Begun in 1960, ESSENCE is a literary and fine arts magazine funded by the Student Government Board at Kutztown University. It is a free publication dedicated to providing visual and written means of expression.
UNDERSTANDING

If only eyes could see into the mind,
And ears could hear its thoughts.
And if only the nose could scent the smell
of feelings.
Then the mouth would know just what to say,
And we could understand each other!

—Tammi Gosnell
A Letter to Grandma

I reminisce of my childhood days,
my strange and often omerry ways,
when Grandpa and Mom and Dad were gone, too,
and all that was left for me was you.
Not many kids around my age,
so I set my life up on the stage
at your house, and you played the part
which will always remain closest to my heart.

You sent me off to Bible School,
and read to me the Golden Rule,
you helped me distinguish the wrong from the right,
and when my world got dark, you turned on the light.
You took care of me when I was but small
and picked me up when I took a fall;
you carefully wiped away the tears
and were always there with the loudest cheers
when I ventured into something new,
even tho' I faltered a time or two.

You held me on your rocking chair
and taught me how to read—right there.
When Mom and Dad and Gramps were away,
you were with me thru' the day
to protect me and keep me company,
to keep me from being sad or lonely.

I'm sure you wondered what the future could hold
for such a child who proved so bold;
but my boldness came from all the strength
which you endured—at any length.
I admired your courage when things went wrong
and saw others weaken tho' you remained strong.
You stood tall thru' what they couldn't endure,
and tho' they always had questions, you were so sure.

Giving me all you had seemed your goal,
as often times you filled the hole
with affection, love, and tender care
when no one else—just you—was there.
Now that I'm older and more able to see
all that you have done for me,
the thing I most readily realize
is that you are the apple of my eye.

My own life, now, I've begun to live,
but I nonetheless make room to give
all to you that I am able
since the years have made your feet less stable.
Tho' often I anger and wonder why
I lose my patience with you sometimes,
we both know that if you asked me to,
I'd go to the end of the world for you.

—Debra Dursi

ESSENCE 5

The Lizard Lounge

large horns curling back
along huge green scales,
a red belly warms of
burning.
crumbs, dirt, cold
air rushing through
the broken window.
Morrison on the south wall,
a dart board face.
white vinyl chairs
broken and rusted,
melted candles in
creme de cacao,
reflections of the
last event before
sunrise.

—Jeffrey R. Ney
Bow the weeds!
Here comes the wind!

• Feeling the night
  in one's solitude.
Value one's presence;
  to what accord?

Purpose that serves none,
dear parasites, leaching
the very ground that
gives its life, and
pleading for love
  on the coldest
of nights.

Snap! feel the
stones' cold-wave one's emblem
  high! small, trifle
tuft, empty with seed, as we begin
to die.

—Michael Montalvo

Lookin' for a way to get out,
My life's reduced to my goal.
Searchin' for a way to be free,
A loophole for my soul.

—Lisa Bailey
STORMS

In the morning,
waves crush bones
against shark-toothed rocks.
Tonight,
a wind pushes harder until
nothing is left but
the rocks and myself.

Reflections leave me lonely,
rejection scares me,
almost nothing pleases me
but knowing that you
are there in the
darkest storm.

— Jeffrey R. Ney

DEAUVILLE BEACH, NORMANDY

In the beach
Lies many footprints.
In our lives
Lay many people.

Sometimes I wonder
If my life is like a beach,
With many people coming and going.

I just hope
That unlike the beach,
I remember
What footprints belong to whom.

— Mia McDonough
Rail Runner

Here it comes!
Rumbling, churning
Forward, closer
Faster! Faster!
Closer, Closer
Louder! Louder!
Clang! Clang!
Clatter, clatter
Moving further
Fainter, fainter
Going, going
ting, ting
There it goes!
Gone.

—Lee Haldeman

Beth Linn
A LONELY CHILD

A lonely child reaches out,
He needs to know what life's about.
He sits in a dark corner all alone,
His feelings they have not grown.
All around him kids will play,
But they always tell him to go away.

A lonely child sits and stares,
And he knows that no one cares
He reaches out to touch your hand,
And hopes for you to understand.
He reaches out just for you,
Hoping you'll reach out for him too.

ESSENCE 12

— Tammi Gosnell

HAiku

Sudden snow flurry
tenderly brushes barren trees
night soliloquy . . .

The bending of wills?
neither the wind nor the reed
deliberated . . .

Sorrowing himself—
the autumn cricket invites
all who listen . . .

The old gnarled tree
reaches for heaven
in every direction . . .

— Charles J. Scanzello
I liked it for a while, a long while. It seemed I'd never stop liking it. Its intensity grew and its appeal greatened. In my eyes, it was a reflection of all that I held to be real. An existence and a presence. Overpowering my will, it became an obsession. My hands caressed it in wonder as I held it to the light. For a long time I possessed it and kept it close. A sacred symbol of my beliefs. Until one day it shattered.

—Beth Linn

For the Man in Dreidelbis Cave

Bitter coffee bites a ragged throat as I fantasize in the cold of my house that keeps my coat on and the coffee evaporates.

Soon there will be nothing.

White clouds rising like the man in Dreidelbis. A womb filled with the breath of absence.

Bitter memories of traffic cars blocked by each other. Traffic flowing like the streams in the cave winding slowly under bridges.

—Jeffrey R. Ney
motion, perpetual motion, a never-ending,

I Oughta...

You know I...
I really ought to...
Though I...
Don't feel like...

I know I...
Should go and...
Sit down and...
Get goin and...

Make myself really...
Get it together and...
I really oughta...

—Lee D. Haldeman
Harry Truman's Middle Name

My first wife left me after I wouldn't go to the laundromat for her in the middle of the night to get her a pack of Parliament. She flew off to Spain with an friend of her father's, and it was there that she fell in with an unsavory crowd of expatriate artists and writers. Eight or nine years later, I was hanging out at Erin's—Ernie's—that's the place on Main Street where they sell magazines and lottery tickets—and I found her picture in a third-rate porno magazine. It was a black and white picture—a full-page—and it was too grainy to be really graphic. But it was her. I talked to the goddamn picture and told it to go to hell. I even almost bought it. I didn't. I put it back on Erin's filthy shelf and went home and threw up.

That was eleven years ago. The first week she was gone I smoked a lot of marijuana and watched baseball games on television. The Phillies were playing five games against the Cubs, and since they don't have lights at Wrigley Field they were all day games. The PhDs lost four of the five games, but Willie Montezano hit two home runs.

I needed a roommate because I couldn't afford to pay the rent myself anymore, so I let a guy named Greg move in with me. We tiptided around each other for the first couple of weeks because I thought that maybe he was gay, and he thought maybe he was. He's got a natural silver streak in the front of his hair, and I've always been kind of skinny and pale, so I guess we were both justified, if a bit silly, in our fears. We soon got to be best friends and confidants, and we had lots of women that summer. We were still young and energetic enough that we always got into talks that went on all night. We'd talk about film (usually about the director Ken Russell. Greg loved Ken Russell), or philosophy, or religion, or women—mostly women—and we'd laugh and drink cheap red wine and smoke lots of cigarettes. Every night we ended up walking to the laundromat to get more cigarettes. He married a girl from Erie a couple of years ago. I was the best man. Candy's a waitress now in Allentown, and Greg reads poetry and drives a school bus. They just bought a rowhouse with a GI loan, and Greg's saving up to buy some teeth.

Anyway, that summer we met two local girls. Mine was Shara; she had long legs and no chest. His was Leota, a green-eyed, dark-haired German girl who somehow ended up in Shoemakersville. They both worked at banks in Reading, and after work they would come over to the house and I'd put a red light bulb in the ceiling socket and play Miles Davis and Nat King Cole records. Leota told me years later that they would call each other at work in the daytime and discuss our sexual prowess. Greg was the cute one, she told me. I was the nice one.

When school started in the fall Greg and Leota drifted apart. She and I moved in together and Sharon moved to California. We had a blue Friday. The day after Thanksgiving, Sharon married a guy from Santa Cruz who sold shower curtains that had astrological designs on them. She brought him east for Christmas, and when I offered my hand to him during our introduction at her mother's, he refused to take it.

The whole time Leota and I lived together, we vowed that we wouldn't fall in love. I don't really know what the definition of love is, but it seems to me that it has something to do with jealousy and dependence. We were about as jealous and dependent as two people could be, so it must have been love. When we finally realized it, we didn't know what to do next. So we got married.

Even though we knew that the relatives that had given us all the money at the wedding wouldn't understand, we decided to take separate honeymoon. We flew to Madrid together, and then we split up. I laid on Spanish, Portuguese and Moroccan beaches with topless Spanish, Portuguese and Moroccan girls, and Leota took a train to Zurich to see her cousin. After three months I got tired of sardines and wine and laying on beaches, so I set out to find my old college friend Lenny. Lenny had been living in Europe for two years. From the very beginning he had been sending me great vivid letters with descriptions of French whores and Moroccan hashish farms. He wrote that he had managed to stay alive for the last six months by knocking on doors in Israel and saying, "Please feed me. I am a Jew." He was eager to share his wisdom with me. I was eager to learn.

It took me four days to get out of Barcelona because of a strike by RENFE, the Spanish train company, and by the time I got to Athens, our meeting place, Lenny had left. The plan was to leave messages for each other at post offices and, sure enough, there was a letter for me at General Delivery. There was a James Joyce festival in Dublin, his letter said. He'd leave a message for me there.

Dublin was nine countries and two thousand miles away. It was mid-summer and I was having trouble with the heat. The hell with James Joyce and the hell with Lenny. Three days, one stolen wallet, and a sprained ankle later I had to get the hell out of there. They say there's only one way to separate the men from the boys in Greece. With cowbars. I couldn't find any cowbars.

I started hitchhiking toward the coast. Even though I was frustrated, miserable, and on corniches, I knew that somewhere on one of those Aegean islands there was a woman waiting for me with hairy armpits and a can of olive oil. A guy in a red convertible gave me a ride and he stopped at a gas station so that I could piss. When I came out he was gone. And everything I owned was gone.

After the big plane ride, the first American I saw was a black cab driver who charged me thirty bucks for a ride from JFK to the village. It was the middle of the night so I slept on a friend's roof. When I woke up, the Empire State Building was in front of me and the refineries were on my left. I didn't know where the hell I was. I was lost and sinking fast. I decided to go see Sharon.

Sharon was still in Santa Cruz, three thousand more miles away. It took me a full day and a night to get through Pennsylvania and Ohio. A belt salesman with fat, hairless arms picked me up in Elkhart, Indiana and drove me to Las Vegas. He had just won a belt salesman award and was going to Las Vegas to celebrate. I'm gonna get me some thirty-four and a half, you know what that is? he said. You do me, baby, and I'll owe you one! I felt sorry for any son of a bitch that had to drive across the goddamned country to owe somebody one.

The belt salesman didn't want me to sleep. He thought I was clever as hell; he wanted me to entertain him. I didn't want to screw up a good ride, so every time I suspected he was getting bored, I'd ask him trivia questions. What was Harry Truman's middle name? What's the first foreign country south of Detroit? Who was the only baseball player to ever be traded for himself? I wanted to throw myself out of the goddamned window.

Sharon screamed when she saw me. She was long divorced. The shower curtain guy had been a bastard; they were all bastards, she said. We went out to a restaurant where all the waitresses wore short skirts and roller skates. We drank three pitchers of Margaritas and then went home and slept together with our underwear on.

It took me a while to get used to the laid-back California lifestyle. In Santa Cruz it was altogether proper to be between professions. Before I knew any better, I'd ask people that I met what they did for a living. The answer was always the same. "What do you mean?" they'd say.

--Kevin R. McGrarvey

Sharon and I fell in love. It had been more than ten years since we had shared a bed, but we vowed to stay together always. She was working in a leather store downtown, and I found a job writing political articles for a local newspaper. The city had just elected a socialist mayor that the paper had championed, so with the fiery editors applauding the coup (along with all the massage ads in the back), the paper became popular as a souvenir for tourists. The circulation took off, and Sharon and I suddenly had money. We were happy. We had a nice house, a car with doors that didn't open, and a bunch of cats. We were nineteen again. She was everything I ever wanted.

Sharon and I would walk to the beach every night and run around in circles until we collapsed in laughter on the ground. We'd drink tequila and read to each other in bed until one of us was asleep. We'd play strip poker in the kitchen, just the two of us.

Most nights in Santa Cruz are cool; one particular night it wasn't. Life kept on getting better. We were celebrating; Sharon had just been made manager of her store. She had gone shopping that day and had brought home a red light bulb. She was screwing it into the ceiling and I was dancing around the living room when somebody knocked at the door.

Leota. What followed was a lot of looking at each other; then kissing; some hugging; a lot of crying; then more looking. We went through it all again, just to be sure, and then we just sat on the floor and smiled at each other. I remember wondering which smile would be most appropriate. The sympathetic one? Leota had hers, but hell, she had had time to practice. As soon as I knew what a goddamn son of a bitch selfish bastard I was. I asked her if she knew what Harry Truman's middle name was. She didn't know.
AGE

The old woman sat hunched over the table.
She lit a cigarette.
While one still burned in the ashtray.
The radio's volume boomed.
The television's light flashed about the room.

The old woman's eyes looked out the window.
She seemed to be looking for something.
There is nothing there
But the vegetable garden.
And the darkness of the night.

—Mia McDonough

DARK EYES

I look out through dark eyes,
The faces I see are blank.
Sunlight feels yellow
And soft on my skin.
I only know of what I'm told
Listening is all I've done.
Oh, the emptiness I feel in me
Never to have seen a day.
Envy does not tell the story
Of my jealousy to be free.

But imagination I do have
Not limited to black and white.
I too, can see a sunset
And the beauty of the seasons.
What I have
You should have, too.
You should envy me!
For I have something you have
not—
The pity of being blind.

—Jeffrey Holthenrichs
Love's Consumption

Love is not to
be shared in the dark, when
one does not reveal oneself.
Does not mean to
be a victim; there are no victims
of love.

But, there are
spiders to the prey, that
ardently consume their hearts.
despairingly pumped out of their places,
juices sucked and relished
by the stronger partner.

And, so one
should be informed, not all hearts
beat red — but sometimes
white. (I wonder if that means that
that no true blood runs
in their veins, or if
all butterflies die a virginal death.)

— Michael Montalvo
Summer is fading.
icy fingers
Fall around my shoulders
   Nudging me
Toward decisions
   That will be
Faded, dry in only weeks
Tumbling off
   Unto a crowded
   walkway.
And unintentionally
   Passed by
Forgotten
   Like a sweet flower.

— Casandra Bell
In pictures with faces
memories of forgotten places
We share a brief flash
before the soul takes its crash
Quick advance the film
beneath the ground or
in the kiln
We have this strange obsession
to hold them in possession
Who will keep us when we're gone?

Comb your hair just perfect
Cover up any defect
Smile and say cheese
head down a bit please
No one will forget us
once the frame turns to rust
Hiding the stain on the wall
children's children to recall
Who will keep us when we're gone?

Photographs of ancestors
cluttering space on the stairs
Dust them once a year
Occasionally shed a tear
for loved ones never known
Ghosts echo all alone
Years of life and knowledge
now lost boxes in some garage
Who will keep us when we're gone?

—Melinda L. Johns
Lifeline

twisted, curled cord
feeds energy
to the child
  compactly crouched
that feels the pulse
vibrating
  from the other end
listens to the reassuring
  heartbeat—until
Operator
cuts off
  —the child
hears
a blaring dial tone
the loud ‘click’—
  disconnection.

—by Kimberly Bender

LUST OF A BLANK BOOK

You have been away so long
I forgot the texture of your flesh
And the way my hand glides along you
Pouring forth on you all my wildest
Thoughts and desires.
You soaking them up.
Never getting enough
Asking for nothing in return
But knowing that I’ve been here
You’re a true friend in the sense of
What a friend is
Telling not a soul
Divulging nothing
You know I’ll always come back
Our short time spent together
Lingers long in my thoughts
Oh, you’re always open to me
For me to do away with your
White innocence
But... You’re glad—I’m back.

—Mark S. Clocca
While trees hold snow
With black branches,
Five birds fly
With black wings
Against the white winter sky.

—Chris Ventimiglia