not get all that we want from life. We will not do all that we want to do. We will not even do all that we can do. We are finite. Limited. Failure will happen. Guilt will happen. That is part of life. Accepting the joy of life means accepting the pain. Including failure. I still regret the young man's death, make no mistake, I still wish it hadn't happened. But Rathe will not destroy me with the boy's death. He killed the boy, but he did not destroy me.*

He looked again at the guard. He knew that if he encountered him in the afterlife, he could look him in the eye.

*May Heironeous reward his valor.*

Jonathan reluctantly turned his mind to a far more uncomfortable subject: his own imminent death.

*Rathe. That bastard, telling me when it will happen.*

He leaned his head back against the wall. He took a deep breath, tasting the blood.

*Will I miss the taste of blood?*

He looked around him. He let the images of his cell drift across his eyes. His surroundings were dull, but they seemed to him bright and vivid.

*Now that I know what I will and will not accomplish in my lifetime, what is it worth? I only have a few hours to do all that I wanted to do. And I'm in a cage.*

He clenched his fists.

*What has the point been? Death has been waiting to claim me this whole time. Why did I put up such a fight? Why struggle along for fifty years? Why not give up after thirty? Or twenty? Why struggle at all?*

*I'm back where I started. All my revelations of the past day are noth-*



ing. I'm still left with the realization that it's all worthless. Death equates us all. Whatever we do, we will die. The people we touch will die. Those who knew us will all die. We are all lost in the rush of time.

*But what of my uniqueness? My personal experiences? As unique as I am, it does not matter. I'll pass away. My uniqueness will pass away. Forever.*

*Forever. There's a concept. Imagine what man could do if he lasted forever. Look at what we do in our blink of existence. Imagine stretching it out to infinity. But wait. What would that do? All it would do is stretch our experiences. Put more space between them.*

*Is that what it would do?*

*If we knew we would never die, would we ever do anything? Death reminds us that we've got things to do. Death is not only the end, it is also the impetus. The motivator. Our time is limited, therefore we do. We create, we celebrate, we work and we play. Because we know we will one day be no more.*

This realization filled Jonathan with energy. He bounded to his feet and began pacing.

*Death gives us our chance to be human.*

He stopped. Today would be his chance. Fighting his death would be fighting his humanity. Death was coming. His humanity was coming. There was only one thing left to do.

*I have found my purpose in dying. But what of my purpose in living?*

He sat down. He was filled with a sudden sense of urgency. He felt that Rathe was only minutes away, bringing with him Death. So much to do in such little time. Jonathan closed his eyes, and remembered.

He remembered his childhood. Growing up. His parents. His older brothers. All dead now, yet each of them leaving an indelible print on the remainder of his life. He saw his schooling, his tutelage, his learning. From teachers, from family, from friends, from himself. He saw his adult life. The things he did, the things he did not. All the decisions he made. The battles he fought. The truces he made. The promises he kept, and those he broke. He remembered his actions, and his experiences, and his attitudes. All modes of his life.

All with a purpose.

Nothing was in vain. Even his leisure time made him better, different, more unique. His mistakes had purpose. His defeats had purpose. Every instant of his life provided a chance to learn, a question to answer, a challenge to overcome. And every instant he has left will provide more. Life is full. Full and overflowing.

He heard a heavy door open down the hallway. Rathe was coming. Jonathan's time was drawing to a close, and he was ready.

King Jonathan of Westphal, descendant of King John I, over-

thrown and imprisoned by his brother Phillip, stood to meet his fate. Footsteps sounded, running towards him from down the hall. A small group of people approached. A dwarf, an elf, and four humans came into view. He recognized them. They were children of some of his closest friends and associates. It was Ragnar, Delstat, Jacques, Calliope, Tara, and Zechariah. They had been away West with the Elves when he had been imprisoned. They had returned.

*Incredible. It's the children. Am I saved?*

"Your Highness," bowed Ragnar the Dwarf, "I think we should get you out of here."

—Lucas Anderson



