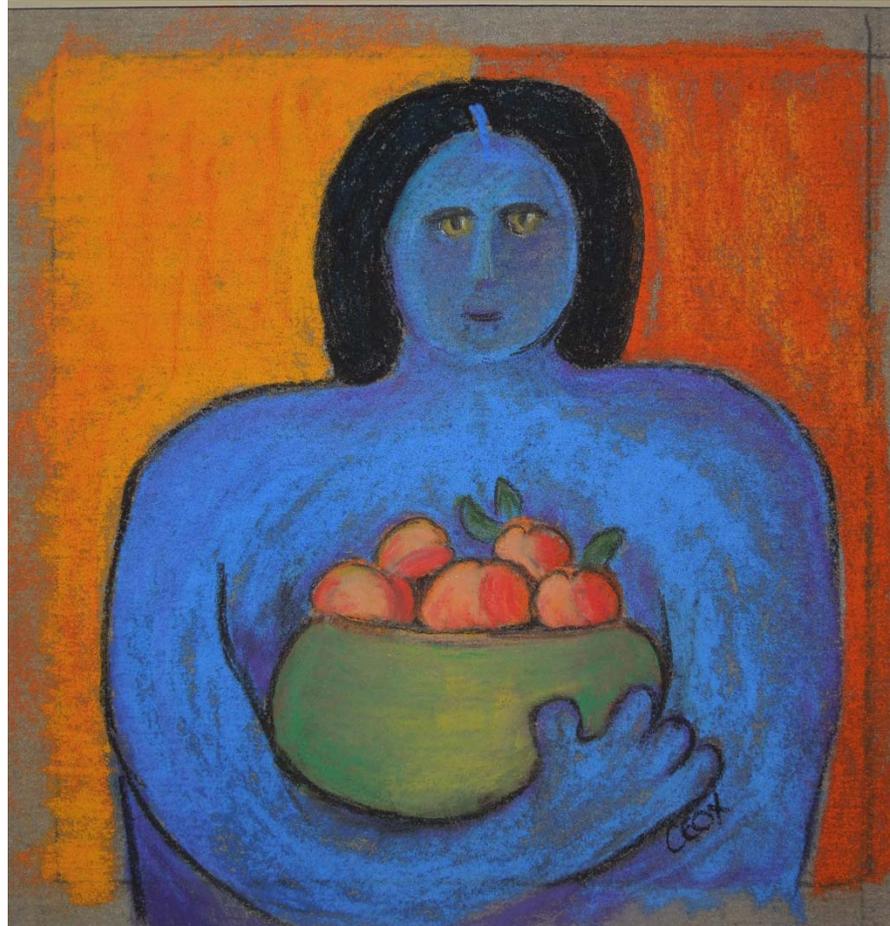


# Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 11 Issue 2



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# Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **THE LADY WITH PEACHES**, 6" x 6" – Pastel on Paper.

*Cynthia Cox works in watercolor, pastels and oil. She is a member of Artist Incorporated Gallery, Vestavia Hills, where you can see her latest 3-D American Flag contribution to the Wounded Warriors Project. Four Seasons in Homewood carries her bird paintings: A Time To Sing, A Time to Fly.*

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Back Cover: **WHO GIVES A HOOT**, 32" x 48" – Acrylic & Collage on Canvas.

*Christina Anderson is a Hoover, AL, wife, mother of four and visual artist. She received her BFA from University of Alabama at Birmingham and is a resident artist at Artists on the Bluff in Bluff Park.*

**www.mimisartwork.com**

## SPECIAL ROMANTICS

Marie A. Hulme - 2013 Hackney Literary Award – 3<sup>rd</sup> Place, National Story

He waited for her each Saturday in the late morning until she appeared through the bay window overlooking the Fulham Road, and while she stopped to purchase a paper at the newsagent stand just outside, he watched the young American girl. She always paused, as she opened the door, placing her copy of *The Guardian* in her shopping bag, before entering his cluttered, dusty bookshop. Sometimes she held a bouquet of daffodils in her arm, purchased, he imagined, from the flower stall down on the corner where the street met Elm Park Gardens. In June, she often carried roses; she favored yellow ones. She would set them down carefully on the table by the door, where he sometimes left leaflets announcing a reading or a recent acquisition, ensuring that her hands were free to explore his shelves.

For almost a year, he had seen her eyes grow wide as she entered, as if in the course of a week the shop had been transformed with new offerings from her favorite writers. He heard her breathe deeply as she entered, as if inhaling all that was contained within the bindings on each shelf, as if she was in a place that provided her an elixir, as if the smell of old leather and paper were as sweet as a fully bloomed rose like those in Regents Park on a summer's afternoon. He saw her taking down a book as one would reach for a delicate piece of crystal, handling it with the tenderness of a mother lifting her infant from a pram. He saw her rubbing her hand over the leather bound cover, then turning each page as if touching silk, her lips sometimes moving as she read to herself the words printed on it, quietly, as if in prayer. He dreamed of her lips. He dreamed of her lips saying his name as if in prayer.

Each Saturday morning he hurriedly rearranged the books, shelving newer acquisitions that he thought she might like nearest his desk in the middle of the shop. He would recommend them to her. She would think a large new shipment had arrived from an estate far off in the countryside and be impressed by how he acquired so many exquisite books each week. She would linger over them, carefully eyeing each title as though searching for an old friend in a crowded train station. He would sit, busily attending to some paperwork as she entered, only glancing up with a smile and a nod as she made her way to a shelf she hadn't yet visited. She would always say "Good morning" and he would think, yes, yes it was, and throw himself back into his ledger and bills. Beautiful books require time to fully

appreciate, he thought, and she dedicated her Saturdays to them just as he had dedicated his life to them. He wondered about her life, about where she read her books and about how she spent the other days of the week when she wasn't in his shop. She was always alone.

One Sunday, he saw her in Bishop's Park. He often walked through its formal gardens on his way home from services at All Saint's Church, which stood just outside the park's southwest corner along the Thames. She had been sketching the stone sculpture by James Wedgewood that he had admired so many times himself. *Adoration*. Its title was engraved on the base, although now only "Ador" was fully visible under the encroaching moss. He had observed her, unnoticed, from the gate separating the church grounds and the botanical gardens near where she was sitting on a bench across from the statue, her eyes focused on the abstract interpretation of a man and woman in a passionate embrace, her left hand moved across the paper on her lap as a dancer moves across a smooth floor, with casual economy, in easy, eloquent strokes.

On that day, he had made his way towards her, his casual stride belying the excitement he felt at seeing her, outside of his dimly lit shop. She looked radiant, her hair glistening in the sun like the gold of a newly gilded book. Her dress was a bright pink like the blooms on the rhododendron bushes that stood on either side of the church door. He often thought back on that day. He remembered the conversation, the smell of the lavender next to the bench, the grey charcoal lines on the stark white of her paper, the mellow sound of All Saints' bells sounding the midday hour, remembering their conversation. "It's a beautiful day to be sketching," he said, tentatively stopping just before his body came between her and the sculpture. His heart raced as he waited for her to respond and his weight shifted from one foot to the other. She glanced at him, quizzical, until she smiled suddenly.

"Oh, hello" she said, her voice warm, inviting confidence. "I've been enjoying my Yeats." She had recently purchased *The Collected Poems*, published by Macmillan and Company on St. Martin's Street; the 1952 edition. He recalled it had a reproduction of the poet's portrait by Augustus John on the frontispiece; a fine edition, although the paper cover had some wear. He never forgot a book. She reached into the colorful tapestry satchel at her feet, retrieving the familiar text. "There's something I must show you." She motioned for him to join her on the

bench. “Forgive me for not recognizing you at first, away from behind your desk in the shop.”

He hesitated for just a moment, not having expected that his comment would receive anything more than a polite acknowledgement in return. She noticed and gestured to the bench, shifting towards one end to make room for him. She set her pad down between them when he sat down as if to assuage his reticence and maintain a comfortable distance between them. She opened the book and removed a yellowed clipping with small tears and darkened deckled edges from where it had been torn out from its original newspaper. She unfolded it carefully so as not to cause any further damage to its already delicate state, its deep folds forming sharp lines across the print and directly under the nose of the image of an old man with large round glasses whom he immediately recognized as the poet himself. Without speaking, she passed it to him, as if offering him a sacred scroll. He studied the piece of paper carefully, aware of her eyes on him, knowing she was waiting for him to comment in a way that demonstrated an understanding of its value to her, perhaps to them.

“I found it tucked inside” she said, her voice nearly breathless with excitement, “Between *The Tower* and *Under Ben Bulben* of all places.”

Of course, he thought, by *Ben Bulben*. The headline read, simply, “Homecoming.”

“How ironic,” he managed to say, his eyes scanning the page that reported on the return of Yeats’ body to his beloved Sligo nearly ten years after a hasty burial in France following his death. The title of the newspaper, *The Irish Independent*, was visible across the top of the clipping, although the date had been a casualty of the seemingly hasty business of tearing the article out. “It must be from sometime in September of 1949; that’s when he was moved.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “It’s been in the book for nearly forty years.” They both fell silent, each examining the content of the page, until she pointed to the tributes written by readers.

“Isn’t it lovely, that the paper printed all these poetic remembrances of him?”

He followed her finger, delicate and pale, as it reached across and paused over some of the lines which had been submitted by those simply identified as “C.M.G.” or “A.G.T.” It was her left hand, the one she had been sketching with; there was no ring. He noticed the titles such as “Heart’s Desire” and “Place of Peace.” One reader had written “*And*

*evermore shall Drumcliffe be/A hallowed place for you and me/Oh was there ever place so fair? /And W.B. is lying there.”*

“I believe it was Maude Gonne’s son who arranged for the return of his body to the cemetery in Drumcliffe in County Sligo,” he said, his eyes still on her finger lingering over the paper in his hand, and this time it was she who murmured, “How ironic.” He thought of the poet’s abiding love for Gonne, mostly unrequited, except for a brief consummation in Paris when she had separated from her husband, the father of her only son. He wondered at the resilience that enabled Yeats to ask for Gonne’s hand in marriage four times – or was it five? – until, following the final rejection, he moved on in middle age to marry another. He wondered because he knew that his own heart lacked such fortitude and courage. *But did the obsessive Yeats ever move on? Did he still think of Gonne even as he professed his love for another woman? Wasn’t it twenty years after Paris that he wrote about his night with her “My arms are like the twisted thorn/And yet there beauty lay”?*

“Isn’t it touching how someone saved this?” Her words brought him back to the present, beside her on the bench, in the shadow of Adoration. He caught himself smiling as he nodded and, for the first time, looked directly into her blue eyes, which reminded him of the sea in Cornwall where he’d spent his summers as a child. He often yearned to be near that sea. “Do you remember the lines?”

He knew she meant the lines from *Under Ben Bulbin*, chosen for his epitaph. He knew them well, as he had studied Yeats at University and returned to the poet for company on many occasions when the shop was quiet. He cast his eyes downward, as if trying to recall them, finding her eyes so beautiful that he was afraid he would blurt out a compliment and startle her. He didn’t want to shatter the moment of shared passion, if only towards a poet they both loved.

“Cast a cold eye on life, on death,” he began. He felt her eyes, vibrant and warm, on him. He struggled to remember the last line, thinking only of lines he would write of those eyes, comparing them to the sea. He imagined standing with her on the Lizard peninsula along the Cornish coast, gazing out towards Kynance Cove with its fleet of colorful wooden fishing boats moored like a necklace of jewels around the rugged coastline. He imagined buying her jewels for her pale, delicate fingers and graceful neck.

“Horseman, pass by!” she finished it for him and then seemed to grow shy, casting her own eyes downward and saying softly, “Yes, that’s it.”

He stood up, feeling that he had lingered too long. “I mustn’t keep you from your work” he said, handing her back the clipping. “I enjoyed seeing the treasure you found inside one of my books. I assure you, I won’t endeavor to collect any additional monies for it as a result.” He returned to his role as the shopkeeper, formal and polite, no longer allowing himself the pleasure of her company. The moment had ended and he would always remember it.

“I can’t think of anyone else who would have enjoyed seeing it more” she smiled, returning the clipping to a page she had marked with the flap of the cover. “It will remain here, nestled next to *Under Ben Bulben*, for someone else to discover in another forty years.

“I look forward to your next visit to the shop,” he said, turning towards the statue where she once again had focused her penetrating gaze. *Did he imagine a look of disappointment on her face as she picked up her pencil to begin to draw?* With one last fleeting glance at the homage to corporeal love, he continued along the path to the botanic gardens that he had been keen to see before the sight of her had stopped him in his tracks. He thought for a moment of telling her about the three other Wedgewood statues placed throughout Bishop’s Park. But on that day, *Grief*, *Protection* and *Leda* would have to wait. *Adoration* would be the only subject of her art and his imagination.

At night, he chastised himself for being foolish enough to think that she might be interested in him. Time had worn on him like a vise, pressing him down, creating a curved back from stooping over boxes of books to be shelved and making him appear much older than his years. Smoking had added lines to his face that appeared to sag under their weight like a poorly constructed shelf stacked with heavy books. She was vibrant in her colorful manner of dress, her blond hair, her red umbrella on rainy days, and in her marine blue eyes that scoured the shop like a miner in search of a buried gem. She was only interested in his books, he reminded himself. But that didn’t stop him from thinking about her each night, imagining her working side by side with him, carefully dusting off the books, taking orders over the phone from wealthy Arabs in search of classics of the western literary canon to have on their Knightsbridge built-ins. He imagined her putting the kettle on for tea in the room at the back, knowing that he took his with just a splash of milk, no sugar. Yes, he thought, he was a man of vivid imagination after all, having spent his life within the walls of his family’s rare bookshop. There was no harm in imagining. He believed she felt the way he did about the books; he shelved

them lovingly, even reverently whenever he returned from an auction or an estate sale. He understood her passion.

He remembered one Saturday, was it in November? She had entered, as she always did, but rather than just placing the newspaper in her bag, she had lingered in it to retrieve a small bundle wrapped in aluminum. “It was Thanksgiving, this week,” she said. “Do you know about that American holiday?” He mumbled something about gratitude and food, as she nodded and smiled at him. “I wasn’t able to go home, with all my studies, but I made some pumpkin bread to alleviate my homesickness and I thought perhaps you might like to try some”. He watched her as she put the small loaf-shaped gift on his desk, setting it on the piles of papers, pens and books that covered every inch of its old oak surface, laughing nervously as she did. “If I can find a place to leave it.”

She looked directly into his eyes, as she did when she purchased a book. It was a uniquely American mannerism, he thought, being so direct, cheerful and thoughtful. His English customers, mostly book dealers or pensioners, all wore dark colors matching the grey London weather and kept their heads down as they walked into his shop, rarely if ever engaging in conversation or glancing at him as they made a purchase. None of them had ever brought him a gift. Most of his days were spent in the company of those reserved, bookish types with seemingly little need for human contact. She was different. She often asked his advice on editions and editors of her favorite poets. He had come to know that she loved Blake, Keats and, of course, Yeats. She often inquired about some aspect of a book she admired, perhaps the quality of the binding, the process of its gilding or its typography or Florentine endpapers. She wasn’t intimidated, as many of his customers seemed to be, to ask about some of the complete sets placed behind glass shelves at the rear of the shop. One week, he had just stocked a complete Dickens’ set in pristine condition that had caught her eye. She remembered her grandfather having a similar set, she had told him and had asked him how rare it was and its price.

After placing the loaf on his desk, she said “I realize that I don’t always make a purchase when I come in each week; but I’m grateful to have found a place like this and I wanted to express my appreciation to you for letting me spend some of my Saturday mornings just browsing. 733 Fulham Road is like a second home to me.”

Her words lingered in his mind, the way his eyes did on her figure outside the bay window each Saturday morning before she would turn

away from the newsagent's stand to enter the shop, and he would have to lower them to his work. A second home to her. Maybe it was not so farfetched an idea that she would want to have a life with him, a life with his books. Maybe it was just a matter of time before she would ask for a position in the shop and the hours spent talking about their favorite writers, closing for lunch to take in the sight of a white peacock in Bishop's Park, sharing knowing looks about the absurdity of one of their customer's requests – Could you find me a cheap and cheerful first edition of Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* in perfect condition, please? – would lead to more than stolen glances and superficial conversations.

She had left that afternoon, after purchasing a finely restored first edition of Wordsworth poems, chosen and edited by Matthew Arnold and published in 1879 (he remembered every detail, as she had chosen well). And he had said quietly, "Thank you for the bread."

Walking the stairs up to his modest flat above the shop after closing, he unwrapped the bread, held it to his nose and inhaled its deep, pungent smells of cinnamon and clove. How strange, he thought, the notion of making bread out of a vegetable, and yet he eagerly devoured nearly all of it that night, saving one last slice to enjoy with his tea the next morning. He imagined her mixing the pumpkin, spices, flour, sugar, eggs and butter somewhere in the kitchen of her flat in London, perhaps even nearby in Fulham, and lovingly wrapping it in the aluminum to bring him the loaf much like the way he wrapped her books before placing them in her shopping bag and wishing her a pleasant week. The next time she was in his shop, he would ask her if she would like to stay, to linger every day on the red velvet cushioned window seat in the bay overlooking the street, to work alongside him amidst the treasure they both valued above the gold of the most elaborately gilded book behind the glass-fronted bookshelves.

Weeks passed without her returning; perhaps she had gone home for Christmas, he thought. The shop had been busier than usual that holiday season and when he fell into bed at night, his mind often drifted off to sleep without even dwelling on her, her blond hair cropped short to her chin, her blue eyes, or her smile. Yet, when the letter arrived on the sixth of January, he hadn't expected its news.

430 East 88<sup>th</sup>  
New York, N.Y. 10128

Dear Sir,

*I realize, even after my weekly visits to your charming shop on the Fulham Road over the course of the last year during my graduate studies in London, that I don't even know your name. Please forgive the impersonal nature of my greeting. I don't know if you will remember me, but I am the American who spent most of my Saturdays browsing through your wonderful rare books. On occasion, I purchased some collections of the Romantic poets; I was writing my thesis on them during my stay there. I cherish the first edition collection of Wordsworth's poetry that I stumbled upon one particularly memorable November afternoon; I think it was during my last visit. Perhaps you enjoyed the pumpkin bread I brought you that day? Does that help you to remember me? We also met one summer's day in Bishop's Park, briefly and spoke of Yeats. I do hope this finds you in good health. I was hoping that I could impose on you the great favor of looking for a leather bound edition of Keats' poetry, gilded work would be wonderful and, if possible, illustrated. I would like to give it to my fiancé as a wedding gift. I'm sure you'll understand; he is a devotee of the Romantic poet as well! I look forward to hearing from you as soon as possible. We are being married in June, having just become engaged at Christmas, so I'm hoping that during one of your enviable buying trips out into the bucolic English countryside to attend an auction or estate sale in the next few months you'll happen upon the perfect book for him. I have told him all about you and your exquisite shop. I will be patient, knowing how carefully you choose your books and look forward to hearing back from you at your earliest convenience. I remember fondly all my many Saturdays in your good and knowledgeable company at 733 Fulham Road.*

*Sincerely yours,  
Elizabeth Stewart*

He could imagine her writing the letter, almost hear her voice as if she were reading it to him – cheerful, thoughtful, direct. Elizabeth he quietly spoke her name, as if reciting a prayer, lingering over each syllable as he had lingered over the sight of her through the bay window each Saturday morning for so long. He imagined a sparkling ring on her pale, delicate left hand, her writing and drawing hand. 733 Fulham Road was quiet, as usual, that January. Most of his customers shopped the post-Christmas sales down on Oxford Street and in Knightsbridge, rummaging through racks of reduced-priced jumpers or tables overflowing with ties, rather than shelves of his books. For weeks, he found himself still looking up when the

door opened on a Saturday morning, hoping that she had somehow changed her mind and had returned to London, to his shop, to him. *People break off engagements all the time.*

One Sunday, he purchased some roses, yellow, from the stall at the entrance to Bishop's Park, and left them on the table by the door. They reminded him of her, of her beauty, until they faded and died. He pressed the dried petals in the hand-printed Yeats that he had ordered from Hodges Figgis on Dawson Street in Dublin. He imagined two people sitting on a park bench, one day, perhaps forty years hence, when the contents of his shop were sold off, discovering the remnants of the bouquet inside. *What stories would they tell each other about the petals that fell out from between the pages that read, "All's changed since I...trod with a lighter tread"?* He searched for months for the book she had requested, scouring the other rare booksellers along the Fulham Road, traveling as far out as the Hardy county of Dorset to attend an auction, even placing a small ad in the trade paper, *Bibliophile Today*. When, on a chilly March evening, he discovered a beautifully bound first edition Keats, complete with gilded cover and colored etchings by E.J. Sullivan, at the bottom of box marked 'Special Romantics' at an estate sale in Cambridge, he imagined her blue eyes widening in delight as she opened the package postmarked London. He wrapped the book carefully, as he had always wrapped her books, in the plain brown paper he kept in reserve under his desk for his most loyal customers, adding a note with the bill for twenty-seven pounds, 'It wasn't an imposition at all, best wishes from 733 Fulham Road.' He didn't address it to her personally, nor did he sign his name.

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*Born in New York and raised in its suburbs, Marie Hulme is a writer, painter and teacher who lives in Connecticut with her husband and two children. Her non-fiction has received national recognition. [www.loveletterstolondon.com](http://www.loveletterstolondon.com)*



**MOLTED**

Christy Daniel Cross

12" x 24"

Mixed Media

*Christy Daniel Cross is a self-taught artist from Birmingham, Alabama, whose newest pieces are 2-D mixed media. Her work is primarily inspired by nature and life's experiences and struggles. [artisanatlarge@hotmail.com](mailto:artisanatlarge@hotmail.com)*

**SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE BEGINNING AND THE  
PRESENT** Joseph D. Milosch – *2013 Hackney Literary Award – 2<sup>nd</sup> Place,  
National Poetry*

A letter to Smitty's mother:

Lydia,

As I closed the blinds because sunlight hurts my eyes, I saw the world map hanging on the wall by the cord. It reminded me again of Smitty – and of you. I suppose my problem with sunlight began in October or November of '71. Rain dripped off my plastic poncho as I stood in the formation with those being shipped to 'Nam. I was thinking of maps when Smitty took the space beside me. Because Smitty was supposed to remain stateside, his appearance startled me, and we were both shocked the next morning when we discovered that both our orders were changed: I was to remain here in the states while they were shipping Smitty to 'Nam. Why they had done it no one ever explained though rumor had it someone switched those orders because he was a half-breed Sioux or because he wore love beads. For me this switch was not a joke. As a result, I can work only in dark rooms.

All I know is his plane exploded overseas. On the day of the ceremony celebrating his death, it stopped raining. Then, you stepped onto the stage in sunlight, Lydia, and the rays reflecting off your sequin purse changed forever the way I reacted to light. As I stood at attention beside his casket, one sergeant stood directly behind me. He mumbled, "A good Indian is . . ." Later, he offered you condolences. In the sunlight the dog tags they presented to you gleamed inside the glass cover. I pulled my cap's brim over my shades. Still the light coming off the case hurt my eyes.

Lydia, I didn't dare tell you that it wasn't Smitty in the bag. That it was a common trick they pulled. They placed his name tag on another soldier's bag. They knew you would never find out it wasn't your son under the red carnations you placed on the body bag. That we came out of that war changed and incomplete, didn't give me the right to make your pain even worse, so I kept my mouth shut and let it ride. Thinking of him brings this image of you: dressed in a black coat, in the winged shadow of a recon plane.

I wondered what you thought as you touched what you thought was his body, and drops of mist slid off your sleeve onto the plastic bag. The army taught me the trick of reading a map by finding parts of an idealized woman among its contour lines, but I find it hard to idealize anything. Maybe I just don't want to see anything too clearly. And maybe that has something to do with the fact that in daylight I feel lost, and wear cheap sunglasses, and will not enter a room until the blinds are closed. Often I sit in shadows. I close my eyes and enter the place where memories run like rain off hanger roofs and recon planes.

Joe 2013

.....  
*Joe Milosch received an MFA from San Diego State University. He has multiple nominations for the Pushcart Prize, and received an Excellence in Literature award from MiraCosta College. Among Men won the Tennessee Middle State Chapbook contest. Poetic Matrix published two collections of his poetry: The Lost Pilgrimage Poems, and Landscape of a Hummingbird.*  
[josephmilosch@yahoo.com](mailto:josephmilosch@yahoo.com)

*“I like to imagine that the world is one big machine. You know, machines never have any extra parts. They have the exact number and type of parts they need. So I figure if the entire world is a big machine, I have to be here for some reason.”*

—Hugo Cabret  
(a character created by Brian Selznick)

## HUNTED

Zachariah Barry - 2013 Hackney Literary Award - 1<sup>st</sup> Place, National Story

The full moon hung low in the night sky. Snow blanketed the hard ground. The air was crisp and still. The skeletons of trees dotted the expanse of ground that now was so cold and dead. A wolf howled somewhere out in the wilderness. Though it was night, the moon shone with an irregular brightness, casting a pale light upon the earth. Enough light so as to make out shapes in the distance. But the light was not wanted. For something sinister was lurking throughout the trees.

A hunt was taking place.

Thirteen-year-old Pierre laid very still, not wanting the crunching of snow to give him away. He couldn't see the Germans, but that didn't mean they weren't there. He could hear them. Their sounds were barely audible. He fought the strong urge to run. Francois had told him to stay in this spot, and Pierre wasn't going to disobey him. A German voice made the boy start. It sounded so close, yet Pierre was not able to see far enough into the night to make anything out.

Francois should be back by now. Fear felt like it was clogging Pierre's stomach. He felt as if he was going to throw up. This was the second day. Only the second day since Pierre and his older brother Francois had left Paris, and tried to make their way northwest to the English Channel. They had hoped to find some way to make it to England, where they would escape Hitler. Pierre wasn't even sure if they would be safe there. The Germans bombed the country mercilessly.

A sound brought Pierre back to his situation. Footsteps. The next instant his eighteen-year-old brother Francois laid next to him. Pierre's eyes widened when he saw that he carried a German rifle. The weapon gleamed slightly in the moonlight.

"We have to keep moving," Francois whispered, "in a minute they will be here." Pierre couldn't make himself speak. The feeling in his stomach was worsening.

"Come on." Francois grabbed his brother's arm and led him away, keeping himself and Pierre low to the ground. A voice suddenly shattered the silence. A shot was fired. Pierre felt his legs give. Only Francois's vice-like grip on his arm kept him from falling. He was frozen with fear.

Earsplitting shots rang out, and Pierre realized that Francois was returning fire. He felt the urgent tugging on his arm. It broke the paralysis. Fear now drove him onward. He ran with his brother, snow

from the Germans' wild shots flying all around them. Harsh cries followed the retreating brothers. Flashlight beams flayed wildly in the vain attempts to find their target. Pierre stumbled, but Francois caught him before he fell. It was starting to hurt with each breath.

Silence once again fell. The only noise that could be heard was the sound of the two brothers' ragged breathing. Weariness washed over Pierre as he tried to keep himself moving. He needed sleep. His eyelids slowly fell as he went into a light doze. Francois woke him.

"Wake up! We can't sleep now. We need to keep moving."

They began running again, their bodies numbed with cold. Tears ran unchecked down Pierre's face. He couldn't stop them. His parents and sister were dead. He had seen things, cruelty that he hadn't even known existed. The Nazis controlled France with an iron fist, disposing of any who showed a sign of opposition.

"Except the French Resistance," Pierre thought. Somehow the memory of his brave countrymen filled him with a warmth. "The Germans haven't broken us yet!"

They seemed to run ceaselessly, not stopping for hours. Pierre once again felt sleepiness wash over him. He tried to fight the feeling, but nothing he did made it let up. He felt his limbs begin to shut down. He was so tired. Blackness covered his vision as sleep came. He was unable to resist.

Pierre's eyes flashed open. The first thing he saw was the underside of a crude rooftop. He sat up looking around wildly. He was in a barn loft. He was covered in hay, as if he had been buried in it. Francois was nowhere to be seen. Panic made Pierre spring to his feet.

"I have to get out of here. I have to find Francois."

He began to climb down the ladder which led to the loft. He heard voices. Pierre jumped to the ground. The talking was coming from his right. He crept cautiously toward it, losing fear when he recognized Francois's speech. Pierre rounded a corner and saw his brother talking with another man. He didn't know if it was safe to join them, so he stayed behind the corner, watching the exchange. It ended within minutes.

Francois shook the man's hand and walked toward Pierre, who seeing that the other man had left, went to meet his older brother.

"What's going on?" He asked Francois anxiously.

His brother smiled. "He's gone to get us some food."

"How did we make it here?"

Francois led Pierre back to the ladder.

“When you collapsed, I carried you. Somehow in the darkness I managed to see this place in the distance. So I made for it, hid you in the barn, and went back out to try and disguise our tracks.”

Pierre climbed back up to the loft, followed by Francois. “Did you tell the farmer?”

“No. I only just met him this morning. He was quite surprised to see me.”

Pierre lowered his voice. “Can we trust him?”

“I think so.” Francois sat down and spoke again, “He says he will help us get to Cherbourg. He says we should be able to find a boat to England from there.”

“You told him?”

“What?”

“That we’re being hunted because of Father?”

Francois looked at Pierre. “No.”

A noise made them both freeze.

“Get down!” Francois hissed as he pushed his younger brother into the hay.

Pierre watched tensely as Francois took a swift glance over the side of the loft, gun in hand. He relaxed when his brother lowered the weapon.

“Our friend has brought breakfast.”

Pierre quickly went to the side of the loft and helped Francois pull a large basket up. As his older brother talked with the man, Pierre opened the basket and began to satisfy his hunger. It felt so good to eat again. Pierre couldn’t remember the last time he had eaten a decent meal.

Francois thanked the man, who then left the barn.

“We will be leaving tomorrow morning. Early. Before dawn.”

Pierre paused in mid bite. He swallowed. “Will he be leading us?”

“No.” A friend of his will be.”

“Is he trustworthy too?”

Francois gave a slight smile. “Yes.”

Pierre resumed his meal, pushing the basket in the direction of Francois who at first didn’t take anything out. Then with a small sigh he reached in and selected some food. But only because he knew he would need all of his strength.

It was early morning. The sun had not yet risen. It was deathly cold and still.

Pierre jumped up in alarm as Francois shook him into wakefulness.

“It’s time to leave.”

Groggy from sleep, Pierre clumsily followed Francois down the ladder. The Farmer and another man stood in the barn. Francois went over and said a few words to the two men, accepting a map from the Farmer. Pierre was now wide awake, a mixture of excitement and fear flowing through him. He adjusted his coat, then turned and noticed that the Farmer was gone. Their guide was the only one who stood there.

“Follow me,” he said gruffly.

He led them out of the structure’s double doors where they paused. The guide glanced in both directions, scanning the land with his gaze. He wasn’t a tall man. He wore a black coat and tattered brown pants. His nose was sharp and his eyes piercing. Pierre couldn’t tell if he was a farmer like his friend. The guide nodded and they broke cover and made for a clump of trees, where they stopped. The minutes passed.

“Why are we not moving?” Francois whispered.

“Quiet!” The guide glared for a moment, then looked toward the farmhouse. Pierre looked anxiously at his brother. Francois was suspicious; he put his hand on the guide’s shoulder firmly.

“Tell me, what’s going on?”

The man struck Francois’s hand off and suddenly pulled a pistol from his pocket, aiming it at Pierre.

“Make one move and the boy’s dead! Drop your weapon. Now!”

Francois put his hands in the air after setting his gun down. He talked calmly.

“Why are you doing this?”

The guide didn’t answer. He pulled a flashlight from his coat and pointed it towards the farmhouse. Then clicked it twice. Pierre stood frozen with fear, the gun barrel staring him in the face. He jumped in terror as screams and gunshots ensued from within the house. Germans were attacking the farmer.

“No!” Francois hissed, diving at the guide, who, caught off guard had no time to fire his gun. They rolled in the snow, limbs flailing. The guide had instantly lost his gun, so, after pushing Francois away, he drew a knife from his sleeve.

“Look out!” Pierre screamed, kicking at the kneeling man. His boot caught the guide in the mouth. With a cry of agony the man fell onto his back, clutching at his injured face, writhing in pain. Harsh cries sounded from the house and in the dim light German soldiers could be seen

running in their direction. Pierre dove flat as bullets whistled overhead. Francois had retrieved the guide's gun. He tucked the pistol in his pocket, and aimed his rifle. Pierre covered his ears as his brother squeezed the trigger.

"Pierre! Get in the trees!" Francois screamed.

Crawling and shuffling, Pierre managed to make his way into reasonable cover. He laid flat behind a tree and covered his head with his arms, praying that Francois would be okay. Finally the gunshots, which made something inside of Pierre seem to vibrate, subsided. He looked out from behind his cover. He couldn't see anything. He stood, trying to see to the tree line. Taking a deep breath, Pierre walked to where the conflict had taken place.

Relief flooded him when he saw Francois kneeling by a bush.

"Francois!" He ran to his brother, crouching beside him, "Are you alright, Francois?"

His brother nodded dumbly, the gun hanging limply in his hands. His face was expressionless.

"Francois we need to get away from here!"

This seemed to bring his brother back. He shook his head, rose, and told Pierre to wait where he was. Pierre did so and saw him go cautiously into the farmhouse. Minutes later Francois came back.

"Come with me."

Pierre quickly followed his brother back to the house.

"They killed him didn't they," he said.

Francois nodded once, and went back inside. Suddenly a sharp scream tore from within the building. A scuffle followed. Pierre ran to the door, hearing Francois shouting for him. A young boy and girl ran into him as he blocked the exit to the house.

"It's all right," he shouted, trying to hold on to them both. Francois came to his assistance, grabbing the boy gently but firmly.

"We are here to help you!" He grunted.

This did little to calm the children, who began to cry from the experience they had just been through. Pierre and Francois tried to comfort the boy and girl, but failed. The children had been through something traumatic. There wasn't much they could do.

"You're safe now." Francois soothed, hugging them tight, "The men are gone," he looked at Pierre, "they were hiding in the cellar, in a premade shelter. The Farmer must have been their father," Francois continued administering to the children.

Pierre felt helpless. The sun was rising so he rose to view his surroundings. There wasn't much to see. A barn, a field, and a small house.

Francois stood. "Stay with them, Pierre. I'm going to gather food and ammunition."

Pierre didn't know what to do. After several minutes of silence he opened his mouth to tell them that they were going to England, but stopped himself not knowing if the boy and girl could be trusted.

"This is terrible." He thought, trying to make a decision. Pierre resorted to telling them that the Germans would soon be defeated.

"The Americans are coming. They will help the English, and our countrymen. They will send Hitler back to his own country."

The children looked too scattered to understand him, but he took courage at his own words. Francois brought a pack from the house filled with food and handed it to Pierre.

"Try to get them to eat."

He left in search of ammunition.

Pierre took a deep breath, opened the pack and let the young children look inside. "Are you hungry? You should eat to keep up your strength. Like me, see." He took a bite out of a dried apple.

The children stared at him blankly. Pierre guessed that they had to be between the ages of six and four.

"This isn't going to work is it?" He said, putting the apple back in the pack. He sat down with a sigh.

"My father was killed by the Germans too", he stated. Then, after he saw he had gotten the boy's attention he added, "And my mother."

The little girl stopped crying too, looking with a tearstained face at Pierre. He gave her a small smile. Her large brown, red-rimmed eyes stared back at him. For a while they all sat there not speaking.

"My name is Pierre. My brother is Francois. We will look after you."

At that moment they heard a noise. Pierre sprang to his feet, but relaxed when he saw it was his brother.

"They won't eat."

Francois didn't pay him any attention. "Pick up the girl, I'll take the boy," he said, tensely. Pierre did as he was told, not asking any questions. Francois slung the food pack across his shoulders and scooped up the little boy.

"Follow me!"

They ran off behind the house, then cut into the woods. Pierre slipped, but caught himself before he fell.

“Are there more Germans?”

The little girl on his back gave a fearful whimper.

“We’ll be alright,” Pierre panted encouragingly, sincerely hoping he was right. He didn’t know how long they ran, but when they at last stopped Pierre was drained of all energy.

“What happened?” He asked Francois.

His brother gasped for breath, leaning heavily against a dead tree. “I was collecting ammunition when I heard one of the fallen Nazi’s radio. Someone on the other side was yelling frantically. They wanted a response, and they weren’t going to get one.”

Pierre understood. “They would have sent soldiers to investigate”.

Francois nodded, picking the boy back up. “We have to keep moving. The farmer told me that northwest is in this direction,” he pointed to his left, “But we won’t be able to see if we’re going straight until night comes. Then the stars will tell us.”

Pierre breathed deeply as he followed Francois. Nothing felt real. It felt like one huge nightmare. And it wasn’t ending. He thought of life before the war. How happy his family had been. But when Hitler had invaded Poland, and war had broken out everything had changed dramatically. Pierre’s father had stood up in the way of his writings. So when France was attacked, the SS had dealt with him swiftly.

Tears welled up in Pierre’s eyes, but he was determined not to shed them. That was the last thing that the two children needed to see.

“Francois?”

“Yes”.

“What will we do if we can’t find shelter before night falls?”

His brother didn’t answer.

“Will we try to light a fire?”

“We couldn’t risk that.”

“Then what will we do?”

“We’ll find shelter, Pierre. Right now we need to be silent”.

Pierre stopped talking. He tried to focus on the situation, but found it hard to. Fear constantly gnawed at him. He had never been so afraid in all his life. If they were caught they would most likely be killed. Pierre’s country, which he loved deeply, was being ruled over by tyrants who killed without thought. He swallowed even though his mouth was bone dry.

Suddenly, without any warning, the young boy who Francois held, spoke in a small voice.

“I’m hungry.”

Pierre smiled at Francois. “He wants to eat now.”

Setting the boy down Francois reached for the food pack. “Are you hungry too?” he asked the girl.

She nodded.

Francois set the pack on the frozen earth, letting the children choose their food. “You should eat too,” he said to his brother.

Pierre shrugged. He didn’t want to. But he forced himself to grab a few morsels. They tasted dry and flavorless. He choked them down. Francois did likewise, his face showing his discomfort. When they had finished eating they carried on. Hours later Pierre looked up at the sky. The day was quickly slipping away, and darkness would fall soon. No shelter had been found. Slowly, blackness was enveloping them as they continued their trek. Pierre found it very hard to see anything. Unlike the last night, there was no moon.

“That’s good though,” Pierre thought to himself. It would be less likely for anybody to spot them.

The temperature quickly and suddenly fell as the sun vanished completely. The little girl on Pierre’s back started to shake. Her teeth chattered so loudly that Francois turned his head.

“Here,” he slipped off his coat and draped it over Pierre’s small charge. “We’ll find a place to rest soon.”

Pierre nodded, he too was feeling the bitter effects of the snow and wind. They walked on for a long while, only pausing once for a brief respite. They were all completely numbed from the cold now. Francois looked anxiously around, trying to find some form of shelter. Pierre fell to his knees, unable to go another step. Francois made a swift decision.

“Pierre, take the children and stay by this tree. Here’s the pistol. I’m going to find someplace for us to rest.” He looked his brother in the eye, “If anything happens to me, I want you to leave this area as fast as you can.”

Pierre painfully rose to his feet, “We’ll come with you.”

Francois shook his head, “You’re in no state to go on. And I can run faster,” he added with a grin.

“Stay silent and still. I’ll be back soon”. He promptly, disappeared in the darkness.

At first, Pierre sat with his back to the tree, the boy and girl on either side of him, wide awake. Fear kept him from falling asleep, for a time. But, as the minutes dragged on, he began to feel drowsy. He gripped the pistol tightly, shaking his head in his attempts to stay awake. It was a battle he would lose. Moments later he was dozing.

Something suddenly made him snap awake.

“Was that a noise?”

He heard it again, and it confirmed his fear. Somebody was coming in their direction. At first Pierre clung to the idea that the person was Francois. But his opinion rapidly changed when he realized that it was more than one person.

“Maybe Francois found help,” he thought.

He wasn’t sure if he trusted that idea. Pierre swiftly pulled the sleeping children behind the trunk of the tree. He joined them after brushing away the imprints that they had made in the snow. He aimed the gun in the direction of the footsteps, adrenaline pumping painfully through his body.

“Pierre!” A voice hissed.

It was Francois!

Weak with relief, Pierre came out from his hiding place.

“Where are the children?” His brother asked.

Pierre gestured behind the tree, glancing suspiciously at the man who was with Francois.

“Who’s this?” he asked, quietly.

Francois picked both the children up and carried them over to Pierre, taking the pistol back. “His name is Bertrand. He has a hay cart on a road not far from here.” He gave one of the children to the man, “Cherbourg is close. Bertrand has agreed to take us the rest of the way. We may need his help to enter the city.”

Pierre was untrusting. He didn’t like the way Bertrand looked. There was something in his eyes that looked out of place.

“I could be imagining it,” he decided, although he still watched the man closely.

With Francois in the rear and Bertrand leading them, they briskly walked through the trees. Soon, they came upon an empty stretch of ground. A road stood in the middle of the area, leading to the left, and back into the forest. Pierre quickly made out the hay cart as a dark mass which sat in the middle of the road.

“Everybody get inside,” Bertrand whispered, placing his sleeping burden on the mountain of hay which billowed in the rear of the cart.

Pierre climbed in the back and took Francois’s child from him, settling down next to both the children for warmth. He piled hay over them and himself, hoping it would keep them all warm. Bertrand snapped the reins lightly, and the horse began to move forward.

Pierre once again fell into a doze, the hay feeling comforting. His doze turned into a deep sleep.

He awoke to Francois shaking him. It was dark still.

“We’re almost to Cherbourg. Hide yourself and the children in the hay.”

Fear and excitement churned in Pierre’s stomach as he did as he was bid. After he had hidden the boy and girl, he buried himself also. He tried hard not to move, praying that they wouldn’t be found. Cherbourg was a large city. Nazis would be posted thickly over it.

The moment’s passed. Finally Francois called back to him. “We’re going to enter the city in another way. In a secret way. Bertrand is out past curfew, and can't be seen.”

Pierre’s suspicion of their guide was raised again.

“Why is he out past curfew?”

A large bump told him that they had left the road. Pierre steadied himself.

“How will we get in unseen?”

The next few moments passed in tense silence. Then, the cart stopped. The hay was taken off Pierre and the children. Francois helped his brother out of the cart, then took one of the sleeping children. Bertrand took the other. Francois nodded to the man, and he led them into a small grove of trees, then down a steep downgrade. They turned into a ravine. A large pipe opened before them. Bertrand pointed and nodded to Francois, who nodded back. Pierre swallowed nervously. A gutter was their entrance to Cherbourg.

Bertrand squeezed through the gap, barely fitting. Pierre followed him, and Francois went last. Darkness was all that could be seen. Using touch, they navigated through the gutter. A grate told Pierre that they were coming to the end of their travel. A grate blocked their exit from the tunnel. Bertrand quietly slid it aside. He leaned out of the small space, checking left and right. He signaled to Francois, telling him that it was clear. Then came the hard part. Bertrand swiftly laid his child out of the

gutter, and moved to the side. He slid smoothly out, looking as if he had done the action before. Pierre closed his eyes, summoning his courage. He opened them and looked out of the opening. Bertrand was crouching behind a hedge, waving for him to come. Pierre did. He copied Bertrand, sliding out on his front, then crawling on all fours to the hedge. Francois followed with no difficulty.

Once they were all hidden behind the hedge and the grate had been replaced, Bertrand pointed to what looked like some sort of tavern. That's where they were to run. Bertrand went first, reaching the building with no problems, where he hid in the shadows. Pierre was about to make his dash, when he heard something. Francois grabbed his collar and pulled him back behind the hedge. Boots sharply clicked against the cold stone street. Two Germans walked by, joking and laughing as they did, guns protruding from their dark forms. After a terror-filled moment, their footsteps slowly receded.

Francois took a chance, grabbing Pierre and hustling him across the roadway, while still hanging tight to the child. When they reached the tavern, Bertrand pulled them into his hiding place.

"You alright?" He whispered.

Francois nodded.

"We're almost there, follow me."

He led them through a narrow opening in the wall. They emerged in a small closet-like space with a small door in one of the walls. Bertrand knocked softly in a series of different patterns. The door swung open. Bertrand pushed all of them inside, and closed the door. Light blinded Pierre for a brief instant. They were in a small room, with a lamp which burned brightly. An old woman with short white hair stood in front of them.

(continued on page 26)



## KOI

Dargan Dodd

Digital photograph taken in Arlington, Texas

*Dargan Dodd is a native Texan. He is an amateur writer and photographer. Previous work has been featured on his mom's refrigerator and as lining to the birdcages at various PetSmart locations. [dargandodd@gmail.com](mailto:dargandodd@gmail.com)*

“What’s this!” she exclaimed, immediately administering to the young children.

“I found them outside the wall. The Germans were hunting them,” Bertrand said. The elderly woman set about preparing some food. Talking gently to the children who were just waking up. Bertrand led Francois and Pierre up some steps and to another small room. Two beds were all that were inside.

“You can stay here for the night.”

Pierre instantly climbed into one, the talking of Bertrand and Francois merging together.

“I trust him now,” he thought, thinking of their guide. After what they had just been through, Pierre would have trusted Bertrand with his life. “There are still people who do good. The Nazis haven’t taken that from us.”

It didn’t take long before weariness overtook him. Light from a small window shone into the room, waking Pierre. Francois was already downstairs. He rose quickly, the smell of food rousing his appetite. He walked down the stairs, and into the room where everyone was gathered. Bertrand was talking. Pierre accepted some food from the elderly lady and sat on the floor to listen, quickly disposing of his meal.

“He declined, saying it was too dangerous. So I went to see the fisherman.”

Francois interrupted, “And what did he say?”

Pierre looked from his brother, to Bertrand. The man grinned slightly.

“He has agreed to take you.”

Francois closed his eyes, leaning his head against the wall.

Pierre stood up in his excitement, “He’s agreed to take us to England!”

“Yes.”

Francois leaned forward, “When?”

“This afternoon. He’s taking another group across the channel in his fishing skiff. There wasn’t much room.”

Francois put his hand on Bertrand’s shoulder, “Thank you. Thank you very much!”

The man smiled, “You are very welcome. I will take you to him. I wish you safe passage!”

The sky was grey. A cold wind blew. Pierre lowered his head to the cold air, walking next to Francois, who held the two children. Occasionally as they went through the city streets, they would pass a German or two, either standing still, or marching along. But the brothers and the children had gone unnoticed.

Pierre felt sweat run down his face as they approached the exit to the city. Two German soldiers stood guard. Pierre's heart began to race. Bertrand, who was walking ahead of them, waved at the soldiers, a big smile on his face. He indicated that the brothers were to walk through. They did, and emerged unchallenged. Bertrand swiftly led them down a slope and to the wharf. Pierre was stunned. They had made it out so easily. He still wasn't sure how they were going to make it out into the channel, without being stopped by Germans. Bertrand had explained it, but he hadn't understood. They broke into a trot, as Bertrand, who was ahead of them, motioned for them to hurry.

He gestured to a rundown building that sat at the water's edge.

"That's it."

He turned to Francois, and shook his hand. He did the same to Pierre.

"You were both very brave. I am proud to have helped with your escape."

"Thank you, friend," Francois replied.

Bertrand smiled, turned, and walked away. After he had walked a short distance he turned back to them, "Tell the English, and the Americans, to hurry up and get to France!" He waved as he walked away.

The brothers approached the building, opened the door and walked in, as they had been instructed to do. As had been promised, a back door stood wide open. They walked through, finding a skiff rolling with the tide behind the building. People were already on board, waiting tensely. They were mostly women and children, with a few older men thrown in the mix. Pierre noticed one particularly old man who sat at the stern.

"The fisherman," he thought.

Francois led Pierre aboard. He set the boy and girl down and held their hands. The people moved to make room, constantly glancing around nervously. Moments passed. They were waiting for the signal. Suddenly a faint boom was heard. A jet of water streamed upward roughly half a mile away. Bertrand had said this would happen. It was a distraction. A diversion he had called it.

The skiff moved forward. Pierre felt an exhilarating feeling. They had made it! They were leaving France behind them. A slight twinge of regret

came into his chest. But he knew that soon, the Allies would come. And when they did, even Hitler himself could not stand in their way. Pierre sincerely believed that.

France would be reclaimed. And then, he and his brother would return to live here.

Pierre smiled. He couldn't wait for that moment to come.

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*“When one door of happiness closes,  
another opens; but often we look so long  
at the closed door that we do not see the  
one which has been opened for us.”*

—Helen Keller

## The End of Longing

Irene Latham - 2013 Hackney Literary Award – 2nd Place, State Poetry

I am done remembering the mooring rope's dull splash,  
done hearing your humming. No more

trailing my fingers in that current, never again  
will I bask, warm-skinned, and golden as sand.

I'm done with hunting mussels, their repeating ridges  
and hollow chambers echoing the swells that separate us—

a foghorn pulsing the same relentless note.  
My love, I am done calling you to savor the salted sky.

When I paddle now, I will ride an untroubled tide;  
when I stop, it will be to adjust my hold.

The night may promise safe passage by starlight,  
but I will not navigate again without a compass.

Syllable by syllable, I am forgetting your name.  
I'm shedding barnacles, swallowing my slippery heart.

Any progress now will be your doing. I'm pushing  
away from the dock, oars easy in my calloused hands.

*Irene Latham is the author of two novels for children and three volumes of poetry for adults, including *The Sky Between Us* (Blue Rooster Press, 2014). Her first collection of poems for children *Dear Wandering Wildebeest: And Other Poems from the Water Hole* will be released by Millbrook Press/Lerner in September, 2014. [Irene@irenelatham.com](mailto:Irene@irenelatham.com)*

## THE CATERPILLAR TREE

James Waller - 2013 Hackney Literary Award – 2<sup>nd</sup> Place, State Story

Jeffrey Renberg was living the adventure of a lifetime. Young, healthy, intelligent, and perpetually optimistic, he had his whole life in front of him, and he knew it.

He was beginning his second week teaching English at a small school in central Thailand – the Wat Nong Suan School next to a Buddhist pagoda of the same name. The American NGO that hired him had provided him a full week of orientation and training in Denver and then sent him to Thailand’s ancient capital, Si Ayutthaya, for fourteen weeks of intensive language training – an appropriately favorable beginning for a recent international relations graduate from Chapel Hill. With his housing paid and a twelve hundred dollar a month stipend, he would learn how to survive a foreign country and culture, become fluent in a second language, accumulate valuable international work experience, and save a little money before going back to find “a real job.”

He taught six classes of fifty students per day, their ages ranging from six to twelve years old. He loved the dark blue pants and spotless white shirts of the boys and the dark blue skirts and spotless white blouses of the girls, he loved the bright smiles and enthusiastic faces, and he loved how the all the classes would begin in a semblance of order and then gradually degenerate into a cacophony of chaos as the 45-minute sessions drew to a close. To the students, he was some fabulous specimen of exotica, commanding respect and awe by his very foreignness, no less marvelous than if he had come from the moon rather than from any earthly realm. He was the favorite of all the other teachers – every one of them female, none of them ever having had the chance to know a *ferang* before, and each of them vying with each other for his attentions.

He chatted cordially with the teachers before and after classes and joined a small group of them who took their lunches at the Pik Mai restaurant, the only restaurant within walking distance of the school. There he faced the most important decision of the day – green curry with eggplants or *Pad Thai* noodles with peanuts. Breakfast and dinner, he took from pushcarts or at various little restaurants in Wihan Daeng town, Saraburi Province, where he lived about three miles from the school on Road 3045. He took his bicycle to and from the school. His only

complaint was the oppressive heat. He could endure riding his bike in the morning, but at four in the afternoon, it was a miserable, steaming ride.

A tiny street stall situated along the road about half way between town and the school stood shuttered up in the morning, but in the afternoon, it sold sliced pineapple, water melon, rose apples, mangosteens, guava, rambuttans, and a spicy mixture made of slivers of green papayas, peanuts, raw green beans, cherry tomatoes, lime juice, tiny dried shrimps, palm sugar, and hot Thai bird's eye peppers, all pounded with a mortar and pestle into a slightly bruised concoction called *Som Tam*. Every afternoon that Jeff pedaled past the stall, he slowed down and said to himself, "I'm gonna have to try that stuff." So on this Monday afternoon, he pulled off to the side of the road, leaned his bike precariously on its kickstand, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and walked up to the wooden and rattan countertop.

As he approached, he was surprised to see on the other side of the counter an old man in a wheel chair sound asleep. He hesitated a moment; the old man was breathing heavily. Rather than depart quietly, Jeff decided to wake the old man up. "Hallooo!" he cried in a booming voice, and then with no decrease in volume, the Thai greeting "*Sawadee Krap!*"

The old man snorted and opened his eyes with a frightened expression on his face. At the same time, a woman appeared through a small door that opened from behind the stall. She rushed to the old man, saying in Thai, "It's alright, Father. Go back to sleep. I'm sorry the *ferang* disturbed you." Then she turned and bestowed a withering glare on Jeff.

Jeff was apologetic. "I'm so sorry!" he said. "I didn't see you in the back. I just wanted... I just wanted to get some of... this stuff," he explained pointing to the slivers of green papaya.

"You want some *Som Tam*?" she asked in perfect English.

"Yes, please."

She motioned for him to go sit on a tiny red plastic stool next to a round, white plastic table positioned off to the side under the shade of a yellow cotton tree. After a minute of preparation with mortar and pestle, the woman banged the dish down on the table in front of Jeff and abruptly turned away. Jeff, apparently, remained unforgiven.

With the first bite, Jeff experienced the unique sensation of igniting an intense, fiery blaze in his mouth, scarcely mollified by the dash of sugar and lime juice, as if he had just placed a burning ember there. His eyes opened wide, he started up in his chair, and he pursed his lips roundly,

inhaling with short, loud whistling sounds in a desperate attempt to cool his tongue. The woman smiled to herself in satisfaction – revenge.

Jeff heard a chuckle emanate from the old man who sat watching him closely. The next thing he knew, the old man had wheeled himself over to the table and brought with him an ice cold bottle of mineral water and a glass. “Here,” he said in English as he poured the water into the glass for Jeff. “This will help.”

This was the commencement of a warm friendship between Jeff and the old man, whose name was Niran. Niran asked about Jeff’s work, how he was getting along in Thailand, about his family back home, and of course, whether he liked Thai food. “This stuff, this *Som Tam*, is my favorite so far,” Jeff lied, finishing off the bottle of water before he had downed his second bite of *Som Tam*.

Jeff learned that Niran had volunteered to fight alongside American troops during the Vietnam War. Afterwards, he studied physics on a military scholarship at Arkansas State University. He made many friends among the U.S. soldiers in Vietnam and among his classmates in Arkansas, he said, but had lost contact with them now for many years. He said that during the past week, he had noticed Jeff cycling past, and had correctly surmised that he was teaching at the little school down the road. He had wondered if Jeff was American or European. He had the facial features of a European, Niran said, but the easy, confident manner of an American.

As Jeff rose from his plastic stool to take his leave that first day, Niran asked him, “Would you like to see something unusual?” Always prepared for unexpected opportunities, Jeff assented and followed Niran, who wheeled his way toward a small tree, no more than 25 feet tall, a short distance further back from the road. As the old man and young man drew near, a strange feeling of movement emanated from the tree. The narrow trunk, small limbs and branches appeared to be churning somehow with subtle motion. On closer inspection, Jeff saw that the tree was covered with thousands of green and brown caterpillars, roiling, seething, writhing over one another. “They are amazing, aren’t they?” Niran said.

Jeff and Niran stood and watched for several minutes as the caterpillars wriggled and squirmed over every inch of the tree, a Thai crepe myrtle. Plenty of leaves remained on the tree, but at the rate the caterpillars were chomping, Jeff figured, all the leaves likely would be gone soon. “I’ve never seen anything like it!” he exclaimed.

“They have been here for about a week now,” said Niran. “There seems to be more of them every day.” Then he turned and wheeled himself back toward his stall. Jeff caught up with him and attempted to help push him over the hard, uneven ground. “No, no!” laughed Niran. “No need for that! Let it alone. This is the only exercise I get.”

Jeff paid forty baht to the woman for the *Som Tam*. He noticed that she was four or five years older than himself with attractive, but hard features. She took the money without looking at him or saying a word, evidently still holding a grudge.

“Come again tomorrow!” called Niran as Jeff waved and pedaled off towards town.

Jeff stopped by the stall every day for the next two weeks on his way home from school. Although he avoided the *Som Tam*, he discovered that he liked the spicy sweet flavor of pineapple slices dipped into a mixture of granulated sugar and crushed red chili peppers. But he stopped at the little stall less for its delectables than for the inevitably pleasurable conversations he held with Niran. Jeff had not yet formed any friendships in town where he lived, and his interactions with the other teachers at school, while agreeable in all respects, left him somewhat dissatisfied. With Niran, he had found somebody who had lived in the United States and spoke English fluently, had a long life of worldly experience, and maintained a sense of humor. Niran also had a tendency to wax philosophically with a sprinkling of quantum mechanics and cosmology that Jeff found immensely stimulating.

During one of their conversations, Niran pressed Jeff to tell him more about his family at home. Jeff told him that he had an elder brother who had married about a year ago and an elderly father. His parents had divorced when Jeff was just ten years old. The court had awarded custody of both children to his father, and his mother remarried ten months later. In the years that followed, Jeff saw and heard from his mother less and less. His father was diabetic, and in relatively poor health. In fact, worried about his father’s health, Jeff had hesitated in his decision to come to Thailand, but his father had encouraged him, so here he was.

Niran listened attentively. With only the subtlest of promptings, he encouraged Jeff to reveal feelings that he had never spoken of to anyone before – his resentment towards his mother, his deep love for his father, and his anxiety at being so far away. Jeff, always ebullient and gregarious, felt a deep connection to Niran. Niran, who had always been attracted to the straightforwardness of Americans, felt a special attachment to Jeff. He

told Jeff things that no Thai would ever talk about to a stranger. He told him how he had been forced out of the military by a colonel who had taken a disliking to him. He told him how his only daughter had been left widowed and childless after five years of marriage. He was worried about her, he said as he motioned in her direction, because after her husband died, she had become unsociable and now had no friends at all. He worried that she would be alone and friendless in years to come.

“I feel that there is something, some force, that has brought us together,” said Niran to Jeff on their second Friday afternoon together. “Who would have thought that a young man from North Carolina and an old man from Saraburi, Thailand, would have found each other as we have? You know, I believe there is an essence inside each of us that somehow knows, somehow draws certain people together. More than that, I believe there is interconnectivity among all things, and that it is this connection to everything that gives meaning to our existence. I’ve told you before that gravity is the key. When we learn more about gravity, we will understand the universe and ourselves better. It is much more than the attraction of objects of mass that can be reduced to a mathematical equation. It is the expression of our interconnectedness. Yes, gravity is the key.”

Jeff smiled at Niran. Jeff knew nothing about physics, and the only thing he knew about gravity was that Sir Isaac Newton had seen it fall from a tree. Yet, he could appreciate Niran’s feeling of interconnectedness. Jeff had often felt his own connectivity to the people and the objects around him. He felt he could draw energy from his own surroundings. And the strength he drew from Niran was enormous.

It was the following night, a Saturday, when Jeff received the phone call from his brother. Their father was very ill in the hospital, and his chances of survival were small. Jeff needed to come home immediately.

On Sunday morning, Jeff called the principal of the school to obtain an indefinite leave of absence. He purchased airline tickets over the Internet and boarded a bus for Bangkok about eighty miles away. He never gave a thought to saying good-bye to his friend Niran.

Jeff saw his father in the hospital only once before he died. Helping his brother with the funeral arrangements, cleaning out the house, dealing with the insurance and the hospital bills, and preparing for the auction left him little time to grieve. At the end of three weeks, the business was taken care of. As there was nothing more for him to do at home, and as he was

already beginning to feel that this place, this little town where he had grown up, had nothing more to hold him to it and that his future lay elsewhere, he decided to go back to Thailand.

Jeff continued to feel downcast and disenchanting, however, even after his return to Thailand. His natural buoyancy had been tempered by his loss, his delight in the charms and wonders of the world had paled, and his confidence in life's ultimate bliss had been shaken. On his first day back at school, he accepted the condolences of his students and the other teachers with grace and patience, but while he knew their commiseration was heartfelt, he felt it was necessarily superficial. They didn't really know him. They couldn't really understand him. All day long he watched the clock, eager to take his bicycle to Niran's roadside stall. He was certain he would find solace in Niran's friendship and sympathy.

When he leaned his bicycle on its kickstand and approached the stall, the woman, Niran's daughter, gave him a dark look. Jeff didn't particularly like her. He had grown accustomed to her disagreeable manner and tended to ignore her. Not seeing Niran in the wheelchair at his usual place behind the counter, however, Jeff inquired of her.

"My father had a heart attack two weeks ago," she said. "He... He's dead."

Jeff was stunned. He managed to stutter a meager, "I'm sorry" to the woman. Then he reeled and walked away, not looking where he was going. When he returned to consciousness, he found himself standing next to the caterpillar tree. In his state of shock and dismay, it took several moments before he noticed the lack of movement, the utter stillness, about the tree. The caterpillars were gone. In their place, thousands of tiny, heavy, mud-colored chrysalides drooped from branches and twigs, suspended like hanging coffins. The lifelessness was too much for Jeff to bear. Regaining his sense of propriety, he walked back to the stall to offer more substantial condolences to Niran's daughter, but failing to find her, he mounted his bicycle and slowly pedaled home. His sorrow was immeasurable.

The following day, as he rode past the stall in the afternoon, Jeff looked over towards the counter with the intention of stopping if he saw the woman. She was there, and their eyes met for an instant, but she quickly averted her gaze and turned away. Saddened and somehow humbled and embittered, he resumed his speed and continued home.

Over the next few weeks, Jeff's life returned to a semblance of normalcy. Resuming his teaching duties, he discovered that he had a

natural knack for engaging children. He developed real friendships with a few of the other teachers, and he discarded his bicycle for a motor-scooter, which allowed him weekend visits to waterfalls and other scenic sights to the north and east of Wihan Daeng town. Despite his activities, however, he felt lonely and disconnected; an emptiness gnawed at him. It surprised him that he felt the loss of Niran, whom he had known such a short time, almost as keenly as he felt the loss of his father. He occasionally cast glances in the direction of Niran's roadside stall as he drove past, but he never felt the urge to stop.

One Monday morning, as he approached the stall on his way to school, something attracted his attention. It was the caterpillar tree. He drove his motor-scooter right up to the tree and dismounted. There, hovering above him, thousands upon thousands of cream, butter, and egg yolk-colored butterflies fluttered and floated about the tree, weightless, effortless, saturating the air with their sheer numbers and their beauty. Tears streamed down Jeff's face as he watched, enthralled and exhilarated. He felt his own being shed its heavy robe of grief, forsake the ground, and take to the sky.

After some moments, Jeff became aware of another presence standing next to him. It was the woman, Niran's daughter. "They are beautiful, aren't they?" she said to him. "They came out this weekend."

Jeff turned and looked at her. He had never really looked at her before, never seen the slight twist to her mouth that spoke of hopes long abandoned and dreams long forgotten, never seen the creases in her forehead that bespoke her cares and troubles, never seen the soft, brown eyes, never seen the timorous quiver of her chin.

"I... I thought you might stop by here this morning... when you saw them, I mean. I... I made you some coffee. Would you like to sit down?"

.....

*James Waller has been a diplomat with the U.S. Department of State for more than 20 years, serving most of his career at American embassies in Asian countries. He published Fau: Portrait of an Ethiopian Famine, a non-fiction account of the 1984-85 famine. He is married and has two sons.*

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## THE MEANEST MAN IN PICKENS COUNTY

Stephen Coleman – 2013 Hackney Literary Award – 1<sup>st</sup> Place, State Story

In the winter of 1971 the Super Bowl was too exciting to miss. Torn between either remaining glued to the TV or, more sensibly, driving down the winding Highway 276 past Caesar's Head to Greenville, South Carolina before the roads froze over, I elected to stay at my friends' remote North Carolina mountain home until the Baltimore Colts beat the Dallas Cowboys with a field goal in the last five seconds of the game. I had heard the weather forecast – rain and temperatures falling to 8 degrees – but I expected I could get on down the mountain safely before it got too cold.

“Are you still here?” Jane asked with surprise when she came into the living room. “Haven't you heard about the weather?”

Sumner, who was still engrossed in the post-game wrap-up, overheard his wife's admonitions and peered outside.

“Yes, you'd better stay for the night,” he advised.

“I have to teach in the morning,” I replied. “Don't worry, I'll make it down the mountain pretty quick to where it's warmer.”

With Jane shaking her head, I grinned, zipping up my lightweight windbreaker, saying a quick thanks and goodbye. But, man, was it cold and rainy outside. I ran to my yellow '66 Mustang, started up and headed down the long driveway into the darkness of deep woods. At the highway, I turned left and headed off, windshield wipers working hard. By the time I crossed the border into South Carolina, passed the entrance to Caesar's Head and started down the steep grade, I realized I had not made the best decision. The park there was closed; the few nearby cabins were vacant in the winter, and I would pass no more houses until the bottom of the mountain, about 2500 feet down and more than a few miles away.

Within another mile or so, I was sliding around the S-curves, sensing that the rain was freezing on the pavement. I slowed to about 15 to go around the next bend, found the wheel turning free in my hand and the little car totally out of control. Ten seconds later, I was off the road to the right with wheels spinning. When I turned off the ignition, the wipers stopped and began to freeze inside a solid sheet of ice across the windshield. I looked at my watch in the gloom and realized how late it was. There had not been a single car going or coming, and I knew there would not be any before morning. There were no cell phones then. Only an idiot would have been out on the treacherous road, driving down a

steep mountainside at this time of night. I sat there in total darkness, beginning to shiver.

Just as I was considering my survival options, I heard a vehicle coming. I jumped out of the car and nearly slid down, waving frantically at the headlights coming down the mountain. It was an old army-surplus jeep with a canvas top. It stopped and the door opened.

“You’ns all rite?” someone called.

I slipped and slid, walking over to them. In the ambient light I could see two men in the front.

“My car’s run off the road,” I explained. “Too icy I guess.”

“We done got chains on,” the driver said. “We’s out joy ridin’.”

“Where was you a’goin’?” the other man asked. He was dressed in camouflage fatigues.

“Greenville,” I replied.

“We’re a’ headed to Pickens,” the driver said.

“Well, let me go with you,” I pleaded. “I don’t think I can make it here in the car all night.”

“Reckon not,” the man in the right front ‘shotgun’ seat, said and moved over to the middle, straddling the gear shift.

“Git in.”

“I could climb in back,” I offered.

“Kids back ‘ere,” Driver said, shaking his head. “Joy ridin’.”

I climbed in, pulled the canvas door to and latched it. Driver (no names exchanged) put the jeep in gear with a grind and headed on slowly down the steeply descending, icy road. In answer to their questions, I had to explain who I was and what I was doing up on the mountain. But then when a clinking sound started on the windshield, the driver interrupted me.

“I do believe that’s sleet,” he said. He glanced at me. “Open the door ‘n stick yer hand out there ‘n see if ‘at ain’t sleet.”

I did as I was instructed, feeling the patter of ice crystals on my bare hand. I pulled it back in and shut the door.

“Look a’ there,” Driver said. “His hand’s just as dry as it could be. I told ye that ‘as sleet. Open the door and stick yer hand back out there again.” So I did, and they both commented on how it proved it was “a sleetin’.”

In a few minutes we got on another subject.

“Look here,” Driver said. “I don’t like drivin’ with them chains on. It ain’t good for my tarrs. We got to stop down here and yank off them chains.”

“Nah, don’t do it,” Camouflage man said. “We’ll run off the road and git kilt.”

And so we went on, half driving, half sliding down the mountain. The driver getting me to stick my hand out once or twice more, and at least three more discussions about the chains on the tires. All the while the boys in the back had been silent.

“You young’uns stay awake back ‘ere,” Driver commanded over his shoulder. “Don’t want no carbon-bnoxide poison in you-uns.” He shook his head. “Joy ridin’.”

When the road leveled out some, we took the right fork onto Highway 8, headed toward Pumpkintown. By the time we drove the twenty or so miles into Pickens, the sleet had turned to snow, which blanketed everything. Telling me that I’d have to spend the night there because there would be no way to get to Greenville, they took me to a white Victorian-styled house on a side street with a sign that read “Colonial Inn.” They both got out with me and walked up on the porch. Two little, old gray-haired ladies, both dressed in black (I swear), came out to greet us.

“Now look a’ here, ladies,” Driver said, “this feller done run his car off the road up ‘ere at Caesar’s Head; he ain’t got no place to stay, and ain’t eat, nor nuthin’, and I want you-ns to take real good care of him.”

And for a modest charge they did, too, except something about their home and their black dresses reminded me an awful lot of “Arsenic and Old Lace.”

Before bed, I did use their phone to call my roommate in Greenville to report that I was okay, and to please make my apologies for not being at school in the morning. I awoke early to find that, although the snow had stopped, it had left a thick blanket over the roads and everything. At breakfast, I met two other men in their early forties who lived at the inn on a permanent basis, and neither seemed to be the slightest bit concerned about going to work anywhere. They wanted to know all about me. I explained that I was a teacher at a private school in Greenville, and one of them asked me what grade. When I said I mainly taught tenth grade, the man shook his head.

“That’as the hardest grade I ever went thru in my life,” he said.

Then they wanted to know what I was going to do, and I said I needed to get to Greenville as soon as I could, and they asked me about my car. I said I guessed I'd have to leave it where it was for a while.

"Nah, don't do that," they said. "They'll come along and strip off the tarrs and everthin'!"

I shrugged and admitted I didn't know what else to do.

"We ain't got no car no nuthin'," they said, "but we know a feller'll run you up 'ere right reasonable." So with that, they walked with me down the street to a wooden shack kind of building that had a sign on it, "Police Station & Taxi Stand."

When we entered, I saw a desk with a sign on it 'Dispatcher,' and seated there was a woman that weighed about 300 pounds and her eyes were crossed about as far over as they could be.

"Where's Stewart?" my friends asked her.

Without a reply, the woman grabbed up a desk-styled microphone with a meaty fist and yelled into it with great authority.

"Hey, Stupid, whar ye at?"

"I'm up here on Main Street," came the reply.

"Well, git in here, 'cause I got a fare for ye."

While we waited, I noticed an old man standing beside the big, pot-bellied stove that heated the place. He was about the dirtiest looking old man I've ever seen. His cap was streaked with stains; his coat was threadbare, and his coveralls were so rumpled and soiled that they looked like they could walk off without him being in them. And his glasses were so dirty he barely could see through them.

He looked at me and said, "Who the hell are you?"

"He's a school teacher, Carl," my friend from the Inn said.

"And where you teach at?"

"Christ Church School in Greenville," I replied.

"What denomination?" the old man demanded.

"Episcopal," I answered.

"Hah," he said with disdain. "I'm a Seventh Day Adventist myself." A little taken aback, I soon realized that he was putting me on a little bit, so I said,

"Some people call us Whiskey-palians."

"Hah," he snorted. "Wait'll I tell you how I got to be a Seventh Day Adventist." And with that he launched into this tale. "I'm a bootlegger – everybody round here knows that. Well, I was out in the woods a runnin'

my still, and them two hunters come along with their dogs. They said they was a' hungry, and so I got out this old ham I had, and they said they was 'Seventh Day Adventists, and didn't want to eat no ham.' But they give me these squirrels they'd shot, and I took 'em down to the stream and skinned 'em and washed 'em. And when I come back, them dogs was gone, them hunters was gone, and so was all the likker I had run off that mornin'. Well sir, I figured if that was the way a Seventh Day Adventist was gonna do his tradin', I was gon' be one, too – been one ever since.”

About that time, Stupid Stewart shows up in the cab. It turns out that the old man – Carl Washburn's his full name – wants to go to Greenville, and I want to go up the mountain to get my car. Stupid Stewart studies the situation and decides we'll both go, and he'll take me up to Caesar's Head first and then go on to Greenville with Carl afterwards. So Carl Washburn gets in the front seat; I climb in back, and we start off down the road – except that Stupid Stewart has to stop by his house first to take his medicine “on account that he got out of the hospital only just last week.”

“Bring me an Alkie-Seltzer, Stewart,” the old man called after him.

While the two of us “fares” were sitting in Stewart's driveway waiting for him to come back, I regard the old man and decide to see if I can help.

“I don't want to beat this cab driver out of making his money, or anything,” I said. “But when we get to my car, I'm going to Greenville and will be happy to give you a ride.”

The old man took off his glasses, spit on them and rubbed a couple of little mud balls, cleaning them. “Son,” he said. “You don't want to have anythin' to do with me. You don't know who I am. Fact of the matter is, I'm the meanest man in Pickens County, and I deal with the meanest, orneriest, trashiest people there are in this world, and you don't want to go to Greenville with me and do what I a' gonna do when I get thar.”

Well, I sat there in silent and perfect agreement. About that time, Stupid Stewart came walking gingerly down the snowy driveway carrying a glass of bubbling stuff.

“I ain't got no reg'lar Alky-Seltzer, Carl,” he apologized as he climbed in behind the wheel. “All I got's this new improved Alky-Seltzer what's got the lemon flavor in it.” The old man shrugged, grabbed the glass and turned it up.

(continued on page 43)



### **THREE DAISIES**

Derek McCrea

11" x 15"

Watercolor on Paper

*Derek McCrea first started painting with oils in the summer of 1984. From 1985 to 1986 he painted under the instruction of Jimmy Peterson. Derek joined the US Army in 1987 and continued self-study in Europe. Through self-discovery he has developed a very unique impressionistic style. More of his work can be seen at [www.derekmccrea.50megs.com](http://www.derekmccrea.50megs.com)*

“Let them tablets dissolve first, Carl,” Stewart advised. But Washburn just gulped it all down, burped, and threw the glass on the floor. The taxi driver started up and pulled out on the road, speeding off, going far too fast for conditions.

“Stu-rrrt,” the old man said. “If you run this car off the road and git me kilt, I ain’t never gonna speak to you again the rest of my life.”

Stupid Stewart slowed to a more reasonable pace, and we rode on.

“Say, Carl,” Stewart said. “What’s that I heard ‘bout them fellers in yer house the other nite?”

Carl Washburn shifted in his seat. “Well sir,” he said. “I got home kinda late the other nite, and I was shakin’ off my clothes, when I heard this rustlin’ under my bed. Well, I got out my horses.”

He glanced at me. “Them’s my Colt .44’s.”

And I yelled, “Come out from under there!”

Well sir, these two fellers come a’crawlin’ out, and I cocked them horses. And one of ‘em says, ye ain’t gonna shoot us, ‘ere ye?”

“Well, what’dya do, Carl?” Stupid Stewart asked.

Carl smiled. “Well, sir, I reckon you got to be nice to some folks, ‘cause that’s the only-est way to git along in this world.” He arched an eyebrow. “But I told ‘em not to never come round there agin.”

The snow was beginning to melt off the asphalt by the time we rode through Pumpkintown, and Stewart drove a little faster. Carl Washburn kept up the conversation by going on about how hard his life had been, how he hadn’t accumulated much and so on – ‘po mouth talk’, he guessed. He was looking at me while he reached inside his coat. I was sure then that he was going to pull out one of ‘them horses.’ But instead, he pulled out the biggest, thickest wallet I’d ever seen, opened it up and thumbed through the bills before my eyes. I saw twenties and fifties – probably \$1000 or so in there.

“Why don’t you put that in the bank?” I suggested. He exchanged glances with Stewart and then looked at me like I’d never learn.

“Listen, son,” he said. “I don’t truck with no banks.” We began climbing the mountain about that time and soon arrived at my car, which thankfully had not been stolen or stripped or shoved over the cliff. Both of them got out and helped me push it safely back on the road. Stewart charged me only five dollars for that thirty mile trip, and I guessed that was why they called him “Stupid.” I thanked them both profusely.

“One word of advice,” Carl Washburn said, looking at me seriously. “Don’t always be takin’ up with strangers.”

I paused. Was I really looking at somebody so all that different?

“Somehow, I don’t really feel like you’re a stranger,” I offered. He gave me a severe look, but I caught a twinkle in his eye.

“Well, don’t tell nobody,” he said. Then we shook hands all around. I got in the Mustang and, when it started right up, I knew I had been, not just rescued, but saved somehow, by the meanest man and those others who lived in Pickens County. I waved and watched and wondered as the two men got back in the cab and headed on off to Greenville, ‘to do whatever it was they was a’ gonna do when they got thar.’

.....

*A resident of Birmingham, Stephen B. Coleman, Jr. earned a B.A. in history from Duke University and an M.A. in English from University of Alabama. He holds a Master’s license for sailing, has authored biographies and histories of local interest, magazine articles, novels and poetry. [sbcolemanjr@bellsouth.net](mailto:sbcolemanjr@bellsouth.net)*

*“The more uncertain people are, the more they defend their ideas.”*

—Susan Weinschenk

## CANDLEMAS

Sarah Simpson-Enock

you have grown mysterious  
brother  
now you hide  
i search the primrose gerbera fern  
stand alone beneath the bald and silent sun  
once your eyes danced with mine  
a hundred nights waltz tango rumba  
now there is only the breeze  
the first breath of spring  
stirring the muslin at the windows  
is this how friendship turns to love  
the distance grows a grecian whiteness  
highlights the details of what you are, what i am  
where once we merged in velvet darkness  
sympathies and kindnesses an indian ink  
upon a parchment i cannot find now upon my cluttered desk  
will you come to me, inscrutable unloquacious  
carrying our conversations in your pocket  
like so many cardamom seeds?  
will i recline upon embroidered linen, eating figs  
from your hand, staring at a vase of lilies, distractedly  
tapping one slippered foot against your leg?  
Will our eyes dance again, this time in full daylight  
to music that won't need to be heard.

.....

*Sarah Simpson-Enock is a writer living on the south east coast of England. Born in Columbus, MS and brought up in Reform, AL, she studied creative writing with the well-loved children's author, Charles Ghigna at the Alabama School of Fine Arts in Birmingham. Her book, Mummy, Mummy, What's in Your Tummy? is published by Francis Lincoln in London. [ssimpson.enock@gmail.com](mailto:ssimpson.enock@gmail.com)*

## THE BOY WHO LIKED SPINACH

Jim Reed

Spinach was the un-coolest thing I could imagine placing in my mouth, way back when I was a whippersnapper. Adults would tell me all sorts of things that made spinach even less attractive: “Eat your spinach – it’s **good** for you!”

**I don’t want to be good because I eat spinach. Aren’t there lots of other ways to be good?**

“Why, spinach will give you loads of iron to make you **big and strong.**”

**I don’t want to eat anything filled with chunks of iron. What if they rust? Besides, I’ll pass on being big and strong. Small and wiry and elusive sound more survivable to me.**

“You just **love** Popeye the Sailor man – and he eats **his** spinach!”

**What’s Popeye’s mailing address? I can send him my serving. Besides, Popeye is kind of creepy – it’s Olive Oyl I lust after.**

“Here, let me cook the spinach with slices of boiled egg—that’ll make it real good.”

**Great, now even boiled eggs taste like spinach.**

And so on.

My silent protests and unspoken wisecracks rose up whenever anybody tried to force an idea on me. Actually, I’m like that to this day. **Then, one day, when no-one was looking, I decided to actually try some spinach**—just to prove to myself that I really hated it. The empty can of Popeyebrand spinach lay hidden in the garbage pail. One serving was left on the platter at the family dining table, the table that I was in charge of clearing off (back then, kids actually had chores to perform). I grabbed a forkful of the mushy, over-cooked substance and stuffed my mouth. It tasted good! **Holy Smokes**, I thought. **What have I been missing!** From that day forth, I ate my spinach, but, in order to save face, and in order to smugly lord it over my younger siblings, I never explained how I had discovered that spinach was edible. I relished it while they sat staring at me as if I were a brown shoe floating in a punch bowl. Being a natural-born **contrarian** allows me to learn new stuff every day. Right now I’m eyeing that serving of **sushi** that’s on the menu. **Gulp.** Well, maybe, at least for today, I’ll skip the contrarian thing

.....

*Jim Reed is curator of the Museum of Fond Memories at Reed Books in Birmingham, Alabama. [www.jimreedbooks.com](http://www.jimreedbooks.com)*

## AGNOSTIC

Joan Kantor - 2013 Hackney Literary Award – 1<sup>st</sup> Place, National Poetry

As I pass  
by a patch  
of greyish-green plants

my eye catches  
the morning light  
reflecting  
from a leftover drop  
of dew

whose translucent tension  
lets the color  
show through

It's impossible  
how she holds together  
the quivering  
taut bulge  
of herself

doesn't drip  
or slide  
down a stem

but clings  
to the drooping  
curved edge  
of a leaf

tempting me  
with belief

.....

*Joan Kantor was born and raised in New York City. She currently lives on The Farmington River in Connecticut, and her work has been published in numerous journals. Her book SHADOW SOUNDS (Antrim House) was a finalist for The Foreword Book of the Year Award. She especially enjoys writing ekphrastic poetry.*

**[www.joankantorpoetry.com](http://www.joankantorpoetry.com)**

## MAKING FRIENDS WITH THE DAY

Noel Conneely

Sleep eludes, the more pursued.  
The wary sheep we lose track of.  
The town clock strikes the hour;  
we listen to the heart climb  
the heavy stairs into midnight.  
And then the funeral into light;  
we can't hear the wheels  
so we think we're not moving.  
And though the dark is on us  
we linger in the soft warmth.  
At the single peal of one  
we wait for another, afraid  
we might have missed one.  
The strong elastic of time  
ties up the bundle of night  
to stop it coming apart.  
The dawn's not always welcome;  
all this cold knowing.

.....

*Noel Conneely of Dublin, Ireland, has published poems in Poetry Ireland, Cimarron Review, Willow Review, Coe Review, Chelsea, Yellow Medicine Review and other publications in Ireland and the United States.*  
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*“The difference between stupidity and genius is that genius has its limits.”*

—Albert Einstein



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