

The Phoenix¹⁹⁹⁹



**Continuing the
struggle for
student liberation**

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CONTENTS

POETRY AND PROSE BY:

SARAH GROOMS "ONE CRACKED STONE"
T. BYRD "PHOENIX FOR THE FLAME"
LEE BLACKBURN "DITCH-DIGGER"
NATHAN GILMOUR "INQUISITOR"
ERIC DUNNE "UNTITLED 1" "UNTITLED 2"
ISSAAC RICHARDSON "CRIPPLED"
JESSICA BICHLMEIER "FEAR NOT"
ROBIN SOENDLIN "UNTITLED"
KEVIN REED "THE SPECK"
JEFF COLEMAN "SILENT SCREAM"
TODD EDMONDSON "ST. MICHAEL'S MORNING"
JASON EVANS "ILLNESS AND REDEMPTION"
STEPHANIE HART "UNTITLED"
T.J. REAVES "FREE VERSE"

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STEPHANIE HART
JEN KORAK
KRISTIE ROLAPE
SHANNON ROUTZAHN



Kristie Rolape

One Cracked Stone

*A dry cracked stone I am;
Not a beautiful gem, nor consisting of a lustrous, metallic glow,
But an obtuse structure with no shimmering sparkle,
And without a critical angle to reflect the Perfected Beauty.*

*My Maker, a glorified being too holy and true,
Creator and destroyer, molder and mentor,
Designed me, but am I mistaken?
How can I be a creation from Purity
Being molded as a perfected source of Truth,
While hiding what I Know underneath these masked iniquities?*

*How can Truth abide in me when I am refusing to abide in Truth?
How can pure evil house the Source of Love?
How can my injured soul from sin find comfort in Perfection
When all I do is sin, and all that I am is sin?*

*Once I, a gem so glowing with perfection, and like a pearl so white and
pure,
With the innocence of my Maker, embarked on The Journey.
Now, my permeable structured surface absorbs the world,
And my sin is an escape from sin.*

Sarah Grooms

Phoenix for the flame

*With his hair the color of a fire,
Or death,
Or what have you,
He sits at the bus stop,
Smoking,
One tattoo (maybe more),
The ubermensch of his mind,
Black sieg heil boots
Black pants
Black shirt
I label him, so do you,
He likes it, me thinks.
The ubermensch of his mind,
The ubermensch of his mind,
It is a line, but only a line...*

T. Byrd

DITCH-DIGGER

by

Lee Blackburn

Dense drops of sweat dripped on the cracked earth. The pick penetrated the ground and the ground spit it back into the sky. Rick clumps of dirt shot past his face like the sparks that whiz by the masks of welders. The muscles of his arms stretched his skin to a filmy thinness with every pin-point stroke. In the brief split-second of suspension, the moment of the victory of potential over kinetic, he would imagine a small black circle on the ground and would slam his weapon dead onto the spot, like a lizard that shoots with its unfurled tongue across the trees to zap the still, black beetle. It was a method he had developed after weeks of ditch-digging, a means by which he kept his sanity and his concentration during the sweating hours in the honey-thick haze of summer afternoons. To temper the torture of the accumulation of the millions of particles of ejected dirt on his spongy forehead, he would focus in on that black dot with a savage concentration. Even on his breaks, which were few, he could still see that black dot every time he blinked or looked at the sky. Such was the lot of the young ditch-digger.

During these long hours of blinking black dots and spraying

earth, the tears of his mother fell into the softness of her pillow. For three months the tears flowed as her son broke the ground somewhere outside. Watching her son walk into the house in the silence of dusk, seeing him lay his broken body onto the hardwood floor, she listened to him tell her about the heat, a story another ditch-digger told him, something he had noticed on the drive home—anything but the black dot. He would smile as she spoke of the news, a book she was reading, the phone call of some long-lost relative—anything but the paroxysm of tears.

And those were the finest hours, the hours of quiet conversation with Hank Williams albums yodeling along in the background. Looking at the shirtless figure of her son on the floor, she saw how the months of labor had transformed his torso into the root of some primeval tree, some muscles bulging and contorted and others retaining the softness of the baby flesh that had covered his entire body not long ago, at least in the memory of a sentimental mother.

“Jeff, you look awfully tired. I’m worried about you doing this much longer.”

“Mom, come on, I’m a big boy. And you know how good the money is. Leave it alone.”

Such an exchange of dialogue would rise to the surface of their early evening talks almost without exception. A cool silence would

ensue like the hush of some ancient sacrifice, a silence that even Hank Williams seemed to acknowledge and respect. And so their evenings went until Jeff pulled himself off the floor and shuffled into his bedroom, his body stiff like pages of a book that were wet and had dried back out. On the worst nights he would help or even carry his mother to her bed, a task more painful than the nine hours of ditch-digging he endured each day combined.

Sometimes he would have dreams. A wide field of overgrown grass in which he stood in the middle, a pick in his left hand and a shovel in his right. Breaking and digging, cracking and scooping. Despite the terrible dirge of ripe dirt that rang in his ears the motion of the pick would not stop. It did not matter whose grave he was digging, his or his mother’s. Feeling the sun on his back like a sheet of fire, he saw black dots dancing all over the earth, blinking and moving and mocking. When he woke up, he would slide on the clothes that were crumpled on the floor like rejected manuscripts and go and dig ditches until the sun dropped back out of the sky.

His mother would lie awake under the blankets, listening to the muffled sounds of her son’s preparation for the day. The tears that accompanied her spiral into sleep the night before appear once more, as if running in fear from those terrible eyes too proud and sad to blink

them out. Some mornings Jeff would neglect to brush his teeth or comb his hair just to be away from that awful sound of despair choked by tears and smothered by a pillow. On the drive to work he would try to recall the faces of old friends into sharp relief, but all he could conjure was faded hair color and broken fragments of rusted phone numbers. Some mornings he would even forget why he had become a ditch-digger, why he had forsaken those airy dreams for the terrible tangibility of dirt. But then he would look through his smeared windshield and remember. Those drives were always silent—nothing on the radio ever seemed anything but mocking or blithely ignorant. All he needed was something hard and real with the slightest undertone of hope—not the smack of saccharine.

About the same time as Jeff parked his truck and was walking over to the tool shed, the nurse's sedan would pull up in his driveway. His mother would hear the tires and the indifferent hum of the engine and think of Jeff, those eyes too tired for expression, scanning the rack of picks and shovels. She knew that this was the worst part of the day for him, when he would hold his two tools in his hands and watch the sun drowsily emerge from behind a thicket of trees, wondering how many hours, minutes, seconds would pass before the sun would disappear in the west, when he could drop the damned tools to the ground like

traitorous friends.

The worst part of her day, however, was the sound of heavy envelopes tossed on the kitchen table like dead fish. She would wince at the sound, the more resounding the deeper her sadness. Day after day it would come in its detached obviousness. Piles of propaganda from colleges and universities across the country, hoping to entice the young ditch-digger with their prestige and facilities. These envelopes were never opened; Jeff would always furtively throw them into the garbage, unaware that his mother counted each one and never lost track of the number. She would imagine the contents, what the letters might plead: "You are throwing your life away for a woman who will die no matter how many ditches you dig and how much sweat you drip. You are burying your potential in holes in the ground. Drop the pick." Such cruel fantasies struck at her like venomous snakes. She knew that if these colleges could see Jeff now, listen to him speak, look into the smeared globes of his eyes, they would recall every one of their insistent letters. No recruiting office would want such a bruised skeleton of a young man stalking their campus like some forgotten prophet. And yet the letters were a source of perverse comfort for her, a reminder that the Jeff whose brain was turning into mush under the summer sun was not yet completely severed from the Jeff of several years back, a young man

with fire in his eyes and symmetrical muscles. The young man who would someday soon be dead and buried alongside PVC pipe in some anonymous ditch.

But he wasn't yet, though Jeff held onto the vestiges of his old life as precariously as a dizzy spider dangling from a torn web. He still had his books, but when he tried to read them in his bed in the evening fatigue and the drowning choir of crickets sliding through the crack in the window often sent the book through his fingers to crash on the hardwood floor. When sleep threw its blanket over him he often froze in contorted and grotesque positions. Sometimes his mother would creep into his rooms in the blackest hours of night and watch her son sleep, his body like an agonized unfinished marble sculpture. There she watched his most maddening nightmares dance on the lines of his face. Cursing her insomnia, she would scuffle back to her room and pray for sleep like a famished old farmer begging God for a few fat drops of rain.

But the rain never came. Morning would inundate her bedroom despite the best efforts of the venetian blinds and claim victory for another sleepless night. The screen door would slam shut like chomping jaws of a crocodile and her heart would jump like a nervous dog on a short leash. Her own leash was indeed short, staked into the hardwood floor of the musty kennel she shared with her son. On this particular

morning she found herself engrossed in the mystery of light, rapturously watching the millions of dust particles in her room nakedly exposed by the sunlight, watching as they danced and dipped in an ethereal ballet. And for an instant she felt as light, lighter even, than those weightless specks and she yearned to be in the midst of them. And with the softest clap of her eyelashes, she was.

When he called home at lunch break at his usual time, the nurse insisted with a faltering voice that he come home immediately. Without hesitation he hopped in his truck and took the shortcut home. Trotting across the front yard and breaking the threshold of the screen door, he was taken aback by the lances of sunlight that pierced the house like fine needles of fire. He was accustomed to only being in the house in the waxing and waning hours of the day; he was not prepared to see the way in which the shafts of sunlight betrayed the utter emptiness of the house he slept and dreamed in every night. Moving through the cloud of floating dust like a stunned deer, he turned the corner into his mother's room. Her dead body was not what sunk the lead weight in his stomach—he knew she was dead as soon as he heard the first trembling intonation of the nurse's voice. It was her mouth that sent razor blades tripping down his spine. The corners of her lips were just perceptively

turned upward in an expression somewhere between satori and sadness. It was almost as if she had witnessed God slitting the membrane of heaven open while its yolk spilled out onto the afghan that covered her stiffening body in its departure from her world of Hank Williams and broken children. Looking at her nightgowned body as he pulled the afghan back to the foot of the bed, it seemed to Jeff that her body had lost all of its weight and mass, as if he could scoop her up with his index finger.

The nurse turned to him and held out her arm. In her cupped palm was a small mound of white pills, which Jeff immediately recognized as the sleeping pills that he had been picking up for her at drugstore the past few months.

"There's no telling how many she took," the nurse sighed before dropping her eyes back to the floor. Jeff did not have to speak. There was a silent understanding that that particular detail would venture no farther than the room they were detained in. Then the nurse, as if handing him a death sentence, placed the roll of paper in his unsuspected palm and rapidly paced away to the opposite corner of the room. Jeff knew even before he read the words on the sheet that he would in some way have to act as an extension of the will. As his eyes scanned over it and absorbed individually each scrawled letter he felt

his mother's trembling but steady hands caressing the calluses that had formed on his hands like fleshy atolls. The appropriate numbers were called and his mother left the house one last time. Later that night Jeff wept alone in his room with a godlike force that shook the rotting sheetrock in the walls.

Standing in the center of his backyard, he looked up at the sky and then walked to the designated spot, a patch of soft ground that once gave root to a small rose garden, dragging his tools along the ground behind him like two dead snakes. The air was thin and crisp at this time of the morning, giving no indication that by noontime it would fatten and sizzle like frying lard. Hours melted in the sun as the rich dirt accumulated in a dark mound like a sacrificial altar beside the abyss that he was sculpting out of the earth. He worked at a speed despised by his muscles but mandated by his will. The strength of his mother's tiny right hand coursed through his veins as he cracked the skulls of the black dots that had plagued his sight and his mother's sleep for those three months that were as eternal as the essence of the dirt he displaced every day. But that strength was not always sufficient, and from time to time his frayed body would collapse onto the floor of the grave like a flattened insect. Several minutes would pass, and he would pull himself

back up and begin digging again.

The process repeated itself the next day. By late afternoon, when the sun started to sneak to the west and the crickets began their dissonant requiem, only matted hair like the sprouts of dead grass could be seen above the surface of the earth. He would only need one more day and it would be finished, the last ditch his mother would ever allow him to dig.

By noon of the third day he began to check the measurements, aware that this task, the last request of a dying woman leaked out in ink onto an ivory white piece of paper, was almost completed. He began to smooth out the floor of the grave to give it symmetry and a polished look for the service that would be held the next morning. As he swept the flat-headed shovel across the smoothed dirt he finally felt the last breath of his energy exhale as he came crashing down on the earth like a razed skyscraper. His skin tightened at the touch of the cold dirt, and gooseflesh spread across his body like mountain ranges on a map. After the passage of several seconds his warm body began to spread its heat into the coolness of the earth below him and he felt almost as if he were floating several inches above his muddy bed. His thoughts turned to his mother and her final hours, her passion of sleeping pills and floating dust. He knew that her final tears were not the fat viscous drops dense

with guilt and horror like those he had so often seen her shed; they were rather light, defiant droplets that ran freely down her cheeks like reckless raindrops on summer leaves. He wondered what she had seen in that moment snapped in the tension of life and death, of disease and healing. He pictured the corners of her mouth pointed upward, one last secret of the mother whispered in the ear of her only son. These thoughts soon fragmented like a cracked sheet of ice as Jeff drifted into a sleep too deep for grief.



Leigh Doty

Inquisitor

*Tearing up
Chasing out
Beating down
Making war
Seems like hate is the only thing you're in it for*

*You're self-righteous
Looking down
Damning me
Dreaming up
Lakes of fire so that you can watch me suffer more*

*Live straight
Point fingers
Stay above
Rule it out
Keep my evil down and keep your little kingdom nice*

*Choose life
Breathe death
Kill my name
Steal my fate
Keep on praying that your god will make me pay the price*

*You want your world? Stay out of mine.
And keep your damn sermons out of my day.
You want your life? Make up your mind
And keep your damn truth out of my way.*

Nathan Gilmour

*I haven't eaten in three months.
I haven't tasted a morsel of food.
I haven't had anything stuck between my teeth.*

*You have food, but you will not give it to me.
You tease, you show, but you will not let me eat.
You drop crumbs as you switch hands.*

I haven't eaten in three months.

*One hundred children, dead.
One hundred joys, sorrow.
One hundred sorrows, despair.*

I haven't tasted a morsel of food.

*I have asked you for food.
I have begged you for food.
I have gotten on my knees and wept for food.*

I haven't had anything stuck between my teeth.

*If I had something stuck between my teeth
Then that would be nourishment enough,
But I only drink my tears as I beg and weep.*

*I haven't eaten in three months.
I haven't tasted a morsel of food.
I haven't had anything stuck between my teeth.*

Eric Dunne

*I cut my hand the other night.
I never bled.
it was more of a scrape, I suppose.
Red, raw and rubbed away skin.*

*I put hydrogen peroxide on it,
it began to puss and I saw pieces of stone
embedded in the cut.*

*The abrasion is beginning to heal,
a scab has formed and the skin around the wound
is dying and flaking off,
yet still no blood.*

*I like the sting of pain as I pull each dead piece
of skin from where it joins the living flesh.
Yet, it still hasn't bled.*

*Of course, I could always cut myself
a bit deeper next time.*

Eric Dunne

Fear Not

by: Jessica Bichlmeier

She laid on the cool ground, a mixture of sand and dirt beneath her body. The bugs were crawling through her knit pants and biting her legs, but she tried not to notice because she liked where she was.

She was absorbing. Absorbing everything around her. She wanted to remember this moment and she didn't want anyone to take it from her. Ever. The near intoxicating breath from the pure July night. The droning of the Mississippi water passing by her. The damp earth near the banks between her toes and under her fingernails like laying in a sea of gritty pudding. She could smell the coppery smoke from the refinery farther down the shore mixed with the fishy smell that comes only from rivers.

She was scared. Scared this night would end and another like it would never come. She had to keep this moment for a lifetime. She felt the future like a huge, dark tyrant waiting to dictate whatever her life was to become. He was a sheriff and she was the criminal. She was running as fast as she could but her capture was inevitable. The dreamer would be shackled by circumstance and obligation.

crippled

*Am I alone naked, bruised and shamed?
Furrowing burrowing gouging my skin
At a mark that shames that shows I'm stained.
Reaching left, right, realizing none akin.
I am grasped with a grasp that grasps my throat.
Take your strangling hands away from me
Let me breathe Let me remove the coat
of blood-spit, sealing your eyes unable to see.
A noose nears my neck. I yell but I only murmur
"No," as it grows taunt and it draws firmer.*

Issaac Richardson

She was startled by a splash of water to her right. Two boys-trying-to-become-men had been sitting near the bank and talking. "I just don't think that Life meant for me to deliver pizza," said one. He had given up on the notion of a God a long time ago and thought that society was all a part of a governmental scheme, so there wasn't much meaning in anything he did. The other tried to console him with what trite bits of wisdom he could mutter out. They got into a discussion about Deity and Power which neither of them really understood. So they gave that up and went to stomping on the edge of the bank and watching the clods of dirt fall into the water. The clods fell apart mid-journey and sprinkled gently into the river. Sometimes a rock would fall in with the dirt and make a hollow plop that would ripple the water.

The dreamer got up to watch, though she wasn't sure why. She became fascinated by the way the earth disappeared into the water and the rain-like sound it made as it fell. She watched the current carry tree limbs and tugboats down the river until they were out of sight and her eyes hurt from looking so long.

She and the two philosophers decided to walk farther down the bank near a line of trees. They walked in silence, hearing only God's breath around them. They had gone nearly a mile before they reached a muddy ditch too deep to cross and decided to turn back. On their way

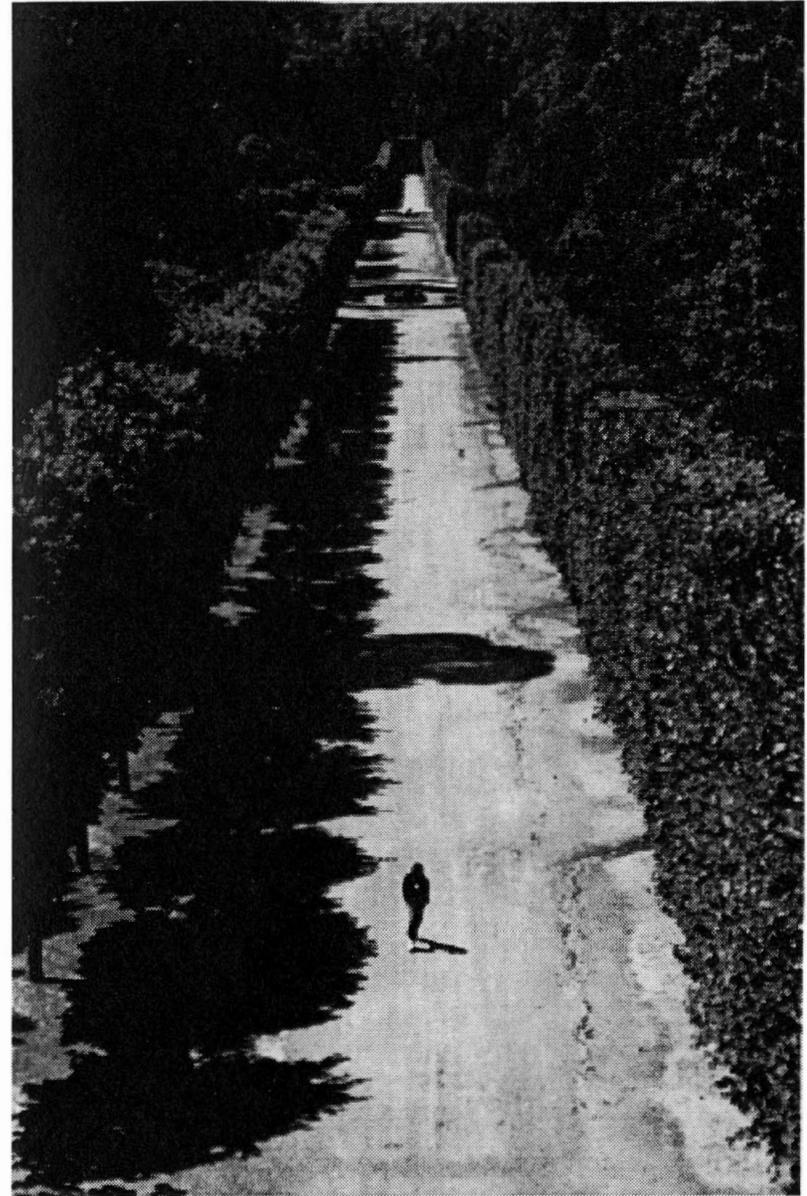
back, they decided to make a movie of themselves walking. Their own version of The Pilgrim's Progress. They laughed and talked and were disappointed when they saw that they were already back to where they had begun. Their movie was over and reality overwhelmed them like a sickness.

The dreamer lay back down in her spot by the bank and stared at the vast expanse above her. There were no buildings, no cars, no lights but the stars themselves. How beautiful and terrifying those spots of light were. The longer she stared at them, the closer they came to her. They got bigger and bigger until finally she knew that if she reached up, she could touch one. So she did. She reached into the sky and took one from its home. She held it in her hand and studied it. As she turned it over and over, she found it was covered with shiny foil that spewed light from its creases. The foil seemed too delicate to hold all that power inside. She wanted to find out what made it shine, but the more she handled it, the weaker the light became. She finally managed to peel back a corner of the foil. The light instantly vanished and the foil turned to dust and blew away in the night breeze. She couldn't explain it, but she somehow felt empowered by this odd experience so she reached up and stole another one. The same thing happened to this star. It just blew away. She tried it again and again but the result was the same every time. Feeling that she

must have made a dent in the number of stars in the sky, she looked upward. There were just as many stars as there had ever been, but they looked much different now. They weren't huge lurking objects reminding her of how small she was. Now they were just tiny, white flowers that floated in a black sea above her.

When morning came, the sun's young rays played magically on the surface of the great river. The sun reached out and caressed the dreamer's cheek. She was glad for the warmth for she was cold and damp from the early morning dew. The dreamer was awake and squinted into the first light of the day. She looked out into the purple-pink swirls of clouds on the horizon. There were no stars at all to be seen now.

The dreamer smiled and walked to the edge of the bank. Looking into the murky water of the sustaining river, she picked up a handful of dirt and threw it into the water like tossing a final goodbye on a grave. She walked over to the sleeping philosophers and gently woke them. "It's time to go home," she said. "We have a lot to do."



Kellye Bumpus



Dan Drage

Untitled

She did not know what to do with it.

She stared blankly at the object in her hands

*It was
so soft,
so smooth,
the palest of pale yellows
like the egg of a songbird,
an intricate working of veins
tracing the delicate,
fragile petals
of this small,
precious
thing*

And she crushed it with her fingers.

She had not known what to do with it.

R. Soendlin



Leigh Doty

There's a speck on my fingernail. It's large, I'd say, as far as specks go, and it's dark. A small speck wouldn't grab your eye like this, couldn't be this visible, but it does and it's dark, so I guess it's a large speck.

I remember the first time I saw the speck. I was sitting outside underneath some healthy green trees, talking and talking about nothing with some friends. Some single phrase or thought spoken by the closest to me of the two drew my attention to the index finger of my left hand. There was a speck on the nail. When I saw it, something sunk in my stomach.

I almost immediately began to unconsciously and constantly glance down at the speck or try to scrape it off. It was my mother who called me new habit to my attention.

"What's wrong with your finger?" she asked. I was thinking restlessly on the couch. I looked up and quickly dropped my hand down to my side to hide it.

I contemplated for a moment my two options, then decided to tell her the truth.

"There's something on my finger."

"Well, let me see." She took my hand and squinted at the finger. "You just have something on your nail. Go wash your hands and stop picking at it."

"I have washed my hands. I've washed them several times," I said.

"Hmm... Well, it'll go away after a while." I think that if she had the speck on her finger, she would have ignored it. That's how she wanted me to deal with it.

"It's been there a while now," I said. "I think it would have gone away by now." I think this stumped her. Her finger went to her lip, her hand to her hip.

"Well did you do something to it? Did you smash it in the door or something?"

I looked down at it again and examined it for the umpteenth time.

"I didn't do anything to it," I said.

"Well, just pretend it's not there and it'll go away after a while." The conversation ended and she left me alone.

She didn't know at the time of this exchange how long the speck had been there. I had begun to believe that the speck had always been there, that I just didn't notice it until that day under the trees. Had she known, she'd probably still have given me the same answer.

At least after that conversation with my mother, I became aware of my obsession. I began to notice how I was constantly studying it, but that studying it didn't show me anything about its nature. I began, instead of just picking, to dig at the speck, trying to get rid of it.

Those two things completed my obsession. I couldn't determine its nature, and I couldn't remove it. This speck, its essence and removal, consumed my thoughts. I couldn't eat, write, or brush my teeth without seeing it. Daily functions sent me down the spiral. If I didn't see the speck I saw something that reminded me of it, like a bird in the distant sky or a spinning tire. Then I would start studying and digging again.

This situation came to such a ludicrous head that I eventually couldn't think of anything but the speck. I looked and looked, scraped and scraped. My head throbbed and my finger ached from the repetition. I didn't eat, I didn't sleep. Nothing moved me but the speck.

So my mother spoke to me again.

"I'm putting together a puzzle of your mind," she said, physically removing my attention from the speck. "When I finish the puzzle, you'll be better."

I would have bet my life then that she had never had a speck on her finger. But she made me realize that I was being ridiculous.

"This is ridiculous," I thought. "I have to live."

At this, I stood up and went into the kitchen. I sharpened the paring knife.

It wasn't as painful as I thought it would be. Still, if I could go back, I wouldn't do it again. It wasn't the pain or the blood. It's because I didn't know what to do with my finger. I ended up dropping it down the garbage disposal. I regret that. My finger was a part of me, and now I'm incomplete without it.

I looked at my blood. "Red blood," I noted, a little cynically. "I'm alive."

But it worked—for a while. It was enough to make me think I'd become happy again.

But now—now I'm standing here, and I see the speck again. The happiness illusion fog dissipates. I think I see the essence of the speck now. I couldn't remove it because there never was a speck on the nail of my left index finger. The speck is in my eye.

Soon, standing before a blank wall with a housefly blemishing its whiteness, I'll see this cycle will begin again and may never end.

Kevin Reed

Silent Scream

As the snow falls
From the sky,
Quietly,
To its demise...

Hear it screaming,
Silently,
For it no
Longer shall be!

It falls then lands
And glimmers awhile,
And all who see
Stop...

And smile.

So beautiful
On eve and limb-
'Til its time is gone,
And its luster dim.

Hear it screaming,
Silently,
For its life
Is vanity!

My friend do you
Hear the sound?
For it does
Much abound.

People here...
People there...
Hide the pain.
That they bear.

Their souls drown in
The void so deep,
And inside
Their spirits weep.

*Why do they cry
Alone at night,
When their lives
Shine so bright?*

*Hear them screaming,
Silently,
For their lives
Have no meaning!*

*Friend, have I
This sound construed?
Does your soul
Make it too?*

*No one hears...
No one cares...
As they try to hide
The scream that's theirs.*

*But...
There's one thing
That I know,
Assurance,
A blessed hope!*

*When you're full of strife
With hope no where,
And you're falling... falling...
Into utter despair...*

*Your silent scream
Thunders in
The Ears of the Great
Elohim!*

*Hear the Jubilation
In
He whose soul
Has the Living Spring!*

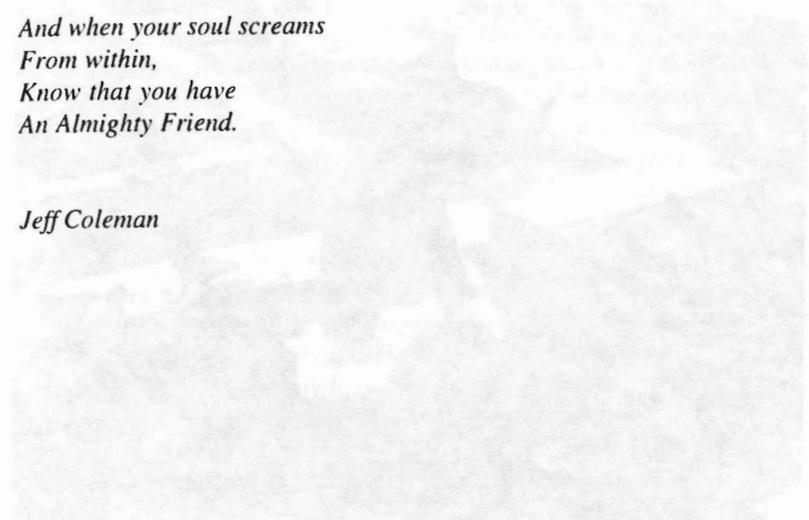
*It is he who's found
The Bread of Life,
Who has the true Peace
In the midst of Strife.*

*Come and drink
The New Wine,
You'll scarce believe
What you'll find!*

*Hear and do
The words He speaks
For He gives Himself
To him who seeks.*

*And when your soul screams
From within,
Know that you have
An Almighty Friend.*

Jeff Coleman



ST. MICHAEL'S MORNING

By

Todd Edmondson

The priest is at the altar, I'm in the sixth pew from the front, third seat from the center aisle, and Joe's in the ground, six feet down, with fresh earth on top and an eternity stretched out before him not unlike a road, I suppose. I put him there yesterday, standing around a hole with his family and friends, gathered to shed tears and inhibitions, and to bid farewell in the most feeble way to someone who, in the end at least, was pretty feeble himself.

I wore a sensible suit to do it—black, with a black tie and black shoes and a snow-white shirt that created an eerie contrast in the september sunshine that beat down on the granite garden and lifted our spirits from their nightmarish repose in hell for a few moments before our tears mimicked the rain that should have been falling on a day like that.

A day like that—was it only yesterday? Hard to believe, from where I sit now, in the sixth pew in St. Michael's, staring blankly at the stained glass images, because the words don't seem to be holding meaning very well. Sometimes, a picture is necessary, because words are failures. Right now, Jesus and his twelve friends are looking down from the windows at me, cold and tired, in a gray sweater, and, as of yesterday, friendless.

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The other morning, the day after Joe died, I woke up early. It was unusually early, not just for me, but for anybody. It was about five-thirty or so, I guess. It was silent all around, just perfectly silent, without pretense of solemnity or anything, but rather a simple silence that made it impossible to stay in bed. I'd been at the hospital until one in the morning, and I'd smoked so many cigarettes in the last week that my throat felt like dry fire, but I couldn't sleep, so I really didn't have much of an option. I could either lay in bed with my reflections of the night before, or scream to break the silence, or get up. I got up.

I went to the sink, and the trickle of water was the first sound I heard that morning, splashing into the bottom of a glass. I filled it up halfway, to the mid-season mark of the Green Bay Packers schedule printed on the side, and drank slowly. I looked out the window and watched the sun starting to rise. It was still pretty dark, though, so that the light pushing through the red leaves on the tree outside my kitchen window seemed like a figment of my imagination. I don't know; I just turned away and went back to my room. The sound of my bare feet against the hardwood floor was starting to annoy me. I saw a pair of socks lying



Shannon Routzahn

against the chair's leg in the corner, so I picked them up and slid them on. They were really nice, wool socks. My mom had bought them for me the Christmas before, and when I put them on that morning, I could slide around the wood floor and still preserve the silence that was driving me so mad. There I was, alone, in my four-room house, wearing my college gym shorts and some wool socks, sliding around the bedroom floor totally alone in the silence. Joe was totally alone in the silence. I had to put on some music. It was only six in the morning. What does one listen to at six in the morning when his best friend has just died? Johnny Cash, I suppose. And I did, almost three songs before I fell asleep with the CD player on repeat.

When I woke up, Johnny was singing "Ring of Fire" and Joe was still dead and I think it was close to nine-thirty in the morning. The phone was ringing, and I wished it would quit, but I picked it up. It quit. It was Jennifer, the girl I used to refer to as "my girlfriend", but who now occupied a fairly ambiguous role in my life.

—How are you? she asked. She was in France.

—Tired.

—Oh. How is Joe?

—Dead.

—God.

—Yeah.

Our conversation continued that way for a few minutes, just sort of rapid-fire verbal missiles launched through space across the Atlantic, each one coldly, quickly, calmly ripping me apart, or ripping her apart, or ripping the morning apart. Pretty soon, there wasn't anymore to say. She had to go to a lecture. She was in Paris, studying Samuel Beckett, I think, for no other reason than to study Samuel Beckett. She was sorry she couldn't be with me. She knew it must be hard, and even though she probably couldn't help much, if I needed to talk she would be in her room most of the night.

—I'll pray for you, she said.

—I know. Bye.

I really missed her, but couldn't bring myself to tell her. I hung up.

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I went over to my parents' house that afternoon, just a few miles from where I live now, but the drive seemed really long. I had to get my white shirt, I said, but I really just wanted to be at home for a little while, sitting at the kitchen table with my mom and drinking the really good coffee she makes. I asked across the brim of my cup for my shirt, and she said she thought it was in the closet in my room.

My old room. Joe spent the night there for the first time when we were both fourteen. He slept on my floor, and we talked until my dad came in and told us for the love of God to be quiet.

—For the love of God be quiet I feel like shouting at the priest at the altar. I don't know why, either. I'm not mad at God, the way I'm supposed to be. Even if I were, I wouldn't take it out on the priest. I think it's just that the voice, any voice but Joe's right now, gets under my skin.

—On the night he was betrayed, took the bread...

That's what it was like, a last supper. Joe and I ate pizza on the picnic table just outside his parents' back door. It killed him that he had to move back in with them when he got sick, but of course they didn't mind. His mom would just hold his hand, and Joe didn't squirm the way he would have when we were in high school. That was in August when we sat there, just a couple of weeks ago, I guess, but I can hardly believe that. I can remember making some statement about the fireflies, and then Joe said,

—I think I'm gonna be ok. He was calm as he could be, as he sipped a Sprite in that way he had picked up the habit of sipping ever since the first time he was in the hospital. I'm pretty sure we talked about my job or something for a while that evening, and I went home believing that statement he had made about being ok, because why wouldn't he be, and the next time I saw him was in room 241 of the cancer ward at the University Hospital. Before I walked in, I felt like throwing up, because I was thinking of Joe saying he would be ok, and now his father was on the verge of throwing up himself, right there in the hallway, telling me that it looked really bad. But Joe had said he would be ok, and Joe hadn't lied to me about anything all the years I'd known him.

—This is my body...

So that's how it is: bread becomes life, life becomes death, all blood red, and I don't understand it, a sacred ceremony of words and wheat and wine and faith and life and death, and it's all swimming in a blood red mystery. Blood red, like Joe choking and coughing and staining himself with that very same scarlet, spots on his white t-shirt like the stigmata of his personal passion, and I wish it were a play, but it was painfully real before me in that green linoleum room, sterile but stinking.

His eyes had opened just enough to prove that he wasn't really sleeping, then had shut again out of exhaustion, and he whispered my name, barely audible against the backdrop of hospital sounds. Just two syllables, slower than his heartbeat on the monitor, that meant he knew me. That name was all he said that day, at least as long as I was there.

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That name, my name, spoken by a dying friend, was enough to keep me around for the next few days, forsaking work and sleep in favor of the silent confusion that surrounded Joe in his unconscious helplessness. I admit, I remember so little of what went on in those three days at the end. It was a blur of canned cokes, blood, cigarettes, machines, half-eaten sandwiches, and uncomfortable plastic chairs. Through it all, Joe lay there, the perfect picture of passivity, being acted upon by any and every force but the one which could make him truly well, and waiting with heavy, hot breath and nighttime trembling for the time when unconsciousness would become complete, rolling into a blinding darkness or a blinding light and finally crashing into eternity with the same silence it had left behind. —Is it supposed to be this way? That was his dad, asking me an impossible question at eleven-thirty on wednesday, as we sat peering into the last twenty-four hours of Joe's life through stinging eyes and wondering what to say to drown out the silence. That was why the impossible question came, not because Joe's dad expected an answer. I gave one anyway.

—I guess it is. It came quickly and stupidly, and I believed it myself without knowing why. I went to get a coke, and drank it with Joe's father, and he seemed grateful for the company even though the only thing I'd contributed to the help him drown out the silence was a quick, stupid four words that crawled into bed with Joe and stayed there, so that every time I looked to see if his eyes were open, all I could see was my own statement on the appropriateness of my friend's death staring back at me, right through me, in fact, and out the door and into the hall, then climbing the stairs to the rooftop and shouting to the heavens with all the strength contained within them that they were the words of a twenty-three-year-old with a dying friend and all the answers, and nothing else of any use to anyone.

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—The doctor says I've got cancer. The words seemed like a joke, coming two years before room 241, at the front door of a cheap apartment. The punchline would be funny, I thought, until I realized that the punchline was a very unfunny silence, followed by an even more unfunny smile from Joe, forced and scared, the most serious smile one can imagine. The smile that death wears when it has to do its dirty work on a confused client.

For my part, I did a good job weakly gripping the railing of the stairs which led to the street below. I didn't say anything, though. I almost said something like, —Are you sure?, but I'm glad I stopped myself. Of course he was sure. He said he didn't feel sick, but he probably would soon. He uttered words like remission and chemotherapy, and he might just as well have been reading the answers to a crossword puzzle, for all the sense

they made to me at the time. I stayed at his house until five in the morning and didn't go to classes the next day. We watched a movie on tv and talked very little, because he was a dying crossword puzzle and I was a bundle of fear and doubt, and neither of us even approached any semblance of coherence.

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I was halfway home that night when I cried for the first time. The tears came, and I couldn't explain them, except that it seemed the only answers that would make the crossword puzzle complete were words like death and gone, and they seemed so simple, so much more certain next to words like remission and chemotherapy, abstract ideas of wellness that may have held a certain mystique under the antiseptic fluorescent lights of a hospital room, but which were powerless in the misty night. When I got to my own place, pulling in the driveway and turning the headlights off, I couldn't get out of the car. I just sat in there, screaming choruses of profanities at God and my dashboard for an hour or so, and I wish I could say I felt better about things when I finally went inside, but I didn't. As I slept the sleep of the desperate and exhausted, the fears and doubts didn't go away, but only cooled like lava into something less burning but more solid and permanent, more inescapable and at home within me, harder to shake but easier to ignore when it was convenient to do so. During the next two years, the lava-rock silence cut against my insides with an alarming constancy, so that even when Joe seemed fine, I wasn't. I would just sit there across a sugar-dusted, brown-ringed coffee shop table nodding at the reassurances implicit in his calm manner of conversation, and silently praying for the day to end so that I could go to sleep that night with the knowledge that Joe hadn't died that day.

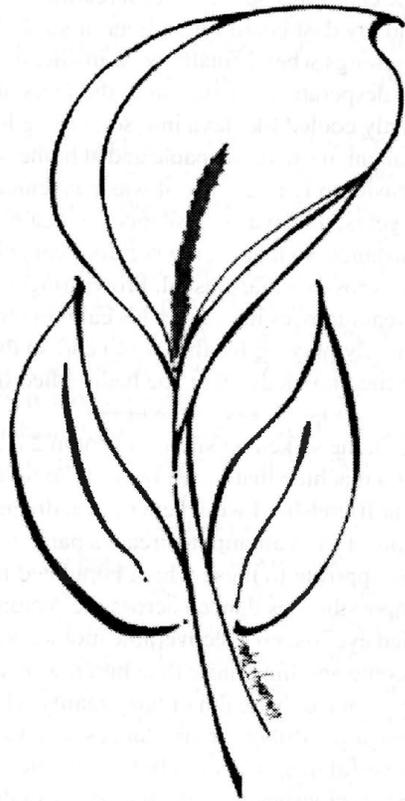
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When sleep came, in the sickening silence of room 241, punctuated only by the noises of a machine that measured out the remaining moments in the most significant friendship I would ever have, dreams were non-existent. My mind didn't even attempt to create a parallel set of places and words and faces, opposite to those which populated my waking hours. No happy impossibilities danced across the picture-show backdrop of my sealed eyelids, no irrecoverable moments grew in my sleeping mind to become anything more than bittersweet reminiscences, but instead stealthily avoided the realm of hazy reality which often consumes even the most painful of circumstances in a wave of tragic and misleading hope, powerful in appearance, but imprisoned in the night, with moments of night-unconsciousness which come early in the morning providing the only glimpse of respite from the bondage which prevails. I was spared the pain of that cruel comedy of illusions, and for that I am

thankful.

—*The Peace that passes all understanding...*

So that's what peace feels like, a one-moment journey into an oblivion of silence and absence, in the time it takes to close two eyes and squeeze a mother's hand for the last time, the peace of death can replace the pain of disease, and *dying* becomes *dead*, verb to adjective, a drama of grammatical forms that isn't even fitting as an allegory, but only as a tool for hiding from the real. Ours is not to question why. Ashes, dust, and a quick goodbye. *Amen.*



Kim Dyer

Illness and Redemption

By Jason Evans

CAST: Nude, Two common folks, Doctor, Cloth, Nude Passer-by

Scene begins with Common Folks standing as if in a city park, making small talk about the weather, gossiping, etc. Nothing noteworthy is being said. Enter Nude, oblivious and looking for something. The Folks notice him and cease talking for a moment, then resume conversation, trying to appear normal. Nude finally recognizes these people and barges up to them, very much invading their personal space.

Nude: (*Slowly, to Folk 1*) Have you seen my modesty? I seem to have lost it—can't find it anywhere. Have you seen my modesty?

Folk 1: (*backing away*) Put some clothes on!

Nude: (*To Folk 2*) What about you? Can you help me find my modesty?

Folk 2: (*Reacting more violently than the first*) No! Leave us alone!

(*Nude wanders around a bit more, still oblivious and still looking intently for something. The Folks pause in their conversation to observe the nude, then hesitantly begin again. Nude sees the audience and addresses them.*)

Nude: (*Slowly*) What about you? Have you seen my modesty? (*Sighs*) I was once a very modest person, had lots of friends and playmates. But now, now I am immodest, and it is killing me. One day, I woke up, and my modesty was nowhere to be found. I tried to put on clothes, but couldn't bring myself to it. I missed a whole day of work before I figured out that clothes just weren't right, that I just had no modesty. And now, now I am ostracized, and it is killing me. Have you seen my modesty?

Doctor: (*Walking on stage, as if to walk by, stops when she sees the nude.*) Excuse me, sir, can I help you?

Nude: Doctor, I have lost my modesty. Can you help me find it?

Doctor: You haven't lost your modesty, you've just caught a case of immodesty. It's going around. (*Just then, another Nude walks nonchalantly across stage.*)

Nude: Oh. Is there any cure?

Doctor: Nope, you just have to deal with it.

Nude: How long does it last? Is it fatal?

Doctor: Hmmm, never can tell how long it lasts. It is fatal, but you won't die.

Nude: How do you mean?

Doctor: Well, it's a social poison, immodesty. Your social life will most likely die, if it hasn't already. Go ahead; try to talk to those people there.

Nude: Too late, I already know.

Doctor: Oh. Well, then, have a pleasant day! Do you have insurance?

Nude: Insurance?

Doctor: Yes, insurance. Diagnosis is not free, you know. Pay up.

Nude: But I didn't ask you to diagnose me, and anyway, I'm not wearing pants. Don't have my insurance card.

Doctor: That's all right. I'll be in contact with your insurance company. You'll pay.

Nude: *(Hesitant)* Oh. Thanks? *(Exit Doctor)*

Folk 1: *(Panicky)* Did you hear that? It's contagious! He touched me!

Folk 2: I've had my shots.

Folk 1: Do you think I'll get it?

Folk 2: *(Glancing at Folk 1's body)* I hope not!

(During this conversation Nude lingers momentarily, wanders thoughtfully to stage left. As Nude exits, Cloth enters, clothed beyond personal recognition and comfort, lumbering past Nude (though not seeing him); Nude is taken aback by this fully clothed being, but after a short, puzzled look, exits. Cloth lumbers toward the laughing couple.)

Cloth: Where the hell is my innocence? What's going on? Have you seen my innocence?

Folk 1: *(Caught off-guard, offended)* No, I haven't seen your innocence.

Cloth: *(To Folk 2)* Where the hell did it go? Have you seen my innocence?

Folk 2: Huh-uh.

Cloth: Hell's bells, the rat-bastards. What did I do with it? Damn, rat-bastards.

(Folks edge away, concerned for their safety in the presence of this abrupt individual. Just then, Doctor comes back, in the same manner as last entrance.)

Doctor: Excuse me, can I help you?

Cloth: What the hell do you want?

Doctor: I noticed you there, couldn't help it. Are you feeling quite right?

Cloth: I was feeling fine, until just the other day. I woke up, and my innocence had vanished. I searched high, I searched low, but to no avail. I just couldn't find it. I found myself putting on all these clothes, hiding me from the world. I can't bear to face the world. I tried taking the clothes off, but some things are just f*cking impossible. And cussing! I started cussing! Hell's bells! There, I said it again! *(Holds ears and cowers)*

Doctor: *(Thoughtfully)* Hmm. This is an interesting case. You've symptoms of prudence, in your dress and appearance, but your mind seems to show a lack of prudence, and a certain savvy for immodest language. What's for certain is that you have no innocence. You'll have to come by for tests before we can make a positive diagnosis.

Cloth: Give me no tests! Give me my goddamn innocence!

Doctor: *(Condescending)* Now, now, there's no treatment until we know

what you've got, and then only if your insurance covers it.

Cloth: Insurance? Who the hell said anything about insurance?

Doctor: *(Smiling)* Naturally, you must have insurance. If you don't have your information on you now, don't worry; you'll pay.

Cloth: Like hell I will! Pay for what?

Doctor: For the diagnosis, of course. Diagnoses don't grow on trees, you know.

Cloth: Bullsh*t. *(Exit Doctor, knowing that she will be paid)*

(Cloth looks around for his innocence as ardently as his clothing will allow. Nude enters again, looking contemplative this time. The Common Folks see Nude, size up Cloth, then turn and exeunt abruptly, as if frightened. Nude approaches Cloth, unashamed.)

Nude: Have you seen my modesty? I must have misplaced it, can't find it anywhere.

Cloth: Get the hell away from me, freak!

Nude: *(Shaken and defensive)* Freak? You're the one who's invisible. Probably hideous underneath those clothes.

Cloth: At least I have some modesty.

Nude: Yeah, well at least I have some innocence!

(A pregnant pause. The light dawns on them both.)



Stephanie Hart

untitled

The bottoms of my mother's feet were rough.
dry and cracked,
callused and hard,
they bore the markings of years of labor.
Her pink bunions that juttred out from her big toes
were souvenirs where cheap shoes had destroyed her bones
in leaner days

when food was a commodity,
a \$3 allowance was a luxury
and expiration dates were irrelevant

From days when *dad* meant *far away*
And *It's not your fault* was whispered in my ear so many times
i began to wonder if it was really true.
When back to school shopping meant finding out what my sisters had
outgrown.

And summers meant hot, sticky days
living in a sundry of apartments and houses
in the heavy, damp, humid air of Central Ohio,
wondering why i wasn't in Kansas.

When Christmas meant a decision that would end up hurting
one of the two people i loved the most
and i would have rather just forgotten the whole thing.

As i sit massaging the wounds of a confused past,
wary and mindful of the tender parts that make my mother wince in pain.
Using a little more force on the tougher, harder parts
that always take a little extra time.

i notice her nails are tough, hard and yellow.
They are thick and bare deep ridges
like markings of time.

As of late, she paints them,
and the burgundy of the paint smoothes out the grooves
and plays nicely against her alabaster skin.

I guess some things you can still cover up.
Some things you can still forget
for awhile.

When we lived together,
my mom and i would lounge on the couch together.
In those evenings after a hard day's work ,
my mother would plop her foot in my lap,
and with sad eyes and a playful voice she'd beg,
Please, steph. Just for a little bit.
i'd act reluctant at first, but in the end i'd always give in.
Gingerly at first, i'd test the waters,
allowing my hands to find the sensitive areas
where the day had proved extra wearing,
attentive to the squeaks and moans of her tired voice.
When my hands felt confident, i allowed them to work
until at last she would say *thank you*
and pull her foot away,
offering up the other for just the same.
And when my hands finally grew tired,
i would pat her foot,
and my mother,
exhausted and half-asleep,
would mumble under her breath,
Thank you. You have such strong hands.

My mother's feet are old.
 callused and hard,
 worn and abused.
They have aged faster than the rest of her.
They defy her still young face.
They have worked hard
Now we are apart.
And when i come to visit,
we will lounge on the couch,
sipping tea and reading
or watching a movie we've seen a million times.
And i always expect the inevitable nudge
of a tired foot
and the sad eyes and
the playful voice.
And my hands are out of practice,
but she assures me i haven't lost my touch.
And it takes me a while to find out where she's tender,
but eventually i know it all again.

And i now see that my mother's feet are
 worn,
 haggard and callused
on the bottoms.
And i realize now that the tops are smooth as silk
 soft and warm,
 smooth and lovely.
And I wonder why I never saw it before.

Eventually I finish,
and through shut eyes, half asleep my mother replies,
Thank you. You have such strong hands.
And instinctively i reply back,
Thank you.
i am proud to be complimented by such an extraordinary woman.

My mother's feet are tough
 hard and callused,
 worn and cracked,
 haggard and old,
with thick, yellowed nails
and bright pink bunions that shoot pain through her foot
and smooth skin
as soft as silk
the perfect shade
always warm and tender
beautiful.

Stephanie Hart

Free verse

Cynical

*We listen to children singing
Jesus Loves Me, and our hearts
Are touched. Some people croon,
"What sweet angels!" Others simply
Sigh at the sweetness of children
Singing Jesus Loves Me.
Funny, but people tend
To say the same about children
Reciting old nursery rhymes.*



Jen Korak

The Phoenix is a fresh collection of poetry, prose, photography and artwork and you might not even want to use it for toilet paper.

Featuring the work of 22 of Milligan's finest writers and artists we bring you a new flame... up from the ashes of the old style we bring you a new look and attitude that will truly move you.

-Karl Marx