THE CAULDRON

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the woman with the chili pepper lipstick

Dad used to pick up hitchhikers on his way to work. Once he picked up a woman, who really wasn't a woman, I guess, since she was just 13. Anyway, she had on lots of blue eye shadow, really blue, like the color blue cotton candy turns in your mouth after you suck on it, and red lipstick—the color of one of those hot chili peppers, the kind that makes you catch your breath when you first cut them open and the kind that if you touch them and then rub your eyes, they feel like how you felt when you were little and your mom used to wash your hair and get soap in your eyes. That's the kind of chili pepper red. Anyway, my brother said she had big boobs which were popping out of her blouse. I don't know how if she was just 13. Could be he just wanted to think that—he wants all girls to look like the ones in the crumpled magazines stashed in the way back of his closet. He didn't even see her anyway—just said he heard dad tell mom he had to drop her off at the El Dorado Motel in Detroit. Anyway, dad doesn't pick up hitchhikers anymore. But that's just what my brother says.

—Jennifer Mrozowski
Blushing Sun Thieves

I'm sitting here at the kitchen table
with my sister and her boyfriend,
and she has hickeys on her neck.
Almost twenty-four and her first boyfriend
whispers my family through clenched teeth.
blue veins weaving beneath her skin
she turns her head,
slightly to one side.
bruised blood sucked red to the surface
I envy her
and her boyfriend
who doesn't notice my smile.

I think, I forgot
the fast pulse of feeling young.
my first love licking the sweat from my back
letting the sky steal our clothes
with hickeys on our necks.

—Amy Hicks
A man had a seizure in church today. The priests—three of 'em—and the two nuns just stood their with their thumbs up their butts while the congregation stood stupidly watching on. One tall, skinny guy in a striped Polo shirt called from the back, "Don't hold him down!" The priests stared blankly, trying to withhold emotion and information from a congregation living below the point of having a clue. Static energy fizzled from a few concerned bystanders. The tall guy ran to the phone and called the ambulance. A priest finished the announcements in his J. C. Penny's monotone and the choir attempted a last rousing hymn. I left before the song finished and passed the ambulance on my way out.

She waits on the slatted wooden bench on the train platform at four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. Her cream linen and lace gown, a hand-me-down from her cousin in the city, lays in crisp folds on the flaking green paint of the bench. She lifts a gloved hand to adjust her roll-brimmed straw hat so it sits just forward on her sandy blonde short and wavy hair. She removes a worn handkerchief from her beaded clutch purse. The cotton square had been a gift from her great-grandmother to her grandmother upon her marriage and subsequent move to the frontier town in Wisconsin. Today, that same town which had thrived in her grandmother's days lies grown over with decaying hardware stores and defunct drug store soda fountains. On the platform in that town, the young woman mops her upper lip, slightly creased with too many days in the wind, parched with sun and wheat chaff, and awaits her train.

"It's over now, isn't it, Marie? I had so hoped that he would make it. An old woman like me—well, what's the use in worrying? I suppose I've lived my life. Make way for the young, who have their whole lives ahead of them."
"Now, Mother, you know that life will go on. It is a shame to hear about him losing the election, but you know these things really can’t be helped. Now I’ll just go and take that pot roast out of the oven and cream some peas, and when Jack gets home, we’ll have ourselves a nice dinner. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?"

What I would like... what I would really like, is to have my own teeth back. And to have my silky black hair back, like it was when I was twenty. To remember a time when my fingers were slender and smooth, and men made me blush with comments about my creamy white skin. I would like days filled with lipsticks and hope and not thinking about the end so often. Days when my good dress was pale flowered cotton, not vibrant polyester, days when I could hold an iron and bake a pie, instead of sitting around listening to the infernal chatter of this ugly electric picture box. "But Mother," they tell me, "Jack has done so well at his job, we can afford to take care of you. There is no reason for a woman of your years to be fussing around with maintaining her own house. You must come live with us, where you can be near your grandchildren, and us, who love you. You can relax and enjoy, and pretend you are the queen with no worries but to come to dinner at six o’clock."

Hooey. I’ve ‘maintained’ my own house since I was thirteen years old when my Mami died. Until Jack’s promotion, I spent two hours every morning at the market, the butcher’s, the dairy, buying the best groceries for my husband and family. I reveled in my clean house, my smartly brought up children. I don’t want to be a queen—stuffy old lady with nothing better to do than to watch her overfed terriers fall all over themselves. Why do they need to take care of me? Am I senile? Am I just too slow for their Swanson dinner lives? I’m never ready in eight minutes, I am just old and slow. "Wait for Grandma, you know she doesn’t walk so fast!" Marie tells the children. Bah! What do they know about time? When was the last time they slowed down enough to see what a gem an hour is? Why, when I was Marie’s age, I took time—time with cooking, time with my laundry, time with my children, time with my husband. We discussed his day at the factory, the type of engines he worked on that day. We talked about our friends and their children. We talked about politics, and around election time, we knew who was our man and we supported him. The honest fellow with the honest family.
The one who we would invite over for Rummy on a Thursday night. Now these politicians today—most of them I’d never let in the house, let alone eat my pies. And after my man lost this election here today well just hafta say...well, I’d say....(sigh) It’s over now, isn’t it?

Eight young, willowy Chinese women stand *en pointe* on the stage of the Peking Ballet. Their mild, serene faces and creamy white skin flow about the stage in a series of perfectly timed *arabesques* and rippling waves of swaying heads and arms. In the midst of the graceful captivation of the dance, the audience almost forgets the high-powered rifle each woman carries on her shoulder.

—Emily C. Springfield
After Climbing Katahdin

Chewing doughnuts while
Coffee burns my tongue
In a frosty light blue pick-up
Quivering shaking struggling
To turn its wheels
Just once more.
No way can I sleep
Rattling slamming my head
From the window to the headrest
And back again.
Backpacks in the rear
Jump and thump
Keeping rhythm with the truck
But exhausted from the journey,

After climbing Katahdin
Hand over foot
Into the afternoon sun
Leaving sunrise sleepiness
At the bottom of the cereal bowl, while
Clinging to an almost vertical
Lump of pink granite
Blood streams down my leg and
I don't know which rock
Clutched me back
When I hugged a little too hard.
Lying flat on my back
At the top
Eating cantaloupe whose juices fell
From a cloudless blue sky and
Mixed with the drying blood,

Replicated now by the
Sun retreating to base camp.

—Linda M. Shipley
No Chaser

He thinks of her and pours himself a shot—tequila and heartbreak, no chaser. He studies it, waiting for the glistening liquid, the thick glass, and the standing tears in his eyes to refract the world into some semblance of sense. He thinks of the way she used to say "I love you, too," her voice dropping slightly in pitch on the "too" in a way that pulled at his soul the way a magnet pulls iron filings into a beautiful chaos/order. He wonders if he'll ever hear her say it to him again. A part of him doubts it, and reaches for another bottle. Scotch and love, on the rocks, the ice melting in much the same way his heart melted at her gentle touch. The wind blows through the open window, through the tears on his cheeks, and in his mind he feels her warm breath on the back of his neck. He raises the glass and downs his drink, letting it warm his stomach, if not his spirit. It falls heavily to the counter, a sound of finality. He hears in it the echo of the closing door after she told him good-bye. He reaches for another bottle.

—Shadowdancer
A front porch chat

It may not seem important to you, but we were sitting on those rocking lawn chairs, the green and orange ones, on the porch, which is significant because it was so cold that I had to keep my neck and back in constant rocking motion, back and forth and back and forth, just to lift the creeping numbness, and I had my arms burrowed into my sleeves, and my sleeves tucked under my arms, so that he noticed my form and said we could go in, but I knew that would be the end of our chat on the porch, and that brings me to the reason why I didn't go inside even though I could've gotten another jacket, but I already had on dad's blue hunting flannel and my yellow jacket with the zip-out lining, and I was afraid if I went inside he would realize we'd been talking for over an hour, so I just stomped my legs pretty violently, up and down and up and down, on the concrete porch as I rocked, which was a natural movement since I had to pee so badly that my side hurt, but as I said, we were talkin', and I just didn't want to go in.

—Jennifer Mrozowski
Baptized Cross

—Todd Wickersham

[Image of a cross and a shadow]
I lived in Russia from September 1993 until March 1994 and experienced firsthand the economic turmoil following the transfer from socialism to democracy and capitalism. While the change alleviated the infamous bread lines and grocers filled the stores with both Russian and foreign cheese, noodles, and shampoo, Russian citizens lacked the funds to purchase these goods. My American mentality perceived these prices as amazingly cheap. Twenty cents for a loaf of bread was no problem for me and the other foreigners living in Saint-Petersburg. However, the Russians considered this cost extremely high. Product costs had risen 1200% in just a year and wage increases were not comparable. I overheard an old woman in a tattered royal blue coat on the trolley-bus cursing the United States because, thanks to the capitalist economic system, she could barely afford to buy brown bread and vodka. I listened carefully to everything she said, but slumped down in my seat and tucked my blatantly foreign work boots underneath my chair. My friend Galya explained the Russian perspective by telling me she had once paid three cents for ice cream which now cost thirty-five cents. This scale of inflation is easier to understand by expanding the amount into dollars. A hypothetical example in America would be the cost of a gallon of milk rising from $1.89 to $18.90. By July 1994, one year later, the costs rose again. This time, the already inflated costs tripled. Bread which cost fifteen cents in September 1993, now costs sixty cents. The gallon of milk would rise from $18.90 to $56.70.

The change of economic systems affected more than the cost of milk and bread. The transportation system suffered as well. Trolley-busses and trams, the main form of transportation within the city, ran occasionally and unpredictably. In February, I and my temporary comrades waited at least half an hour in -20 C weather for something to carry us to work, classes, or the market. The bus finally arrived, resembling an over packed suitcase. The doors reluctantly folded back, pressing against people standing on the steps. When the doors eventually opened, people fell down the stairs into the street only to scramble back inside. Despite the fact that the bus's carrying capacity was reached and exceeded, people pushed against people hanging out the door hoping to make room for themselves. Only once or twice in my trolley-bus experiences did I hear someone cry out "Enough. It's full." We just packed ourselves tighter and tighter at each stop until noses pressed against backs and shoulders and
we weren't individuals, just a conglomerate of bodies. Often people missed their stop because they couldn't force through the masses to get near the door. Ludmilla, my host mother, shook her head and murmured "This is terrible. The busses were always crowded, but never this dirty." Looking down, I watched the muddy sludge on the floor slosh against everyone's boots, splashing them as the bus stopped and started. Ludmilla continued, "All these changes, but we are still poor." People nearby nodded their heads in agreement and eventually an older generation person jumped up and complained about capitalism and America, where everyone had all the food, money and material goods a person could want. Ludmilla grabbed my hand and tucked it under her elbow. To the other Russians, this gesture meant I was one of them, not one of the Americans they blamed for their economic instability. I doubted I was in danger since many Russians admired America. But the country was reaching a climax of frustration. Capitalism promised wealth and independence, but due to inflation, the majority of citizens could not afford the western stereo systems, coffee makers and clothing which saturated the market. Furthermore, no one understood the capitalist economy. Television channels showed commercials for banks and stock companies. But these organizations meant nothing to the average citizen. Only the people belonging to the newly developed business class understood the concept of saving money in banks and investing in stocks.

Economics permeates our lives in ways we don't expect, extending far beyond taxes and inflation. To Galya, the change to capitalism means when she gets married, she and her husband will live in their own apartment. Under the socialist system, newlyweds lived with their parents and grandparents. People crammed dining tables and beds in the same room due to lack of space. When each person had less than five square meters of living space, the family registered for a new apartment. New housing assignment often took more than ten years. In 1993, families who registered in 1979 received new apartments. Many apartments in the center of the city are community apartments, where separate families live in the same apartment and share a kitchen and a bathroom. Galya lived in an apartment that covered the entire floor of a building. Her mother's bedroom was also the dining room and family room. She never told me exactly how many people lived in her apartment, but responded, "Many, Linda. Very many."

—Linda M. Shipley
Rainbow Suckers, Gangrene, and Alphabet Soup

Great Grampa Zombron made Indian necklaces even though he was Polish. He made them in my mother's eyes, Hershey brown against red and white, every time he asked who she was in Polish so Gramma had to translate, even though he used to speak English. And Gramma's eyes were an American flag—fluttering blue, marshmallow white, and a burst of cherry red to top it off.

Great Grampa Zombron was given the name Zombronski by birth. I heard the tale as a child that someone at the Statue of Liberty stole three letters from his name. I pictured a short, bearded man in a red and black flannel shirt, running through a tight crowd, while tucking the letters S and K and I into a sack of alphabet soup.

Great Grampa Zombron had one and a half legs. He lost one to gangrene and wore a paper bag over the stump. Sometimes he'd ask me to sit on his lap, but I would wriggle away at the thought of the gangrene stub, which I thought must be rotted and decayed and clothed in a coat of fuzzy, green mold. Green as in gangrene. Not really, but that's what I though when I was little.

Great Grampa Zombron stashed big swirly rainbow suckers beneath his sunken pillow and Ben-gay scented bed-sheets. His third wife Anja reminded me of a skinny, lavender-haired witch, peering around the corner as Grampa revealed to me his stash. Perhaps Anja shuffled in softly in her big white nursing shoes with a gentle reprimand on her thin lips as she pried the candy from his liver-spotted, white knuckled hands. But that's not what I saw. I saw two ugly black periods, punctuated in the whites of her eyes, snooping and glaring, her hooked hands swooping and snatchimg. Grampa pulled at the air, but his hands fell in defeat at his side as Anja led the suckers and me away from the sunken, moaning man.
Later, the sucker in my hand, watching his home become a shrinking dot through the back window of our car, I licked away that fallen face, those clutching, curling fingers of my diabetic, wheel-chaired Grampa. The last words he said to my gramma, “Who were those people, Veronica?” blurred together like the colors of the swirly rainbow sucker in my little hands.

—Jennifer Mrozowski
Abba

My father is at church
in genuflection before the cross
as if praying for his children’s youth,
wishing he could have been with
them so they wouldn’t be
so far away now.
His lips move silently as he kneels,
his callused fingers
shuffling through the rosary.
This year was a tres horas service...
I don’t remember the previous years, except they went
from Good Friday to Holy Thursday
to Holy week and midnight masses.
When he came home early,
after all those hours at work and church
my sister Carol asked,
“Mommy, who is that strange man with the beard?”
Maybe parenting abandoned him,
at the age of 14, taking his two fingers with it.
I wonder if those stubs of fingers
ever burn or itch or bleed
with the promise of rebirth.
Are the masses
penitence for only being with his children
every other Saturday at the matinee movies?
Does he say a separate prayer for
each child’s lack of faith?
The kidney stones and the grey hairs
are the same, but has death’s rheumatism entered
his cough? Does he feel the humidity
of Judgment Day in the ache of his bones?

Ceremonies for the dead,
the living and the faithful,
maybe they comfort
those who missed the ceremonies of youth.

—John Morrison
untitled

—Todd Wickersham
I am a tomboy, and
I spit fire.
I refuse to let them force skirts
over my skinned knees.
I run with my hair uncombed, letting it
knot in the wind.
I hate the nights when my mother
sits me down with a comb 'in her hand.
She pulls so hard that I'm sure I'II end up
bald or stupid or
something.

I climb trees.
I walk barefoot.
My father lectures to me about
catching colds and hookworm,
but I don't care.
I like the slip of the mud
pushed up between my toes.

Yesterday, I saw red.
Everywhere
red, red, red
It was sticky
and it clung to my thighs.
My mother laughed
and told my father.

I tried to stop my breasts from growing.
Every night I slept on my stomach,
hoping to flatten them out.
But my mother brought home my first bra anyway.
It had pink flowers on it.
I hid it in the garbage beneath the
chicken bones and the browned lettuce.
Boys look at me strangely, 
like they want something. 
I don't like boys. 
I don't like the way they look 
with their itchy chins 
and tight hard muscles crammed in their pants. 
I don't like boys. 
They touch me sometimes. 
Sticking their hands up my shirt, 
they try to kiss me. 
They are always surprised 
at how hard I can kick and 
how fast I can run. 
I think that I am still running from 
their groping hands and wet parted lips, 
and into the soft dull ache of safety.

—Amy Hicks
I am 30 now
And remember the day
when the cicadas roared in the corn
and the sun wilted the stems dry
and baked the kernels
The river dried up that summer
and the air smelled like dead fish
for a year

—Craig W. Burns
Thread

Fishing line cast by some unseen fisher,
no lures on his cap, no fishing charms,
no cap at all.
The lines weren't a translucent blue,
but a crystal white, trying to
catch the biggest fish, the one without
gills. The boat, the boat was
somewhere on land, in a corner,
under the stairs or in a basement.
The boat had no engine and was
repaired daily with intricately
woven silk patches.
Even so, there would be no fish today,
because the lines were too thin and too far apart.
The rain would come and its drops
would be suspended on the lines
like jewels in the sun.

—John Morrison
Knots

You know I had a knot in my hair one day
so I cried...
It really didn't even hurt badly,
but thinking I had a knot in my hair
made me cry.
Lost ten pounds.
They tell me I'm lucky.
Don't they realize
I don't want to lose the weight...
don't have time to eat.
No time to cry...
No time for poetry...
A kind of steady pounding,
sleeps, eats, beats on my skull,
in time with my heart,
and I'd like to tell 'em all...I know
you know—
that they're breaking me;
that I'm near drowning.
Don't have to bury me.
Can't blink, can't squint, can't open my eyes
as it is now—that's how deep I am...
Five foot five and a half inches underground,
and I'm five foot seven,
you know.
I can smell it, too...
the dirt.
Sure, it's in my nose,
stuffed right up in there...
dirt,
or mud at the top where it's moist
from my breathing.
But it's getting harder to breathe, 
a muddy snowball packed solid in my throat now, 
it's film crawling down my lungs 
like phlegm in the winter, 
can taste it, too, the bland paste, 
and it's getting harder to hear 
with earth and soil mashed into my ears, 
and the crystals scraping together 
when I try to turn my head, 
but it doesn't matter, 
'cause I can't turn much...

anymore...

'cause I got knots in my hair, 
and they're all glued together 
with the dirt and mud and clay 
like ropes tied to my head 
that won't let me move...

anymore...

but with the same dirt and mud and clay 
shoved deep in my throat 
I can't even cry...

anymore...

—Jennifer Mrozowski
The Fall

Three airplanes, a set of triplets, aim toward the explosion of sun, over fields of fallow clouds. Streamers of men are released from each like the promises of their parachutes, arrow headed, legs and arms spread like death, strings of starfish breaking through the angelcake frosting as through the layer of ghosts that swarm the earth. Were they told not to eat breakfast that morning? Last night did they dream in wakefulness about the fall, this lie of flying, this re-entry into the underworld.

—Hannah Wells
Legal Opium for the Soul

Two perplexing questions regarding religion stem from the writings of John Maynard Keynes and Karl Marx. Keynes wonders if religions are correct in deploring the accumulation of wealth and Karl Marx states that "religion is the opium of the people." In this essay, I will show that religion very rightly discourages the pursuit of money as life's ultimate goal and is indeed an opiate.

To address the first question of the propriety of religion's anti-materialism, one must first answer the question, "What is the purpose of religion?" This question itself has two facets: What is the purpose of religion for those who create it and what is its purpose for those who consume it.

There are several plausible reasons why the "producers" of religion, such as prophets, evangelists, and members of religious orders and hierarchies, may have seen fit to bring religion to the people. Perhaps they felt that every soul not converted to their view of religion would be damned to eternal suffering. Perhaps they felt "called" by a higher power to spread a message. Perhaps they thought this was a way to help achieve a social balance through a redistribution of wealth. Of course, once gurus convinced their wealthier followers to give up their money for some moral cause, they could also pocket some or all of the money and make a tidy living. If a person felt cast out by society or desired power, he could attain both the adulation of and power over many people by creating a religious following for himself. So, three reasons why religions may have been started could be to spread a god-given message; to help people out of personal charity, but not necessarily divine intervention; and for personal monetary or emotional profit.

The "consumers" of religion have similar reasons for subscribing to a particular dogma. Perhaps they feel that this is the way to eternal life, or that religion somehow makes their existence meaningful. Perhaps they want to look good, to keep up an image they feel they need to portray, in colloquial terms, to "keep up with the Joneses." Or, perhaps they feel downtrodden and cast out by society due to their lack of material wealth. Historically speaking, organized religions have been the only groups, other than the poor themselves, to accept and value the poor. Religions give poverty dignity.

Is it appropriate, then, for a doctrine to encourage its followers to give up their worldly goods? According to all the aforementioned aims of religion, the answer is yes. If a person truly believed that seeking a god or
higher state was the sole purpose of life, and that money, property and other things of this world were hindrances to union with that god, then that person would be completely justified in encouraging his followers to give up their possessions. If the person had charitable intentions, then using moral persuasion to encourage those who have more to give to those who have less is also an acceptable mode of operation. If the leader's aim is simply to amass wealth for himself, then encouraging his followers to give up their money to him is in complete accordance with his goals.

In the case of consumers of religion, giving up their money and living humbly has distinct advantages, no matter why they do it. For true believers, a non-materialistic lifestyle will earn them passage into a higher realm of being, or at the very least, make them feel good about themselves. For those who want to look good, being generous to a church or charity can be a display of excess wealth and therefore, power and high social status. For those who need acceptance, they are reassured that even though society shuns them for their poverty and "unacceptable" appearance, that they, too, have a place of belonging. These means of escape and feelings of contentment are addictive, and soon the user feels he cannot live without it.

Now, the second main question: Is religion the opium of the people? Again, one must first examine the purpose of opium and, for the sake of discussion, other intoxicating drugs and liquors. These inebriating substances exist for two reasons: the producers and consumers. The producers, that is, the growers, dealers, and traffickers, could have several reasons for engaging in the drug trade, such as profit, power, or as a service. Obviously, those who sell drugs at all stages of the business, from grower to street dealer, make a monetary profit from the drug, assuming they do not get caught. They also profit form the respect and fear they earn in their positions of power, especially the higher-ups and kingpins. Another reason, albeit a seldom-used one, that people distribute drugs may be because they believe them to be the path to enlightenment and the producers of visions. The self-styled new-age shaman may rightly believe that hallucinations are not the spasms of overloaded brain circuits, but rather a glimpse of the truth beyond this world and therefore encourage others to seek reality in the same manner.
Likewise, people may take drugs for several reasons, such as "visionary" purposes, or the relief of physical or emotional pain. Drugs provide a quick form of escape from a hopeless living situation and with an endless high comes liberation from an unacceptable and unchangeable reality. Drugs also provide the user with a place to be accepted. Whether it is a crack house or the "in crowd" at school, drug users form a community that they may never have felt before. Like religious fanatics, drug users soon become at the very least emotionally dependent upon their means of escape.

It is easy, therefore, to see that both drugs and religion serve the same purposes: to bring enlightenment, to provide profit, and to ease the pain of those in need. Economically speaking, both systems are manners of redistributing wealth among the people via personal choice as opposed to forced giving, like taxes. As for the benefits or detriments of either, I reserve that controversy for another discussion. Suffice it to say that religion and the drug trade both serve definite and similar purposes.

—Emily C. Springfield
On the Other Side

“What do you want?” she said.

“What do you want?”

Go ahead,” she replied. She still hadn’t looked up, nor had her gaze faltered. Her eyes were fixed, and as he sat he felt a strange electricity in the air, something a bit like nostalgia, and he knew what people meant when they talked about déjà-vu. Settled on the rock, he could hear the irregularity in her breathing and see the gleam in her eye. He knew that she had been crying, so he asked the obvious: “What’s wrong?”

She looked at him for the first time. Her eyes were red, their color faded. Her face was streaked, her expression strained. He recognized it from some other place, some other time, but he couldn’t place it. He could only remember that it was associated with some great misery. This woman had seen something she shouldn’t have. He didn’t think she’d talk about it but he had to know. “What was it?” he asked, trying to hide his eagerness, attempting a facade of understanding and sympathy.

“You don’t want to know,” she answered, turning away.

“Why do you care?” she demanded, echoing his thoughts. “Besides, it’s none of your business.”

“Yes, it is,” he mumbled. Then, louder, “I know. I just think you should know that you’re not alone.”

“Yeah, right,” she said, blowing air out through her teeth.

“It happens to everyone.”

“I don’t think so,” she said, darkness moving over her face. She was beginning to grow angry, that was clear. If he pushed her just a little more...

“Yes, I think so.”

“Okay, fine,” she said finally, “I’ll tell you.”

“Yes,” he said, eyes gleaming. What had come over him? What was she going to say? “Yes?” he repeated softly, moving closer.
She looked out over the lake again, the setting sun lighting her dull, lifeless eyes with false fire. Sighing deeply, she began to speak. As her story unfolded in front of him, he was taken along with her, lifted up and swept away by her memories. The tears started to roll down his face.

He was left sitting on the rock, alone and shivering, his teeth clacking, heart pounding. He looked up and saw her floating near the horizon, sinking into the sun, hair on fire. He reached out to embrace her and couldn’t touch. He sank to the ground, hair growing, cells dying. He finally understood what she was talking about.

—Craig W. Burns
**Pneumonia and the Neighbor's Stupid Cat**

Neglect pushed me into the cold—
Which really means, I went outside
on the porch in my naked feet,
and tiptoed along the nighttime cement.
"I'm gonna get sick, maybe pneumonia,
then I'll go into the hospital and maybe I'll die"
Plunking down, I buried my head
in my stupid knees and wished on the disease,
and I was pretty happy pouting along,
head in my knees, and mumbling aloud,
when a furry snake sprang on my face—
"Holy Shit! Jesus Christ!"
but it was just the neighbor's stupid cat,
weaving eights around my legs.
At first, I tickled it's shaggy chin;
caramel brown with jagged stripes,
but I decided I didn't need it's pity.
"Get outta here, you stupid cat."
I crossed my arms in showy defiance,
but the cat kept nudging against my leg.
I even ignored it when it bit my foot,
just a ploy to get my attention,
but I wasn't knuckling to a stupid cat,
so I turned my head and began to hum.
I worked for a bit and I was victorious—
but another cat jumped out the bushes.
Never saw such a scraggly cat.
"Get outta here you ugly beast."
And it did...along with the little kitty.
But I remembered I didn't care.
It was just an ugly stupid cat,
and I buried my head in my knees and hummed.

—Jennifer Mrozowski
Angel II

—Todd Wickersham
Nostalgia

My life is floating before me in a wave of nostalgia. The memories are as clear as the ice-cold water that lies at my feet. I look down at my toes. A reflection is staring back from the water with cold eyes. I am not looking at myself, this much I know. The man staring from the water is not a short, balding man, hair falling tiredly past his shoulders. There is a young man in the water, a youth whose vigor has yet to be tainted with the knowledge. All my senses tell me I am looking at another man. That is the most painful part.

Tears falling in a despair whose origin I can't name, or no longer care to remember, something pulls me from the bliss of days and I look to the other side of the pool. There, on the deep grass, is the statue. It is black like the nights I suffer through and it speaks to me of anguish, for it is a woman and I can finally understand the pain. There are colors within the stony flesh I don't recognize, the shades changing subtly with every motion of the warm breeze off the desert, giving the illusion of movement...

Mountains rise in jagged peaks like the frame of a broken window. There are no other mountains than these, for these are where all life began and where all life ends. The horizon beckons to me. The sun set a long time ago, longer than I remember, yet there is no darkness in this land, the rules do not apply, wherever this may be.

A dim ember has distinguished itself on the horizon and creeps itself closer with every step I take. The barren ground, cracked from an eternity without mocks me with its endurance. It fights me every step, a heat burning up through my bare feet from somewhere in the bowels of the earth. I've no idea where I walk, but every time the concentrated glow on the horizon begins to take shape,

The world turns blue. It twists around me in strange patterns, liquid crystal that flows in and out of my lungs with frightening ease. The light is different; subdued, abstracted, broken into too many shades, like a deformed prism. I see fish often. Vaguely there is the memory of another place, another time...

Naked sound comes at me from every direction. Liquid rock erupts from the earth in orgasmic fits, spitting blistering heat against my naked skin. I scream, more in indignation than pain. The heat causes me no
pain. We have been together too long for any harm to occur between us. We are more intimate than human lovers, closer than the sperm and egg at the moment of union. It has always been this way.

The ground crumbles and I am falling into the heat. Flames shoot up, licking at my body, tasting me. The fires are subdued, saving their final energy for my arrival. I am on my way...

I force myself to take another step on the dry earth. Its cracked red heat offers no relief. There is nothing other than the dagger-peaks on the horizon and the red haze which pounds in my head. the glow in the horizon is growing brighter with every step, creating a voice of its own, calling...

I am knee-deep in snow. Confused, I find I am halfway to the summit of a mountain, red desert stretched behind me. Taking a lungful of icy air, I continue the ascent.

For the first time, I move. The motion begins with slow strokes of my arms, an attempt to wipe the murky air out of my eyes. My movements become more agitated, sending me forward into the murk in search of a vague form that is familiar, should be familiar. I rip at the impossibly elastic blue shroud, tearing my way through, moving forward.

I finish my descent into my lover’s fires and perish in an instant. But not before...

I wander as always, answering the beasts’ questions when they are asked, requesting nothing. I am content just to walk...

As the sun rose this morning I had the vision. Countless small things, the wings on the butterfly, the persistent motionless dripping of tiny beads of water from the leaves, sun breaking the canopy into pieces, tickling them on their fall.

Looking up through the molten earth, I see a silhouette. It is the shape of a woman, perfect in the blurred, tortured visions it inspires. The image is burned on my mind, preserved in the only instant I ever saw her...

Without warning a figure looms out of the dimness. Once-numerous fish have gone, leaving us alone at last. I stare without pause. She stares back with lively black eyes, light smile brushing over her lips. I have no words and can no longer breathe. I open my mouth to speak and the air
pours into my lungs, my throat explodes. I try to scream but the pressure has become too much. I fade from consciousness with her image engraved on my mind.

I am battered, bloody and cold, but I’ll make it over. The summit is five yards away, the ice coats the entire peak, gleaming like spilt blood in the hard red light. I take the final step and push my head over the top, expecting paradise. What I see makes me lose my grip and I almost fall back into the desert.

There is only another desert, another endless expanse of dried mud, burning with its own internal heat. Nothing!

In the midst of this barren world there is a small globe of white. It pulses near the ground in a rhythm of its own, spreading a cool, relaxing light over the red earth. Its circle of influence remains small as it begins to grow, taking shape into something I had never hoped to see. Everything I have ever done is justified in that one moment and I am purged of all my sins.

The globe remains near the dirt as it expands and contracts, sending small clouds of dust into the shimmering atmosphere. The particles of clay become golden and fly away before they touch the earth, spreading light. The white heart continues to expand. Dressed in a long satin gown, her dark skin glowing bronze in the white light of her dominion, she moves. Her hand reached out to something that has come to be at her feet. She plucks the single object from the ground and raises it to her mouth. As her lips touch its delicate surface, it pales. Spreading through the veins and into its heart, her light does its work.

She smells deeply of it and lets it fall to the earth. From its point of impact, life springs spontaneously from the earth, turning back the redness. I step over the summit and feel myself begin to slide. I was never meant to get this far. As I slide, the final image of her hair is burned onto my mind. Crying my desire, I push myself from the mountain, falling into the hot pink air. She looks up from her reverie, sees me, and smiles. Her arms leave her side and stretch out. I step forward to embrace her, sinking into the soft, decaying jungle floor. I look up once to see the vine-cloaked outline of a statue through the humid greenery.

—Craig W. Burns