Midnight Thoughts
LaVon B. Carroll

I
Lord Leaf

The world has grown large
and windy and loose things
fly and whirl about.
I have clung to a gray branch
as long as I can.
After all, what harm can come
to a dead leaf
in a winter storm?

II
To a Ghost

If you awake at night
as I,
oppressed by some bleak thought
that will not take its rightful shape,
stays shivering in a shadow
on the wall,
how will you know that you
do not seek me, but her,
as once in her you sought for me?
You may discover then, as I have now,
that all loves, dead or lost,
become their own tenacious ghost.

III
Vene Shadows

When she died that April
I thought I saw her thin hands
reaching out, clutching
at a fine sliver of light
on the dark pane. Tonight
I saw the shadow of my own
shivering in a cold spring breeze
that rattled the screen—
Don’t tell me it was only
the dead vines
of last summer
clinging—
Somewhere along Highway 13,
a mine sweep team out of the Special Forces camp at Bu Dop.
Jungle fatigues wet with sweat,
caked red with dust.

The road continues on and on,
red and dusty.
Rubber trees stretch in straight rows on both sides.
It’s early in the dry season, hot yet still humid.

Routine, an early morning sweep to clear the road between Bu Dop and Loc Ninh.

Our enemy always mine the road at night.
The nights still belong to our enemy.
With the daylight we start our job.
We sweep every morning.

Stay alert.
Anti-personnel mines alongside the road? Chicom claymores?
Mines that tear and rip.
Trip wires? Command detonated?

We are looking for anti-tank mines,
standard 23 pound plastic Chicom,
very little metal—hard to detect.
We use AN/PRS3 metallic mine detectors.

Walking, sweeping back and forth, listening to the ground.
The screech in the headphones becomes harsh.
A mine or just scattered brass?
Our enemy has used this trick before.

Oh Christ, a mine.
Will it be booby trapped?
Mines stacked upon mines? Booby traps upon booby traps?
We dig with a bayonet, the same as other soldiers in other wars.

Sometimes we die. Usually one at a time—always without glory.

Vietnamese bus wants to pass the sweep team.
In a hurry to get to market.
You know the kind, small bus painted red, yellow and blue,
packed with vegetables, chickens, people— and the kids riding on top.

A tense sweep team is alert, but it’s a fatigued tense, a strained alert— the hollow-eyed kind of alert. Alert to combat situations, fatigued to human situations.

Young sergeant in charge decides if the bus is in such a hurry to pass "fuck’t.” If it wants to be a mine sweeper, let it pass.

A hundred meters ahead of the sweep team road and bus flash in an eruption of spewing fire and dirt. As if the universe has just ripped open— then it’s almost over.

A black smoke billows skyward, even before the ever present red dust can start to settle there is a strange second of silence. No birds, no voices, just an empty silence.

Complete silence—a stopping of time.

Then the screams start, then the shouting, then the crying— and the crying has lasted forever . . .

III
An Epilogue

I wanted to tell of those times and those places and of us as young men. In reflection, however, I don’t believe we were ever young men. I think we started those times as boys— children really, then we became old men. No, I don’t believe we have ever been young men.
Another Washday
Sundy Watanabe

April.
Momma cries
into the blueing.
Her roughened
work hands
snag the hair
she brushes back from
cheeks and ears.

She slides those hands
into silver harshness:
rinse water so cold
it makes her gasp.

Seven kids and counting.

She plunges
shirts, socks, and overalls
to the rinse tub’s
drowning depth.
Sucks them up again and
feeds them
to the wringer’s pressure.
Draws them
out the other side.
Drops them into
stainless steel buckets.
Shoves the buckets
toward me.
I lug them
into April’s windcut.
The sharp-lipped edges
bouncing bruises
smartly against my tender thigh.
I chew a wooden clothespin
till it squeaks
against the tension
of the coilspring,
glad to find my jaws so strong.
Then lift
the heavy, sodden masses
to the clothesline
to whip dry.

Momma whips
and shoves and pummels
sheets

instead of Daddy.
Gone for six months,
gone for good.

Sorrow does not stop the motion:
sloshing water,
agitating clothes.
Nor the relentless,
flattening grip
of the wringing
machine.
Step onto the back porch.
Into bird song, sunlight, the under-roar of cars.
Cut open the mango.
Knife glints silver
Juice of pure gold drips out.
Four drops, five.
Run down my wrist.
Are caught by my tongue.
The taste—mmm—of a memory.
Cut through the fibrous flesh
To the seed, bone-hard.
Eat a wedge off the knife point.
I am a young woman, sun-bleached and strong
Step onto a granite boulder aside an alpine lake
Brimming with melted snow.
The water so clear.
Is it water?
Or shadows and mirage
Created by altitude and heady beauty.
The lake is stadium-wide but never deeper than five feet.
A crystal puddle.
I am nude and completely alone,
Except for rainbow trout
Darting from shadow to shadow
Living proof in that shelf,
That pause in a landscape’s plunging and soaring,
That tender stony hollow in the neck of crest,
proof of the presence of water.
I reach down and touch it.
It scalds my hand at perhaps one degree Celsius.
Icy hot.
It registers not as wet to my senses.
Yet I suck it from my fingers.
Delicious, pure.
I bend my body down
To drink straight from the lake.
A fine wine to accompany my feast of mango.
Cut through the fibrous flesh,
To the seed, bone-hard.
From the knife point I
Savor, suck, slurp, nibble
the succulent meat of the fruit.
Strip more flesh from the leathery skin.
While sun pulses heat onto my bare flesh.
Breeze teases with swirling chills over my body.
Caresses my nipples,
Arousing, stiffening.
Playing, tickling, shivering, tingling.
Gently brushing the hair flowing down my back.
Whispering in my ear.
No words, one wordless word
Aahhh...hhaaahhh...
Dyadica
Krista Beus

She is thinking of his face
From the Labor Day weekend photograph,
And he is wondering if the wind is blowing
In Utah today.
She has found the antidote to bliss
In his departure and he has
Filled himself with
“Other business,”
Except when sea birds and table salt
Remind him of home.
Summers there are dust and haze
And hot gravel,
Or moistened evenings after storm,
A land of opposition.
There is desert and delta,
Marsh and mesa, sun ray and snowflake,
And she was two visions:
The large eyed, shivering
Girl in wool,
November as a woman;
And too, the Phoenix
In the dust, the rusty
Sand flailing hair like
Fire against her face.
These women two are his to keep
Come lull in “other business,”

While she keeps about hers. . .

And a thousand and one miles away
She is reading about a brush fire
Burning out of control.
The Beauties
Scott Woodham

Yesterday, the Beauties came to me.
They were all there.

There was Western Beauty, Eastern Beauty, Woman Beauty,
Man Beauty, Morning Beauty, and The Beauty of Night;
The Beauty of Ugliness stood in the shadows.

They knocked on my door seeking refuge.
Someone is trying to kill us,” they said.
I let them in and swung the bolt...

The Beauties were thirsty, but all I had
was red whiskey or water.
The Beauties chose whiskey.

They were shy at first, but once they loosened up they
upended my coffee table, and started
to eat my food. They arm-wrestled
on my kitchen floor, and placed bets on each other.

The Beauty of Peace sucker-punched
the Beauty of War, and won the pot
against all odds.

This continued long into the night,
and they made me go to the store for more whiskey.
The party had gotten out of control; they had obviously forgotten
someone outside my door wanted to kill them.

While I was gone, The Beauty of Love challenged
the Beauty of Refused Love to a fistfight.
They were passionate fighters, and when I returned
I tied them both up to end the dispute.

The fight ruined the mood, and the Beauties started to pass out,
draped over my furniture,
curled up in the sinks, and under my bed.
They hung themselves from doorknobs;
they stuffed themselves into coffee mugs,
coat pockets, and tea bags.

Since that night, the Beauties have moved in.
They don't pay rent, they don't do their dishes,
and they leave the lights on.
I told them they could stay as long as they need to.
Desert Geisha
Halbert Pete

Grace flows out amongst the sage.
A sweeping Kimono.
Bright in elegance brushes the stems.
A bright white face silhouetted
Against the blue sky,
Dark hair that outlines the surrounding mesa’s.
The winds blow and the show begins.

She bends her knees and tills her head,
From out the sleeve a fan flutters open.
She covers half her face. with her eyes revealed.
Her face is concealed only for a moment
And she moves, suddenly, swiftly across Indian Country, face now un-concealed, glowing.

Lightly, she claps her hands together, her rhythm.
She begins to sing a Navajo ballad.
“Walk in Beauty.”
The slight breeze lifts her voice.
Left to right, her hands go sweeping the landscape
Grazing the sky and the earth’s flesh, caressing.

A small string of dust lifts off the ground
Upwards it goes, circling around her.
Fine sand, it shines as it swirls
Like she is being surrounded by crystals
Sparkling, like water shimmering in the sun.
Now everything is glowing, even her lips.
Shining bright red.

Suddenly, she stops while in motion,
Frozen in time, as the dust settles.
Then she begins to move, but ever so slowly.
Her knees bend and her arms spread, accepting.
She kneels to the elements.
The surroundings are foreign and dry.
She stands and closes her eyes.
From across the vast ocean she came.
Dancing atop ocean waves and resting on clouds.
A Geisha, sacred and ancient
Belongs ever so, in mythical lands.
A Geisha, in Indian Country,
The Geisha, dancing in the desert.
This Geisha, came in my name.