

# Spring 2010

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Russell Rowland  
PANDORA'S BOX

Heavy equipment chewing a mall from the hillside  
halts work in deference to deft archaeologists  
with subtler tools. Soon, grid lines mark the site.

Can even God be as old as the child we disinterred,  
curled forever into the contour of the womb,  
at one time someone's dearest, who never grew?

Age folds back upon age. One of our excavators  
catches herself weeping for the mummified remains:  
she prays to Mother Mary, as she has not in years  
(three dolorous moms are now involved, it seems).

Whenever we fall through weak places in the crust  
into dark chambers sealed eons ago, and discover  
ourselves down there, whose deaths are we dying?

Ten mall executives glance at their bottom lines,  
clear their throats. Archaeologists must decide...  
something. What? Wristwatches run backward.  
Diesel earthmovers have not been invented yet.

Tonight's moon is nibbled by a dragon of eclipse.  
Trained scientists scare it off by banging sticks.

**Author's Comment:**

My companion, an artist, returned from Hungary with the tale of commercial construction interrupted by archaeological discovery. While there, she produced a body of work under the rubric, "Time Collapse"—the poem's original title—reflecting her interest in the similarities between us and pre-historic peoples. The poem agrees that we may learn more about ourselves from what lies under the earth than from what we build upon it, but in the learning may open "Pandora's box." Three mothers from different times feel similar grief.

Russell Rowland  
DARK ENTRY ROAD

It shows on older maps. It is unmaintained.  
It is unimproved. It is mostly for dog-walkers.

Selectman named it to such effect that it broke  
out in cellar holes, like the scars of small-pox.

It was the road to the darker, December solstice.  
It wound round the bottom of the northern side  
of the mountain, where by three the sun is gone.

It followed the valley of the shadow, that valley  
in which your feet stumbled, your heart faltered  
at what lay ahead. Fearing evil, you turned back.

It led to one light in the dark valley; late at night  
that too went out. A woman was heard to weep  
over the absolute dominion of darkness.

Her lord may have got the son she couldn't bear  
upon their eldest daughter. Summers, the girls  
ventured out to float their hair on the sparkling  
Pemigewasset.

The boy followed at a distance:  
soon they would be throwing their hair forward  
to dry it, while he crouched in the bushes.

It ended where such roads did: at the quiet plot.  
Here were buried, as in due time all would be,  
Seth, Patience, Rebekah, Baby Boy, and Charity.

**Author's Comments:**

There are a couple of abandoned roads with this name in New England. They go back to pre-industrial times. I tried to draw a somber picture of the early subsistence farmers by working with the ideas of "darkness" and "entry." For them it must sometimes have seemed that the only "exit" from their struggles was the grave. The prevalent darkness is relieved somewhat by the sparkling river. The poem's laconic statements perhaps add a feeling of distance, as well as Yankee speech-patterns.

**Bio:** Russell Rowland lives in New Hampshire's Lakes Region. A four-time Pushcart Prize nominee, he has been featured poet in *The Aureorean* and *Chantarelle's Notebook*, and recipient of Descant's Baskerville Publisher's Award. His poems appear in over a hundred small journals.

Karen Douglass  
NO-NEWS DAY

The headlines: today no one died  
from an IED, no child  
was stolen, no flood, blizzard,  
cyclone, or quake. Can you believe it?

The mortuary is vacant, so  
my cousin the funeral director  
is fishing with the chief of police,  
whose in basket is empty.

The verb to be  
is mayor for the day. Every fifth grader  
has a peanut butter sandwich and homework  
with a big red A on the first page.

The mail carrier wears bedroom slippers,  
and the farmer is asleep in the hay.  
We're tempted to hold our breath, but  
it's hard to sing Alleluia without taking  
great gulps of sweet, clean air.

**Author's Comments:**

I write something every day. One day I just had nothing to say. Given my affection for Ezra Pound's dictum to "keep it new," I moaned to myself that I was having a no-news day, and there it was, the what if. What if we really had no news, a possibility only if nothing newsworthy—read bad—had happened.

Karen Douglass  
SUNRISE OVER THE FREIGHT YARD

In this steel feedlot  
growling herds of boxcars and tank cars  
lumber along, each one  
gripping the hitch of the one in front.

Sides branded with graffiti,  
like untranslated runes,  
powerless to move alone,  
the cars shriek and groan  
like invalids.

They couple joylessly,  
grimy as a caravan of camels,  
elephants, slaves, convicts—  
quick marching over trestles, plains,  
mountains, without water or pity.

Like small brains  
men fill the engine's skull.  
Air and Earth tremble.

**Author's Comments:**

Living for a time near a freight yard, I couldn't help but think how like huge animals the cars were. They were noisy and demanded attention. Once I made the initial connection, it was a short step of the imagination to realize that such creatures would object to the rigidity of the rails, never free to do other than what they are directed to do by the human beings who manage the yard.

**Bio:** Karen Douglass's books include *Red Goddess Poems*, *Green Rider*, *Bones in the Chimney*, *Sostenuto* and *The Great Hunger*. She serves on the editorial staff of *The Café Review*.

Jeremy Deal  
APOLOGY ABORTED

“Hangin’ in there, sweetie?  
We’re about ready, so I need you  
to breathe deep and count down  
from a hundred. Kay?”

And the mask comes down.

One hundred. Ninety-nine.

But I didn’t ask for this, he said –  
now I’m drowning in neon green static,  
wishing they’d vacuum him up instead.

I shouldn’t wish that.  
Pastor Keelor says  
God wants us to wish good on our transgressors –  
to sweep our unseemly bastards into the incinerator  
but to wish good on our transgressors –  
fuck God.

Still, I shouldn’t be...  
I am better than him, aren’t I?

Ninety – eight.

No. I’m a bitch.  
I don’t want him to hold my hand through this  
because ‘this’ –  
because when I signed the insurance waiver for ‘this,’  
his hand steadied my pen  
so I contend that  $3 - 1 = 0 = \text{nothing} = \text{no solution}$   
 $= \text{dissolution} = \text{done}$ .  
And this ordered operation is my proof.

Ninety – seven.

God I hope she has his eyes

so I can watch the light drain  
out of them – or will I get to see it  
at all?

God – it.  
Listen to me – it, I called her  
while she’s still warm inside me.

Nine...

But I didn’t ask for this, he said.

Fine, motherfucker,  
then you didn’t ask for me.

**Bio:**

Jeremy Deal is a BFA student at UNC Wilmington. His work has been published in *Dead Mule* and *Catawba*.

Paul Hostovsky  
GET WELL CARD IN CARDIOLOGY

The beautiful nurses of history  
are all out in the corridor,  
nursing. If you push the call button  
their beautiful voices  
will ask you what you want.  
If you tell them you want them  
they will give you their beautiful  
laughter and a gentle  
rebuke. If you keep on pushing the call button  
they will send in the plain nurses  
whose voices are also beautiful  
to confuse you. If you close your eyes and just  
keep on pushing the call button for all it's worth  
they will take the call button away from you.  
The world is like that.  
What you need is one of those crazy great ideas  
men get when they're in love,  
the kind that just might work,  
the kind that makes a man great  
and gets him the woman. History  
is full of crazy great ideas. Borrow one.  
You can do better than pushing your call button  
and pulling your catheter out.  
Very mediocre ideas, my friend.  
You just keep on imagining all day  
every day of your convalescence  
the beautiful nurses of history  
lining up in the corridor outside your room,  
and you will get better soon,  
because history is on your side,  
and exercising your imagination  
is not only good for your heart,  
it's good for God and country —  
Repeat after me: I pledge allegiance  
to beauty.

**Author's Comment:**

Nothing too deep here. I was visiting a friend in the hospital, and he was a little obsessed with one of his nurses. She was very beautiful. While I was there she came in to check his vitals, and he told her she could check his vitals anytime. This got a smile out of her. Then he said that when she checked his vitals he felt his vitality returning. This got him another smile, along with a gentle rebuke. She told him to push the call button if he needed anything, and as she left the room he and I looked at each other, and the poem was born.

Paul Hostovsky  
THE GRAMMAR OF LOVE

I'm dating an identical twin.  
She tells me her twin sister  
is prettier than she is.

Prettier than she is pretty.  
Pretty is an elliptical clause.  
Comparatives are

special adjectives used for  
comparing two things  
or people. I am reluctant

to meet the twin sister.  
I mean what if I fall in love with her?  
I mean what if love is relative?

Some people use people the way  
others use conjunctions.  
"Marlene is pretty but

Michelle is prettier."  
True love must be superlative.  
It must be the definite article.

Sentences with superlatives use the  
because there should be only one superlative  
in any given heart.

**Author's Comment:**

The first stanza is true; it happened; is happening. The rest of the poem struggles to make sense of it all. True, it's having a little fun (I confess, I like fun), but beneath the fun, or alongside it, there is also perhaps a more serious meditation on the syntax of sex, so to speak, and also the nature of romantic relationships in general. What else can I say?

**Bio:** Paul Hostovsky's latest book of poems, *Dear Truth* (2009), is available from Main Street Rag. To read more of his work, visit his website at [www.paulhostovsky.com](http://www.paulhostovsky.com)



Pris Campbell  
IN WANT OF NO PLUMS

Maybe this is what it takes  
to bring tears:  
two dogs humping out front  
a fresh bud springing  
from something thought gone.  
I have become the confidant  
in love stories men tell,  
not the plum they want picked.

Night after night, dreambound,  
I speak to the lost dead,  
wake, hope for a moment  
they're still there,  
trapped in some hidden  
orgasm of time.

Awareness rides the first  
morning raindrop as I still straddle  
then and now, clutching the dark  
sweating horse of inevitability.

Illusions re-cloaking, I toss apples  
away, rush to embrace the rain.

**Author's commentary:**

An old grad school apartment mate of mine wrote me, "I always thought that our fifties would mean dealing with wrinkles and gray hair, not these terrible losses". She died of cancer about five years ago. I've lost almost all of my family, too many of my friends, and the path gets lonelier. If we could put on blinders for a day, forget what's been lost, and go back in time, would we? Would we choose to be plums again at the expense of what life has taught us, still teaches us? Fresh plums...wrinkled prunes. Seems an easy dilemma in many ways. Yes, it would be wonderful to have men look at me the way they used to, for friends and family to return, but there's no cutting down the apple orchards. Time moves. So many of my poems deal with this struggle of aging and loss. Tis not an easy process.

Pris Campbell  
VISITATIONS

He told me on Thanksgiving,  
moved out by Christmas,  
this man I finally married,  
pirating away shared sea stories  
and memories of our footloose ways  
in that post Vietnam, one-marriage-down era.

The woman I was disappeared with him.

Occasionally, she re-visits,  
frowns at my matched sheets, drapes  
to complement the sofa, husband  
with hands folded in front of the tv.  
She reminds me of sea wind in my face,  
clanking halyards, LP's strewn by the bed,  
lava lamps, noisy communal meals  
and how that blue velvet bedspread felt  
against my bare and trembling back.

**Author's commentary:**

Isn't there so often one great love, one period of time in our lives many of us remember more than any other? We think those days, that love will go on forever. Life is change, as we've figured out by the time we cross the age 40 marker, and we change with it. Even love changes when it lasts. It's no longer the breathless rush to a blue velvet bedspread but to something more solid underfoot. I miss the woman in this poem, though, and am glad she returns, even if with eyebrows arched, to remind me of that wild part inside of me that will never die. Not even if my drapes complement the sofa.

**Bio:**

Pris Campbell's collaboration with Scott Owens, "The Nature of Attraction," will be released from Main Street Rag in July. She is also the author of "Sea Trails" from Lummo Press and two other chapbooks. She has been nominated for 3 Pushcart Prizes.

Harry Calhoun

I SAW THE GROUNDHOG'S SHADOW

It was a month or so ago, and on TV  
the groundhog grumbled from his lair  
and as if he cared cast no shadow.

I guess it was overcast or maybe  
the weather lady holding him up  
for the camera shielded him from

the weak winter sun with her body,  
which wasn't bad, by the way.  
But this isn't about lechery, it's poetry,

and what I mean to say is that I swear  
I saw an umbra of woodchuck  
just off a bit to the left

and I'll bet that's why we've had  
these extra six weeks of winter.  
I claim credit for it, anyway. Perception

is the leading edge of poetry  
and if I'm to get anywhere with writing it  
I have to notice and report

small but important stuff like this.

Author's Comment:

Well, this is just a silly poem. If it has an iota of seriousness to it, it's poking fun at the poet's habit of being gravely serious. So often we write about writing poetry and seeing the groundhog's shadow is a comment on that. Of course, we don't think about these things when we write, or at least I don't, but I think it's significant that the animal doesn't give a rip about the festivities, the poet's attention is distracted by the female form, but the significant part is the "umbra of woodchuck" that the poet thinks he sees..

Harry Calhoun

THE STEPS ON THE BACK DECK

The stain my wife and I placed there  
one sweaty spring day, now scratched  
to bare wood where the dog

scraped the boards, catapulted steps,  
bounded into morning after morning to pee  
on shrubs and trees. I survey

a backyard of memories.  
The dog still black and regal steps  
a little slower today. A clock ticks

inside the house and in this still  
morning I am quite aware

of its rhythm.

**Author's Comment:**

Anyone who knows me knows that I'm largely a two-trick pony: my wife and my dog. I think this poem is both a celebration of youthful energy and an acknowledgement of mortality. A little poetic license involved here; while the idea for the poem happened on my ritual morning trip to the back deck with my dog, and while there is a clock just inside the door, I couldn't really hear it ticking. What I heard, or sensed, was something else, of course — but it felt like what I reported.

**Bio:**

Harry Calhoun is the author of "Dogwalking Poems", "I knew Bukowski like you knew a rare leaf", and "The Black Dog and the Road". He is the editor of "A Pig in a Poke" magazine

Erica Goss

THIS IS A WILD PLACE

On the last day of winter,  
my car, filled  
with chaff and spare parts,

fits neatly in its painted slot,  
a motion box, stopped.  
The little junk birds peck at foil,

and I am called away from my body  
to forage for my life  
out in the open.

When I was eleven  
I climbed a huge pine  
and had a vision

of flying into the thin  
mountain air; my mother called  
my name softly, standing on the red earth,

and her voice was a ladder  
I climbed down.  
I have seen the sky

in late winter, watched clouds  
form the ribcage of a fantastic beast,  
understanding that

the world is stitched together  
from the loosest of tissues – even  
concrete, webbed

with faint cracks  
leaves nooks  
for the smallest seeds.

**Author's Comment:**

This poem began, quite literally, in a parking lot. It was the last day of winter, a day that always fills me with a mixture of emotions. Certain details about that day – the little birds that always hop around in parking lots, something rattling in my car’s engine, the fact that a dry winter was about to end, putting California into another year of drought – brought on a sort of melancholy. I juxtaposed the memory of climbing a tree as a child against the inevitability of the seasons moving forward. This was an admission to myself that most things are out of my control, hence the word “Wild” in the title.

**Bio:** Erica Goss is a writer from Los Gatos, CA. Her poems, reviews and essays appear or are forthcoming in *Caveat Lector*, *Zoland Poetry*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Pearl*, among others. She has won a number of prizes for her writing, including a Pushcart nomination. She teaches poetry and art in the San Francisco Bay Area, and is the South Bay Arts Reporter for *Examiner.com*.

Ricky Garni  
A TRUE GENTLEMAN

What if Tony Bennett and I were singing 'Just In Time' as a duet, and Tony took the first verse, really swinging it, snapping his fingers to that crazy beat, singing Just in time / you've found me / just in time / Before you came my time / was running low and then turned to me and said "Take it, Michael!" Would I take it like he asked me to, and start singing, "I was lost / the losing dice were tossed / My bridges all were crossed / nowhere to go" or would I just stare at Mr. Bennett and say "DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!" and stomp on his shiny black shoe really hard with my shiny black shoe and hear him say "THAT'S what I'm talking about!" Because the thing I like the most about Tony Bennett is he is so gallant and such a gentleman he wouldn't mind a bit if I stomped on his foot and even if he did he wouldn't say so and even if it hurt he wouldn't cry and that's what I call a true gentleman and there really aren't many true gentlemen around anymore and he always says "The kid's got MOXIE!" and I like him for that, I think he was talking about me, and I miss him already.

Ricky Garni  
MORELLOS

I know what you are thinking: mushrooms, right? I happen to know that they are cherries, but still, they are a mystery to me. Even though I happen to own some morellos. What is the best way to preserve a mystery? I, for one, like to preserve my mysteries next to the sunflowers and chocolate, right there on the kitchen table. They remain inscrutable, wrapped in a toy soldier's tiny flak jacket to protect them from the cold and, to a lesser extent, the shrapnel. I keep them under guard, happily, whatever they are. After all, just because you own something, doesn't stop it from being a mystery. And just because you might mistake one thing for another, is no reason not to keep it snug and warm and safe. And just because something makes no sense to you, there's no reason on God's green earth not to care for it with love and joy, even if you don't know why.

**Bio:** Ricky Garni is a graphic designer and bicycle collector living in Carrboro, North Carolina. His work has been published most recently in *PANK*, *MEDULLA REVIEW*, *SHAMPOO*, *THE BICYCLE REVIEW*, *PRICK OF THE SPINDLE*, *PINSTRIPED FEDORA*, *ANEMONE SIDECAR*. His books can be had at <http://www.tinyurl.com/rickygarni>

Margaret Walther  
THE GOOD LADDER

*(Remains of a Chapel, Near Genova, Linda Butler, black & white photograph)*

men hewed my frame  
chiseled slots for eighteen rungs

brought me to this  
abandoned villa chapel

summoned here, there  
rudely moved, I, a good ladder

had to bear the weight  
of thieves

my last position  
on the floor leading to the altar

the cross, the body of god  
ripped off its mount

I saw his hands dip  
in benediction, forgiving

I felt his sadness as he was carted  
down my rungs

now, lonely—

take me outside to an orchard  
where I can rest, staring up

into the face of apples

**Author's Comment:**

*This poem was inspired by a photograph from Linda Butler's Book, Italy, The Shadow of Time. The hand-hewn ladder is in the middle and dominates the photo. I could feel the loneliness of the ladder and decided to write a persona poem from the ladder's perspective. I grew up on a farm with an orchard, so it just seemed natural to include the apples.*

**Bio:** Margaret Walther is a retired librarian from the Denver metro area and a past president of Columbine Poets, an organization to promote poetry in Colorado. She has been a guest editor for Buffalo Bones and has poems published or forthcoming in many journals, including Connecticut Review, anderbo.com, Ghoti, A cappella Zoo, Quarterly West, Naugatuck River Review, Chickenpinata, Tattoo Highway, Snow Monkey, Willow Review and Nimrod. She won the Many Mountains Moving 2009 Poetry Contest for her poem, "Stills/ Steals."

Heather Ross Miller  
GYPSY

Dusty black rag-top convertible,  
tight-ass little trailer behind,  
its window blinded.  
In a suit plain as J.C. Penney,  
she read my palm: I would  
have a good man, have his children,  
then lose them every one  
in a heart beat.

This when I'd wanted skirts  
and tambourines. My young body  
pierced in gold. A man mysterious and choice.

She said I'd live for one hundred  
years, then my bones would break,  
my body dry up, but my unremitting  
heart would not, beating for days  
and days, uninterrupted, amaranthine,  
the flower that never fades.

She smiled, folded my palm  
like a fist, Go with this,  
she whispered, go with this.

**Author's Comment:**

I've long been fascinated by the Romany people, any sort of marooned culture like theirs. This actually happened to me as a teen in mid-Carolina, the gypsy not at all traditional, more a business woman, so I felt a bit let-down. But she was genuine in ways I came to appreciate much later, and I hope the poem reflects that experience, the older woman looking back. It's the most we can hope: reflection.

**Bio:** Heather Ross Miller, author of over a dozen books of fiction and poetry, is a Thomas Broadus Professor Emerita at Washington and Lee University where she taught for many years. Louisiana Literature Press will publish her book-length narrative poem, *Lumina: A Town of Voices*, late summer 2010. She lives on Miller Town Road in an old house full of ghosts.

Barry Spacks

“KILL THEM WITH AN ENDING”

a final scene  
wraps the movie of each life;

the credits screen,  
and then it's emptiness arrives?

(some say the dialogue  
never ceases).

**Author's Comment:**

Film world reference here includes the title's advice to screen writers. The metaphor of a movie standing for life-process turns up often in contemporary Buddhist teaching, added to traditional “dream” or “mirage.” “Emptiness,” a tricky word in the poem, can refer both to death — as blank — or to a merging after death with ultimate reality, the Void. I've been a practicing Nyingmapa Tibetan Buddhist for the past 20 years, and I see an influence from Buddhist notions in much of my work through that time, even in poems rather lightly playful on the surface.

Barry Spacks  
AN EQUAL MUSIC

Never equal, friend John & his pretty Marianne,  
for she can turn him off or on  
exactly as she pleases.

Man proposes, woman disposes –  
from this comes rage in men, they aspire  
to the power of equal music,

and from this — their status as sous-chefs — comes  
the trawling amongst  
tasty backup singers.

“Equinimity,” a noble word...  
without it, all comes down to “mine”  
& “enemies” — call it the best breast music,

the cellos and violins that are joined  
by the darkness of basses and kettledrums...  
great music’s secret: chords of difference

within harmonics; heart-strings to harp-strings,  
all loving aspires  
to the nature of music.

**Author’s Comment:**

The poem aspires to deal with a classic male/female dynamic, the case where a desired woman maintains control over passionate possibilities in a relationship, thus provoking dark feelings in a desirous male’s offering to their co-joined “music” (his “basses and kettledrums”). ‘Sous-chef’ — second in command — leads to acting out with “tasty” back-up (non-starring) singers. “Equinimity” in Buddhism is honored as one of the Four Immeasurables, along with “Love,” “Compassion,” and “Sympathetic Joy.” It provides a serene, level quality that should prevent a couple’s collaborated music from being thrown out of tune.

**Bio:** Barry Spacks earns his keep teaching writing and literature at UC Santa Barbara, California, after many years doing the same at M.I.T. He’s published poems widely in journals

paper and pixel, plus stories, two novels, ten poetry collections, and three CDs of selected work.

Simon Perchik

\*

Between these two fingers the air  
smells from petals and air  
and nothing touches anything

–without a sound, without their lips  
and the dead still eat without hands  
scraping their lips

against that goodbye whose arms  
are always empty, its stillness  
all they hear in those few seconds

and their heart growing colors  
–between my fingers a door  
almost ashes now open to the cold.

**Author's Comment:**

I examine the image in a photograph (This poem came from *The Family of Man*.) and I confront it with an image from science or mythology. What results is some disparate, contradictory, irreconcilable idea which I then go about resolving. A more detailed explanation of how this poem came about can be found in an essay called "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" at <http://www.simonperchik.com>.

**Bio:**

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. For more information, including his essay "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" and a complete bibliography, please visit his website at <http://www.simonperchik.com>.

Scot Siegel  
RUNS IN OUR FAMILY

It's time to get ready for bed  
and you are not to shower  
with that book again!

When you ask how I manage  
to recite so many poems  
from memory, I cannot say  
that I am self-taught.

Before my first mental break,  
my mother, depressed beyond  
belief, recited poems while  
bathing in hot salts.

So now when my daughter  
asks me if she has A.D.D., too,  
or just some form of anxiety disorder,  
all I can do is shrug, and smile

and then she smiles back  
and we hold hands on the porch swing;  
the shore-break making us both  
a little scared, and happy.

**Author's Comment:**

"Runs In Our Family" comes from something recently overheard in my household (the italicized text), which prompted the memory of my mother talking to herself while bathing when I was very young. I was concerned that she might be sick and would stand outside the bathroom door; but I couldn't discern what she was saying. I thought she was talking to ghosts. In terms of craft, the memory prompted a short word list — "depressed, A.D.D., shrug, shore-break" — which helped get the poem started.

**Bio:** Scot Siegel lives in Oregon with his wife and two daughters. In his day job he works as an urban planning consultant. Siegel's poetry books include *Some Weather* (Plain View Press, 2008), *Untitled Country* (Pudding House Publications, 2009), and *Skeleton Says* (forthcoming from Finishing Line Press). Poetry Northwest and the Oregon State Library selected Siegel's *Some Weather* as one of Oregon's 150 Outstanding Oregon Poetry Books. A second full-length collection is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry in January 2012. Siegel serves on the board of

trustees of the Friends of William Stafford and edits the online poetry journal Untitled  
Country Review.

Helen Losse

CANDLE

for "The Professor"

I'm not afraid of those curled-brown leaves  
hanging in bunches from deciduous trees

nor strong gusts of the season's first cold wind  
that will send the last of them flying into darkness.

I do not avoid spots where leaves now decay  
in rain on city sidewalks and ominous shadows—

virtual ghosts of their green-spring existence—  
and fall, when the moon's orange light glows

soft as an ember. I light a candle on Friday,  
autumnal wind chilling, as we wait in unspoken prayer.

The heavens look like November, when suddenly a dancer  
cuts through fragrance, pauses before the high altar,

bows, sways, glides her feet. Touching incense,  
she becomes incense, becomes a tall, white candle,

burned offering, a body in worship, in essence,  
profuse with continuance, its bold punctuation.

She points toes, undulating hands toward the incense,  
as it curls. The candle as dancer, dancer as candle.

Fiery symbol as worshipper. All sweetness  
of foretaste of the heaven yet to come.

**Author's Comment:** "Candle" is the result of combining two poems—as it is my habit to do. The poem isn't quite an elegy because the candle is lit as a prayer that one's life will be spared, but it does begin with a section about life in general that sets a somber tone for worship. The dancer is lost in ecstasy in which she experiences heaven. The setting is purposely blurred: Are we outside, or are we "in church"? Does it really matter?

**Bio:** Helen Losse is the author of *Better With Friends* (Rank Stranger Press, 2009) and two poetry chapbooks, *Gathering the Broken Pieces* and *Paper Snowflakes*, and the Poetry Editor of *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*. She has recent poetry publications or acceptances in *Blue Fifth Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Heavy Bear*, *Referential Magazine*, *Hobble Creek Review* and *Iodine Poetry Review*.

Bruce Whealton  
AN INFINITE BEACH

On some beach  
that never ends  
I'm with her  
and just for a moment  
I pretend  
that things never change  
that sometimes  
in moments like this,  
we walk hand-in-hand  
forever.

This is my greatest desire –  
to stop time  
like this...  
when there is just this place,  
just these beach sounds  
and just she  
and I.

**Author's Comment:**

I wrote this poem thinking about the things that really matter and that endure. A sense of the infinite, or of joy and love is sometimes noticed in certain moments that stand out in your mind... those moments when you stop, forget about everything else and realize that this, right now, is all that matters, all that will endure. Often we get so distracted and driven by various impulses. So, I thought of a time when that was different for me. I wrote about love. The beach is also very inspirational for me, when I want to write.

**Bio:** Bruce Whealton is the publisher and co-editor of Word Salad Poetry Magazine. His work has been published in Gravity Hill, Venus Rising, Aphelion: the Webzine of Science Fiction and Fantasy, The Horror Zine, Childe Bryde, the thin edge of staring, lunatic chameleon, and lines written with a razor.

Terri Kirby Erickson  
UNCLE JACK

He's the wiry one who's never quite in the photograph.  
Sometimes it's just a shoulder or maybe the side of his head,  
one eye squinting at something off-camera. I saw a picture of him  
once, in a sailor suit, smiling—skin so smooth, it looked like plastic.  
He seemed happy then, though perhaps he had a full bottle  
hidden under his bunk, and was looking forward to drinking it later.  
I was too young at the time to understand the scowl on Grandma's  
face when forced to say his name, or why my aunt tiptoed  
around her husband, as if he were asleep. I never actually saw  
much, myself, but heard my older cousins say things like Jack peed  
in the kitchen sink again, which made no sense to me at all when  
they had a perfectly nice bathroom right on the ground floor—  
and I wondered how they got away with calling their father, Jack.  
That would never work in our house, but then, their house  
was nothing like mine. It was much taller than the one we lived  
in, and there were a lot more children. Doors seemed to slam  
instead of close—as if drafts whipped through it on a regular  
basis, and people yelled their good-byes like they were never  
coming back. And after the divorce, which nobody talked about,  
either, Jack moved to Washington , D.C. and bought a car wash,  
which seemed ironic because of the location, but also sad  
because he spent his days cleaning other people's stuff when his  
life was a such mess. His own children wouldn't give him  
a cup of spit if he was dying in the desert, but when he finally  
did die, they all came to the funeral—keeping their distance  
from the casket in case he wasn't completely dead.

**Author's Comment:**

Uncle Jack is a poem about the “elephant in the living room” from the perspective of a child. In telling this “story,” I wanted it to be both sad and funny...the way life is, in general. I always try my best to find the humor in challenging situations—at least in retrospect—which tends to make them more bearable.

**Bio:**

Terri Kirby Erickson is a North Carolina native and the award winning author of two collections of poetry, *Thread Count* and *Telling Tales of Dusk*. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including *Blue Fifth Review*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Dead Mule*, *Eclectica*, *JAMA*, and many others. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Best

of the Net award in 2009. For more information about her work, please see her website at <http://terrikirbyerickson.wordpress.com>, or the Press 53 website at <http://www.press53.com>.

A. D. Winans  
FILLMORE JAZZ ERA POEM

Old Fillmore, 1950s  
Mary Jane haze  
all-night jam sessions  
Mingus's fingers working overtime  
Ella steps in for a solo  
black angel doing what  
she was born to do  
table gals wiggle and jiggle  
boys tap toes snap their fingers  
slow gin fizz and whiskey  
race through my veins  
help ease the pain savor the moment  
like a prime cut of beef  
white hot lightning bleeding my heart  
like an undertaker dressing the dead  
low-key jazz man steps up on stage  
sets the mood  
like the Beatles playing Saint Jude  
electricity races through the room  
sax solo lubricating the gears of my mind  
horn joins sax  
in perfectly balanced duet  
bass man sweats profusely makes it three  
my eye on the lady crooner  
making love to the microphone  
feeling high feeling cool  
be-bop rhythms dancing inside my soul  
rainbow notes cutting into me  
like a surgeon's scalpel  
mean clean notes crucified suffocating  
in the smoking mirrors of my mind  
leaves me feeling like  
a drunk Jesus walking on water

**Author's Comment:**

In the fifties and early sixties, the old Fillmore District of San Francisco was known as Bop City. Well know jazz musicians and singers would jam with local jazz artists. It was mainly a

Black community, but many white faces could be seen in the crowd, and mine was one of them. Poets like Bob Kaufman were regulars. I don't remember the names of the bars any more. Its been too long a passage of time and my memory isn't what it once was, but those days were among the best memories I have.

A. D. Winans

HOUSE SITTING IN PALM SPRINGS

my fingers work my friend's computer keyboard  
the teakettle whistles in the kitchen  
one cup of green tea  
one hour of solitude  
Bob Dylan's "Lay Lady Lay" fills the room  
the dog stares at me  
let's out a howl  
wags his tail  
and falls back to sleep

**Author's Comment:**

I have loved dogs all my life, and regret that I have lived in apartments where dogs are not allowed as pets. So it was with great pleasure that I accepted my friend's invitation to house sit while he was in Europe on vacation. His German Shepard loved music and often barked in appreciation, but for some reason Dylan elicited but a single bark before he fell back into slumber.

**Bio:**

A.D. Winans is an award winning San Francisco native poet and writer who has published fifty books and chapbooks of poetry and prose. He is the former editor and publisher of *Second Coming* and in 2009 was awarded a PEN Oakland Lifetime Achievement Award.

Review of *Lessons in Forgetting*  
by Malaika King Albrecht  
Main Street Rag, 2010, 48 pages, \$7  
ISBN: 9781599482453

Reviewing Malaika King Albrecht's debut collection of poems, *Lessons in Forgetting*, feels a bit self-congratulatory. After all, I helped her revise some of these poems; I published three of them in Wild Goose Poetry Review; I helped her determine the arrangement of the poems; and I was the author who recommended the collection for Main Street Rag's Author's Choice Chapbook Series. I am certain that somewhere someone will say that it is inappropriate, maybe unprofessional, for me to write this review. The truth is, however, I don't care, and if you read the book, neither will you.

Considering how strong these poems are and how vital this collection is, it would be a disservice to poetry readers not to recommend it. Poetry, it could be said, is the perfect blending of sound, imagery, meaning, and emotion. And each of the poems in *Lessons in Forgetting* succeeds on each of these levels. As a teacher of contemporary poetry and creative writing, one of the most difficult questions I face, repeatedly, is what makes a contemporary poem good. It's a complicated question that can only be answered in sentences containing phrases like "yes, but" or "that, and." It is easier and probably more useful to simply provide examples, and virtually all of the poems here can be used for that purpose.

Take, for example, the poem "Riddle Song:"

Grocery bags in my arms,  
I hip the front door open  
and hear my father singing  
to my mother,  
I gave my love a cherry  
that had no stone.  
He stretches her right leg,  
then slowly rotates it in circles.

She hasn't walked in three years  
or gotten out of bed in two.  
I gave my love a baby  
with no crying.  
Her legs resist, the muscles  
tight as fists. He massages  
her leg nearly straight, moves  
to the next one still singing.

A baby when it's sleeping  
it's not crying.  
The story of how I love you  
it has no end.

Of course I'm crying  
in the kitchen doorway.  
I can't see her from here,  
but I'm hoping that she's awake,  
looking directly into his eyes.  
He moves to her left arm,  
tucked beside her body  
like a broken wing,  
and gently spreads it out.

The first thing one notices about this poem is the careful, methodical pace of the words, created by a preponderance of stressed syllables (typically 4 in as few as 6 syllables, lines 2 and 15 for example), and the precise attention to detail, which echo the patient gentleness of the father in the poem. One might also note the pointed alliteration in places, such as the beginning of the third stanza where the repetition of the velar "k" creates a sense of broken speech as the speaker struggles with her emotions. And finally, any reader would sense the almost-magical, gentle lyricism of the last line whether or not they could explain that it is created by the use of the word "gently," the sounds (three alveolars—"g" and "s" twice and a final diphthong—unique as an endsound in this poem), and the fact that this line is the only perfectly iambic line in the poem.

Such subtle technical mastery is common throughout the poems in this book. There is, for example, the subtle separation of an adjective from its noun in "Winging It" ("she struggled to find the bird's / name." The extra moment the reader spends returning to the beginning of the next line to complete the thought seems to mimic the hesitancy and uncertainty of Alzheimer's. There are clever internal rhymes, like "Benadryl pills" in "One Last Time," and vital assonances that link one stanza to the next, "unsweetened tea // She reaches . . . retrieves," from that same poem.

Thus, any of these poems could be used as illustration of good contemporary poetry. What is more, however, confronted with the question, "What makes a good contemporary book of poems," one need only extend one's arm with *Lessons in Forgetting* held in their hand and say, "This," this cohesiveness, this relevance, this intentional alternation of dark and light, this manipulation of emotion, surprise, and contrast, this chill and chuckle of recognition, this recording of the challenges of being human with such immediacy, such clarity, and such

refusal to look away from the difficult moment that it deepens our experience and understanding of what it means to be human.

Malaika King Albrecht's *Lessons in Forgetting* is an important collection because of its subject matter, dealing with Alzheimer's, but it is an impressive collection because of the poetic mastery with which Albrecht records her experiences with and reflections upon that subject.

Review of *Waiting*, by Ron Moran  
Clemson University Digital Press, 2009  
66 pages, \$15  
ISBN: 9780984259809

Noodling is the practice of fishing, usually for catfish, with one's bare hands, typically by letting the fish bite one's finger, or for larger fish, one's hand and then wrestling the fish to the surface. I've never been noodling and probably never will, but I've always thought I should use it in a poem. It's just the sort of thing the people I grew up with would be likely to do. Now, however, Ron Moran has beaten me to it in his remarkable poem "The Best Deer Tracker in Northern Louisiana." Many might think it incongruous to have noodling in a poem about a dinner party, but that sort of odd juxtaposition is part of the joy of the poems in Moran's new book, *Waiting*, and in organic fashion, the incongruity of imagery is repeated in the very structure of these poems where lines of 5 to 6 beats are often alternated with lines of only 1 to 2 beats.

Another source of pleasure in these poems derives from Moran's facility with language and with complex sentences, in particular. Moran's skills in this regard forge a seamless stream-of-consciousness in which entire stories unfold dependent clause after dependent clause forming only 2 or 3 sentences across 30 to 40 lines of poetry, all without any of the herky-jerkiness often associated with that style of narration. This technique creates an impressive sense of the interconnectedness of experience without the breathless rush of Whitman, the Beats or other long-lined poets.

While the poems convey this sense of the vital interwovenness of existence and experience, these are not obtuse, abstract philosophical meanderings. Rather, they explore the proper subjects of poetry, the familiar and commonplace, in such a way that they help us examine our own lives and recognize the deeper significance of the quotidian, of everyday things. Through the syntax of clause and phrase, they also help us appreciate the importance of location as one way we are capable of perceiving the relatedness of things. In "Airing Out the Jacket," for example, the jacket hangs, "out back / on the bare limb of a maple on a bright December day." Prepositions are words that relate a noun to another word or phrase in the sentence, and such piling up of prepositions emphasizes the relationships between things, teaching us not only what to value but why, a why that Moran is intimately and tragically familiar with. The subtext of mortality that runs throughout these poems is almost certainly influenced by the prolonged illness of Moran's wife during the time that they were written. This is nowhere more apparent than in the title poem, "Waiting," where Moran reflects on one's inability to anticipate resolutions despite one's proximity to them:

Pretty good,  
I suppose, just to be here, for the moment

at least,  
which may change momentarily . . . //  
waiting //  
for something to happen or not to happen . . . //  
Is this how it's going to be:  
reality  
a blush in the sky that declares the next day.

English teachers and poets love complex sentences because, unlike their simple or compound counterparts which merely establish that one or more things happen or exist, they acknowledge relationships between things, events, ideas. Not surprisingly, Moran is both a poet and an English teacher. His practice of using dependent clauses to embody the reality of the relatedness of experiences will reach its climax in different poems for different readers. For me it happens in the volume's most beautiful and poignant poem, "A Blessing," where the tenderness and carefulness with which the details of the poem are put forth reflect the same qualities that were certainly present in Moran's relationship with his beloved wife:

If my right hip aches when I first lie down,  
I turn to face Jane, who always faces me  
since her left side is a corridor of pain . . . //  
She holds my left wrist in her thin fingers,  
as if to convince me of some belief, that //  
this is how it should be, or else she plays  
in earnest with the fingers of my right hand,  
so I cup her hand leisurely in mine, closing  
it slowly, feeling her tremors until my hand //  
calms hers, and I whisper, Time to sleep;  
and as she does, I count interludes between  
breaths, longer than ever before but steady,  
then release her, knowing how blessed I am.

A Poetic Response to Jessie Carty's *Paper House*  
Folded Word, 2010, 90 pages, \$12  
ISBN: 9780977816743

I have written reviews of each of Jessie Carty's first two collections of poetry, *At the A & P Meridiem* (Pudding House, 2009) and *The Wait of Atom* (Folded Word, 2009), so when her new collection, *Paper House*, came out a couple of months ago, I knew I'd read it, I knew I'd like it, and I knew I wanted to do something besides write another review about it. I had no idea what that something might be, but then almost as soon as I started reading the poems, it became clear to me that Carty had given me a metaphor that I simply couldn't resist stealing. So, in lieu of review of what is, by the way, a very enjoyable book of poems, I offer the following "reflection" along with my sincerest encouragement for you to order your copy of *Paper House* now.

Paper House  
after Jessie Carty

What is a poem but a paper house,  
every word a window or door,  
the title a welcome mat,  
every image a family portrait,  
photo album, or home movie,  
an endless possibility of rooms  
furnished with the finest internal  
rhyme, alliteration, conceit,  
illuminated by epiphany,  
kept clean through catharsis,  
the only walls the printed page,  
inhabited by people you know, family,  
old friends, some you've missed,  
some you hoped you'd forget.

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Review of *Fear of Moving Water*  
by Alex Grant  
Wind Publications, 2009, 64 pages  
ISBN: 9781936138029

Those, like myself, who have been fans of Alex Grant's poetry for a while, have reason to be happy. His new book, *Fear of Moving Water*, takes the best poems from his first two

chapbooks, *Chains and Mirrors* and *The White Book* and adds to them several new poems to create a more impressive and more cohesive collection. Those who are new fans of his work also have reason to be happy as they will once more have access to the poems from the chapbooks which had become hard to find.

Reading Alex Grant's poems always reminds me of the only rule of poetry—that it must be interesting, and maybe occasionally fun as well. Imagine, for example, the unfortunate students who try to follow through on the ideas presented in Grant's "Poetry Midterm" or "Poetry Final:"

Establish a credible connection between  
the following: the curve of a woman's breast,  
a 1957 Cadillac Imperial, monotheism. Result  
must be enjoyable to the average reader,  
and be small enough to hold in one hand.

\*\*\*\*\*

Explain the attraction of the moon.  
In no more than thirty-two lines, suggest  
a new name for the number zero.  
Combine the responses in a 12-line pantoum.

One suspects, given the seamless pleasure and technical dexterity of these poems, that if anyone can follow these seemingly absurd prompts, it would only be Grant himself. Who else, after all, could manage to transport their reader to the Antarctic tent of Captain Robert Scott not for the thrill of discovering the South Pole but the much more human and enjoyable discovery that

. . . Captain Oates masturbates  
constantly — even during dinner — he claims  
it's simply a mechanism to keep his body temperature  
up — though we all have our doubts. I no longer feel  
comfortable shaking hands with the man, and last night  
he told me that he wants me to have his babies.

Like most good poets, Grant reminds us to take note of more of life. He brings to our attention, for example, such things as "the dry doggerel / of mackerel scales" ("Black Moon"), "the clacking / cobblestones wrapped in centuries of ash" ("The Gardens of Pompeii"), and "the heart's iambic thud" ("The Long, Slow Drop"). And like most good poets, as these lines make apparent, he would also have us take more note of the joy inherent in the abilities of

language and sound to not only reflect but also uncover life. Where he differs from most other poets, however, is that Grant might add, in the written equivalent of his unmistakable Scottish accent, “but don’t take any of it too [add expletive of your choice] seriously.” My favorite of his poems, “Giant,” best illustrates his ability (in the tradition of Nazim Hikmet) to examine the seriousness of life with a bit of unforgettable levity, as he ponders the life and times of a midge:

I read once that garden midges only live for around  
ten minutes, and as I watched a swarm of them, I picked  
one out, kept my eyes fixed on him, lit a cigarette, and tried  
to imagine his life. I did the math, and decided that eight  
midge seconds equaled one of our years, and as he moved  
from the top to the bottom of the cloud, he had two affairs  
and a nervous breakdown right there. . . .  
. . . By the time my  
cigarette had burned less than half-way down, he’d written  
a number of wildly successful self-help flying manuals,  
as well as his acclaimed study of midge relationships –  
. . . He’d had liposuction and wing implants  
. . . His therapist advised  
him to adopt a lower public profile, but he was insistent that  
he alone had secured the swarm’s tenure of the tree, and that  
the other midges ought to damn-well recognize his contribution  
and reward him accordingly. He died three quarters of the way  
into my cigarette, convinced that the rest of the swarm  
were plotting to run him down with a golf-cart.

He was truly a giant among midges.

Review of *Courage of Straw*

by Robert Abbate

Main Street Rag, 2010, 90 pages, \$14

ISBN: 9781599482354

In *The Wizard of Oz*, the Straw Man needed a brain, but he didn't lack what the others did, the Tin Man's heart, the Lion's courage. It is the presence of these things that embodies the speaker of Robert Abbate's poems in his new collection, *Courage of Straw*, and by implication it is the presence of a heart that feels and a courage that confronts that enables us to experience life as fully-realized human beings.

These are not easy poems. Not that they are difficult to understand — they are, in fact, quite accessible — but they are difficult, or perhaps painful would be a better adjective, to accept, to synthesize. If a successful poem is one that has a palpable effect on the reader, then the discomfort and subsequent catharsis these poems inspire mark them as successful. If a successful poem is one that changes the reader, then the ability to empathize that these poems create or at least enhance mark them as successful. If a successful poem is one that engages with the entire spectrum of human experience and utterance, then the historical, philosophical, and spiritual contexts of these poems mark them as successful.

Woven throughout these poems are references and allusions to Dante's *Inferno*, a fact which asks us to consider the ways in which contemporary violence make our world like that Dante imagined below. The pains explored here range from suicide attempts to institutionalized corporal punishment: "My meeting with Jesus / is the birch rod pronouncing / its tearful percussion, when needed" ("*As Needed*"); from electroshock therapy to the story of a boy being sodomized: "the boy stood apart from his body, he . . . / could see himself bent forward, / survival's mask frozen on his face" ("*Tree-Fort Tale*"); from the pastoral molestation of children to terrorist attacks: "What comfort, what comfort was there to find / when I realized the children may have wakened / to trapped moments of screaming engulfment?" ("*Song of the Three Young Men*"); from the inhumane treatment of laborers to the inhuman, nearly unimaginable torture and execution of Matthew Shepard:

the Gay Shepard boy  
pleads for his life,  
and executioners pound  
his marred head beyond  
any human semblance.

Abbate boldly goes where poets often fear to tread and where we all need to go if we will ever understand and through understanding move closer to prevention. Out of this journey into the heart of human unkindness and the resultant human suffering, Abbate creates a

book-length existential metaphor unlike any I've encountered before and perhaps best stated in his title poem: "No greater love has straw than / to be flailed of life for hay."