

*The 2003 Editors' Prize Contest Winners*

THE  
SPOON  
RIVER Poetry Review

*Aaron Kellerstrass  
Honorable Mention*

Skeleton Song

There's absence in bones,  
as the old tactics of the body swim  
about them, flourishing  
like ants over a stone.

If the femur had a voice it would be peace.  
The slow log of the leg's center,  
patient as the grooves in bark,  
marking time by what moves  
past it, over it, an absurd  
wisdom of stagnation  
taught to the clock of pumping arteries.

Yet there is something sexy about blood,  
a constant war  
in our veins, quick  
reaction and turn, its instinct  
to be contained  
like a city  
underneath a moving shadow.

\* \* \*

Before the lumbering consciousness  
can fathom a hand  
slowly caressing  
a cold pin, the electricity  
has moved back and forth between the mind  
and the finger carrying its horrible message:

The grenade is rolling under a tent,  
and the blast meets the face  
as his own voice coming back  
saying *stop*.

\* \* \*

A man passed out underneath  
the humped wheels  
of an idling jeep. His last thoughts  
were not of home, not  
of Janey or Josie,  
but of his own hair, how the sand  
might cling to the jellied strands  
like the tiny men in the trees  
clamping down to outlast

a wave of bullets. One man,  
swaying stock or cliché  
carves *I wasn't here*, in the side  
of the tree. Before he leaps

into the empty hands  
of nightfall, he realizes  
no one will know who the hell "I"  
is, of the millions of creatures  
in a jungle of hair, who the hell  
is "I"? There are too many sounds

in identity, the key hitting the ignition,  
the slow growl of an engine,  
bones cracking in its teeth,  
as it pulls away  
dragging two worlds,  
and a pair of emptied fatigues.

\* \* \*

The finger is a violin  
in the symphony of bones,  
scratching, pointing, delicate  
like the steps of a burglar  
exiting successfully. Always setting  
pace, sometimes,  
accusational, like that same burglar  
bumping into the stoic owner  
of the house, who's been waiting  
with the gun he sleeps with,  
his finger moving a slow circle  
around the trigger  
like an attentive lover  
or sniper.

The muzzle feels like a cold bone  
in the finger pressing  
against the temple.

In the song of the skeleton  
every note carries a weapon:  
The heavy club of the legbone,  
the arrows of the arms, hollow  
bomb of the skull.

Fingers are complicated this way  
working with the thumb  
to complete the first silhouette  
every child learns...

the dumb machinery of the gun  
firing.

\* \* \*

Too many nights I wake in a pear tree,  
the muddled holocaust  
of this dream always begins in a hallway,  
a two mile march through  
a tunnel covered  
in the poems of dead children.

The movement is so slow  
it can only be recognized  
by the landmarks of language,  
one line meshing into the next  
in an obscene riddle  
answered with a single bullet  
at the end of the walk.

A light that can only be described  
as genesis, comes over me  
like the first waves  
of a good pill, and I see  
the trees, filled with pears  
the size of some newborn's head.

I know the Earth is a deadline,  
that the fertilizer has eyes.  
Ghosts are the only true tellers  
of time, their songs  
creaking in a history of calcium,  
are too soft, difficult  
to hear.

The moving body of last scream under  
water, fists slowly pounding  
the thick hull  
of a glass boat.