

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 11 Issue 3



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Front Cover: **MARIAH**, 3rd Place, 2014 Electra Award, 29" x 23"
Pastel on Pastel Board. *Andrew Tyson is a self-taught artist and photographer who has recently begun exploring stained glass as yet another form of self-expression. He has been published in Birmingham Arts Journal and has won awards in the Mountain Brook Art Association and Birmingham Art Association juried shows. tysona@bellsouth.net*

Back Cover: **PLEASE KNOCK**, Digital Photograph
Christopher Woods is a writer, teacher and photographer who lives in Texas. He has published a novel, THE DREAM PATCH, a prose collection, UNDER A RIVERBED SKY, and a book of stage monologues for actors, HEART SPEAK. His photographs can be seen in his gallery - christopherwoods.zenfolio.com

SPRING, MISS NELSON'S CLASS

Scott Latta – 1st Place 2014 Electra Award - Prose

Consider the things that have to happen for a tornado to form. A tornado starts miles above us. In the atmosphere, a vortex of air called a mesocyclone rotates around a supercell thunderstorm way up out of reach, until increasing rainfall from the storm begins to drag the air down to our level. This cool atmospheric air hits the warm air of the storm and begins to rotate. That's your wall cloud. By this point the mesocyclone has shrunk from miles wide to a few hundred yards wide, and that newfound focus allows it to siphon air from a smaller and smaller target on the ground. Low atmospheric pressure pulls it down until dirt and trash and cows get sucked up and there you have it.

But what of a mesocyclone? A mesocyclone needs a rotating updraft from a supercell. And a supercell can't give it without just the right change in wind direction and wind speed. That wind may start hundreds of miles away, over the ocean even, rustling curtains and teasing veils until it hits the right cell. Squirrel finding a nut, etc. You see how this can carry on. The point is that in 1997 there were too many fourth graders at Valley Elementary and so our class, Miss Nelson's class, was put in a trailer one hundred yards from the building, and then the storms came.

About sixty people on average are killed every year by tornadoes, or roughly the same number of people who are electrocuted by their own appliances. But that's junky math. Three years ago tornadoes killed five hundred and seventy-seven people, about the same number of people who were killed by elephants. That's the chance game of the tornado. One year a stomping elephant, the next a sparky toaster. And that's the trouble: we never know how long the odds are, just that they always catch up with a certain number of us. 1997 was a bad year for tornadoes in Alabama. Not because they came--that was '98, '04, '11--but because they bluffed. A tornado's bluff is as bad as its roar when you're ten, and that year there were three.

Fourth grade was our last without pressure. Fifth meant rotating classes, testing out of math, touring the middle school and enduring preparations. Fourth grade was all book fairs and Grandparents Day, chicken fingers and clay, the gift of believing you can squeeze all you need to know of the world into the little room you're sitting in--even if that room is a 16-by-48,

American-made, aluminum-lined single-wide placed in a cluster of three in the back of a parking lot behind the school. It held everything we needed. One day we watched a video of Miss Nelson winning a waterbed on *The Price is Right*.

Storm mornings started warm. A tornado starts miles away on a storm morning. It starts as a blue-black cloud edging over Chandalar Hill, as an extra ounce of hug from your mother. A warm wind through the bus window. A flittering glance of teachers whispering; half a sandwich you don't want. On storm mornings Miss Nelson loved us through distraction, scattering worksheets that allowed her to fiddle with the radio behind her desk and cut furrowed glances to the trailer intercom. She would loiter with us in the building after lunch, twiddling around the library and the art wing before inching us toward the exit at the far end of the hall. We could hear the weatherman on TV in the teacher's lounge. You learn your counties on a storm morning, or wish you had. When she could stall no more Miss Nelson would push open the heavy door--were we under warning? just counties west, nothing yet--and lead us back outside, her bobbed hair blowing, to mark the time together.

We're reminded to listen for three bells, for the sign it's on us. But we see the warnings first. While we're nose down to scribble away an assignment, the trailer falls into shadow. Outside the trees are black. We are watching without a word. The room goes ambient, yellow then purple then gray, until it's dark. Still. A long roll of thunder.

We're listening for the cue. Rain starts in staccato pops on the aluminum roof, louder, louder, incessant, sheets of water that slap us sideways, wave beyond wave. A streak of lightning flashes the windows and a blast rocks the room. One of us cries out. Three bells sound from the school building. Miss Nelson rises and walks to the door, flinging it open in one motion. Her sleeve is soaked. She flicks her wrist toward the building, back and forth. The county warning sirens fire, rising from a low hum to an air raid scream. You can hear the different sirens wailing around the city, from Crosscreek to Chadwick, sentinels at our outposts. One is on a pole not twenty yards away, shrieking out over whatever it is Miss Nelson is telling us. Inside the school children are grabbing heavy books and slogging to the hall, giggling and prodding their way to shelter. We are inconsolable, crying, filing into chaos like wobbly paratroopers. Miss Nelson's mouth moves as she meets our faces, an offering of comfort perhaps as she lays a hand on each of our

backs. I can't hear it until I'm right beneath her. Lightning plays off the scattering bodies on the blacktop, and I feel her hand brush my shoulders. She's only been repeating one word. *Run. Run.*

So much ground to cover in a hundred yards. So much to outrun. When we are young we believe there are safe places to shield us from the world when we are older we know this is a myth, that all places get violated. As we age we watch them go, one by one. Our parents split up, a coyote takes the cat, the girl at school in the bicycle helmet drowns in her grandmother's car at the bottom of a lake. They leave us in an instant, and are gone forever, and after we lose them we can only imagine what it was like before we knew they could go. You can tuck your way to the hall and nestle beneath your science book, but a certain number of people have been caught by the odds. They're coming through the door in soaked clothes, eyes watery, having had something taken from them everyone else can still possess. It will happen twice more that spring, then to all of us in the years ahead, our safe places breached by a doctor's pursed lips, by the crash of windshield glass, by a suitcase on the bed, by the words *We need to talk*, and off our brains will go to find a peaceful moment before it all changed, and the only one we can land on is an afternoon back in Miss Nelson's trailer, when she cuts the air conditioner on. She doesn't know the janitor has been by to clean it. As she turns the knob air rushes through the vents, catching the last traces of soap, and thousands of bubbles begin to pour out, over our laughter, over our heads, as she covers her mouth in wonder.

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Scott Latta is a writer in the MFA program for creative nonfiction at Oregon State University. His work has been featured in Oregon Quarterly and he was named to the shortlist for the 2014 Master's Review anthology of the top graduate-level writing in America. A native of Alabama, he lives in Corvallis, OR, with his wife, Jessica. swlatta@gmail.com



BLAZE YOUR OWN TRAIL

Max Panter – 1st Place 2014 Electra Award for Art
48” x 36”
Acrylic on Canvas

Max Panter was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and raised in Homewood. After graduating from Homewood High School, he attended Jacksonville State University, earning a BA in music education. He has been creating and selling his paintings since 2009, continues to master his craft, and is currently employed at Nabeel's Cafe and Market. maxpanter7@gmail.com

GUARD THE NIGHT

Stephanie Thomas Berry

It is bear season and the hounds
stalk the dark smell of bear,
plundering the fertile night.
The forest is muddled with fear
and even my dreams are ripples of sleep
scattered by the shouting dogs.

My son said they killed a bear this morning
just across the river -- three shots
a bear with blue eyes he said
and I could see it then, the bear
strung up, belly slit open
red organs spilling from the black-cloaked body
its sapphire eye glazed open
and staring
straight into mine.

There is no respite from the hounds
and the lust that unleashes them.
We will hunt everything down:
if it is rare, or precious
if its eyes burn with a fire we cannot claim--
We will comb the night for her jewels
We will scour the dark for her beauty
just to hold some mystery in our hands.

.....

*Stephanie Thomas Berry is a pastel painter and writer focused upon the healing image. Her work celebrates the spirits of plants, trees, landscape, and dreams in ways that cultivate vibrancy and wonder. She is an award-winning poet and operates her studio gallery and tea room in Burnsville, North Carolina, at the foot of the mighty Black Mountains. You can find her work at **themagicofhands.com***

KITH & KINDER (AFTER AUDRE LORDE)

Sue Brannan Walker – 1st Place 2014 Electra Award - Poetry

Time creases the lips of crones;
years collapse in memory's hull,
crumble into distance, then
disappear like ice melting in the brain-pan.
My ears are dulled with the dross of years
and the sludge of relativity
in fields of blear--
tachycardia's racing ta dum, ta dum, ta dum
sounds the heart has made.

Lord, this rebel organ once was strong,
pumped: a lay, aired, sung, my face
flushed and oval as a bedeviled egg,
leftover, rotting:
a deathly condemnation,
blood in the yolk.

The scent of remembered musk lingers,
lust my dear, deer-heart of us, ever hunting.
I dream the scent of a baby's skin,
but the long hand and the short
of the clock is broken. I am
the rut of October, the past tense,
the whereas of survival
against commination,

of blood, of kith and kin.
I'd never known the names,
Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley,
Carole Robertson, Denise McNair,
had never heard the explosion
at the 16th Street Baptist Church--
four little girls bombed to bits in Birmingham,
the white supreme terrorism more fierce
than pit bulls taught to fight,
prejudice sharp in decaying teeth.

In my aging heart, dare I dream
chronometric precisions presaging peace?

.....

Sue Brannan Walker is the Stokes Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at the University of South Alabama. She was Poet Laureate of Alabama from 2003-2012. She has published seven books of poetry, creative nonfiction, fiction, and critical articles. Her latest book is: The Ecological Poetics of James Dickey.

“Never make someone a priority when all
you are to them is an option.”

—Maya Angelou

A FEW LAST WORDS

Anthony Vacca – 2nd Place 2014 Electra Award - Prose

Would you care to hear a first sentence?

You may think me a collector I have so many of them. Nabokov had his butterflies, Kafka his impressive array of smut, Ted and Sylvia their industrious cabinets of bees, Ayn Rand, that miserable midget, miser over her folios of stamps, and I horde these.

See how they lurk about my desk, my butcher's block, like the shrunken and indignant heads of too many slaughtered pygmies? I could shuffle up all these pages like a deck of cards and shovel the mess into a bag. And then shake. And then listen to the jingle of all those false-starting jangles as they clatter like eunuchs against one another. But, no, to do so would be an affront! After all, these are my well-fingered trophies. My fetishes that I knot in strands about my hobbled neck. My own personal canon of literature: the genre of first, weary slurps beneath the stagnant surface of my own inability to complete. A chronology of all those repeated plunges I've made into that particular sludge.

Writing is a dog race in reverse (because every sentence is a low dog): see how the first sentence inked onto the page resembles, with its syntax as tightly corded as muscle, the momentum of a dog's bounding lope? Its period--that black nub of a tail--waggles into the panting snout of the second sentence before it. And even though neither will ever shift rank, only a breath measures the distance between the two, these last, losing contestants in that lengthy chase down the white laps of the page. Off to the finish line, where the last sentence is always named the winner. Off to an ending that the first sentence will never reach. Off to the backside of a novel snickering shut, that boastful sound pregnant with the bloat of its own accomplishment.

But then again every story is also a funeral dutifully attended and then departed from for pages elsewhere.

CONSIDER THIS: If you were to flutter through my window and magpie one of my many orphaned manuscripts and hold the pages in your beak up into the nervous light of some bathroom mirror, what would you hope to scry but a terrible caricature of my own befuddled cartoon face? ...does...does any of this make you feel? Does what I say stir a flutter? Does it fire up a longing? Some lonesome quake of sympathy for me mourning my miscarriages and begging forgiveness for the oh-so many abortions left

abandoned in crimped margins? Good God. Give me a pencil and some paper and I'll fashion me a rinky-dink toy trumpet--all the better, dearies, to blow my cheeks sore on...I flay my metaphors to tatters and still arrive nowhere...I keep stabled a precious pony named Alliteration, but have only ever taught her one trick...

But let no man (nor woman--after all, we are all equal after all this after all) say that I filch on every promise made. You're humoring me for a first sentence, so let me wind myself down to the task. Allow me now my swift dazzle of words for the privilege of your polite clap. That's the only price I ask before I perform my practiced exit of submerging into the stillness of my seat, as quiet and unloved as that piece of furniture no one considers a spoil even in the most bitter of divorces.

And so (invocations, like introductions, are shams) now me, my sentence:

In tune with the cough of conversation throughout the hall and the scrape of forks and knives atop the blank faces of china plates, Charlie Crane, who was plump and wearing a pinstripe suit of mourning, thumbed through his sweat-stained notecards, marveling at his own wit and at the stunning breadth of human insight that teemed from the depressions of each of his penciled words, as he awaited the last few mouthfuls of dinner to be swallowed and smacked over, so that, finally, then, he could deliver his promised send-off to the departed: his last few words for Barth Muntz.

Conceptually, this was meant to be the firing gun from which my story...no, let's call it a novella--from which my novella...from which my unfinished novella was never to be launched. Gamely entitled, "A Few Last Words for Barth Muntz," the story itself was meant to contain a light lathering of description throughout--to set the stage, mood, scene, lighting, whatever--while the majority of the text was to be dominated by a monologue delivered by our man Charlie Crane, who proceeds to give us all a rousing and long-winded and digressive and banal and self-absorbed rant (ho-hum, doesn't this all just stink of someone familiar?) guised as a heartfelt eulogy for his colleague and life-long friend, the dead man with the stupid name of Barth Muntz...but then again, Charlie Crane ain't such a hot choice either.

Oh, how I hate having to name all these stupid paper people.

My intent for this piece? My objective correlative? (As that prissy anglophile would have phrased it.) Its raison d'etre? (To cut a French phrase as a thick as a fart.) Well. Well, what? I suppose there were aspirations to

scratch away a little here and also a little there at the cheap varnish coating our collective notions of BIG IDEAS. And we (the reader and I) would carve, whittle, and weed our way to an understanding that our understanding in fact isn't worth understanding since in actuality it is only our understanding we can ever truly understand anyway...

Yes, yes, lucidity is no willing virtue of mine, but so what. All I want is to put my pretty, polished phrases on the page and watch with wonder where they may meet, so many diverging and crisscrossing currents that eventually fizzle and foam in the embrace of the sea.

And so, as swiftly as a slug leaves a trail of slime, I scrawled out 2,000 words before scrapping the entire project as a bust. (The rest of the work I used to sop up a toppled spill of beer cheese soup, but that first sentence--as of course you know by now--that I clutched to my chest.) I'm not sure what kind of resolution I had in store for the whole affair; what kind of a conclusion I'd eventually drive home with a nail to the ass of my diatribe dressed-up as artifice. Maybe Sorry Sack Charlie would blather through his speech only to awaken to a sudden world of carnage! A dinner hall of corpses! Everyone having either asphyxiated from boredom or murdered themselves through various acts of mutilation, most popular of which is the use of DINNER knives and DESSERTED forks to poke many lethal holes in eyes, throats, wrists, breasts, any part of the body that would produce the coveted result.

Who cares about endings anyway? Or for that matter first sentences? A first sentence for what? To forecast the weather? To sell real estate? Market trees?

A first sentence to show the nameless killer already painting his fingers red with his fresh victim's blood? A first sentence to lament the theft of a loved one? ("Pappy croaked today." "I never knew my mommy.") A first sentence to construct four walls, a ceiling and a floor, just add a dead body inside before putting a lock on the door?

A first sentence to praise God, praise Country, praise the Self, praise the Reader, wish belated happy birthdays, give season's greetings, extend an invitation, beg for money, first sentences stopping by just to show you they care?

A first sentence to play tag with the next. A first sentence for the sake of first sentences.

All of this only leads to nothing. I squint at the page before me and only see the mortician's makeup on a no longer-familiar corpse. What you read was not the first sentence of "A Few Last Words for Barth Muntz." Those were merely one hundred words I licked and thumbed together like a careless waste of stamps.

Come. Bend over and take a look at my 'ittle bitty bloated baby. Dead in its own useless cradle of my rhetoric, smothered with the puff of my own putrid sense of aesthetics, hacking up the breath of life my tired tries at talent forced down the slick of its tender throat...so many of my words snapping apart like the brittle catches of rotted latches fastening together nothing...my long line of blood-drenched bassinets...

All I write are these misworded massacres for the crows and then the worms.

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Anthony Vacca is a writer living in Birmingham, AL. He received his BA in English and Writing from the University of Montevallo. He is also a contributor to the newspaper Weld For Birmingham. anthony.j.vacca@gmail.com

“As in my other works of fiction: All persons living and dead are purely coincidental, and should not be construed. No names have been changed to protect the innocent. Angels protect the innocent as a matter of Heavenly routine.”

—Kurt Vonnegut

SLICKS

Alicia Clavell

for Nellie Ruth Lucy Warr (1936 – 2013)

Do you remember the time Beecher's mother marched over
to tell mamma we were selling nudie magazines?

How mamma looked that woman right up and down,
said, *Well! Your boys didn't have to buy them,*

and slammed the door in her face so fast that her peroxide
hair swooshed up on both sides--just like our Whoopsie doll.

After, we hid behind the bales for hours because we knew
she'd tan our hides from there till Sunday. I bet our stash

is still there by the shed, and some kid is flipping
through the weathered slicks of mature bodies--

pictures of the women we would one day become--
spread thin with creases, cornered, gazing off the page

.....

Alicia Clavell is a previous Hackney Literary Award Winner and a two-time winner of the University of Alabama at Birmingham Barksdale Maynard Award. She has been writing about life and style in the South for over a decade--whether in the pages of Southern Living magazine or her book Southern Kitchens & Dining Spaces (Rockport Quarry Press) aliciaclavell@gmail.com



SUNDAY WALK

Pam Copeland

2014 Electra Publication Award

18" x 24"

Oil on Canvas

Pamela Wesley Copeland relies on expressive brushstrokes and bold color to capture her experiences. She left the corporate world in 2009 to become a full time artist. In 2014, her work was selected to be included in the MAG Regions Bank Show, Red Clay Survey, LaGrange National XXVIII, Energen Art Show, SAAG National Juried Show, ArtsRevive Roots and Wings Show, and AWF Flora and Fauna Show. Her work can be seen at Gallery One in Montgomery, AL. pamcope@yahoo.com

RED CARDINAL

Kristi Houk - 2nd Place Electra Award - Poetry

for Nick Drake

I think of you in October,
trapped in grainy celluloid
wearing a golden
crown. Laughing mother--
She pulled your jacket tight.
I imagine you safe,
groves, and wheat fields,
away from London

You were always gazing out of windows
at swaths of green, squinting while
sunlight formed a trapezoid across
your bedroom wall. You strum
the same melody, staring into trees.

The heather bends with the breeze
preparing for afternoon vespers,
and you are in bed early,
before the moon.

Morning finds your legs first, long
stalks splayed across a made bed.
You took the road bound for northern stars,
where you belong.

Tonight, I scour the woods
clutching my own fear in the dark.
You come to me just above
the flashlight's head,
same dark eyes,
perched on a crooked limb,
and stayed, late.

.....

Kristi Houk lives and writes in Birmingham, AL, with her husband Jason, daughter Georgia and two cats. She holds a BA in English from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, is a vocalist and writer in a local band, Feather Canyon, and a regular contributor to the blog I Am The F Bomb.

CORE CURRICULUM

Susan Luther – 3rd Place Electra Award - Poetry

Frank August Krutzke 3/29/03-2/14/94
“*who in his life was also a brewer and a railroader...*”
www.kmitch.com/Pueblo/obits/kri-kum.html

A cliché sophomore, starry-eyed from class with the heart-throb
composition instructor who'd confided, to willingly captive
freshmen, his major switch from philosophy to literature's
more “visceral” wisdom, I took one look at old Professor Krutzke's
gossamer hair, round cheeks, poker countenance, squat-suited body
and thought, rightly, *this will be a hard semester*. Forms and Movements,
required of literature students at our mountain college – no alternative:
Dr. Krutzke was the only one who taught the class. Between obligatory
sun sessions on dorm roofs; studying until skin blistered, among red-rock
monoliths; skiing, roommates' broken bones; between walks uptown
for decadent hot fudge sundaes, and gossip – friends' whispered,
unwanted pregnancies; sotto-voce rumors of abortion; of war . . . Between
German, Logic, Choir, various forms of academic foolishness, between
Mont Saint Michel and Chartres, lectures by the hail-fellow American specialist
who held after-hours, at-home group camaraderie sessions I never attended:
in Krutzke's class, impatient to leave, I dutifully took notes. Decades later,
between loose bindings, faded boards, and cryptic, cursive marginalia
written in a teenaged hand, *Poems in English* still keeps on my bookshelf
Professor Krutzke's secrets – “Wit, brains – poetry”; “balance”; “foolish”
“bird song”; “sententious”; “doesn't this mean . . .”; “now turning to prayer.”
I still remember the heart-throb's name, not least because he gave the A student
a D for realizing, too late, I'd done the assignment wrong; then, charitably,

for an averaged grade, let me write it over again. But it's Krutzke's voice I hear, a soft baritone growl clotted with phlegm, age, or long smoking, blood faintly rising in his cheeks as he stood at the lectern reciting *Busy old fool, unruly sun*, poem after poem; poetry: as if our lives, his life, depended on it, as if the classroom where we sat listening to him was the beginning, and the end of the world.

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Susan Luther grew up in Nebraska, attended Colorado College in Colorado Springs, the setting for "Core Curriculum," for two and a half years, and then transferred to LSU. She has lived in the South, her mother's home region, ever since, most of the time in Huntsville, her adopted home town.

“Generosity without hope of reciprocation is the rarest and most cherished of human behaviors, subtle and difficult to define, distributed in a highly selective pattern, surrounded by ritual and circumstance, and honored by medallions and emotional orations.”

—Edward O. Wilson

TREMULOUS VOICE

Meagan Logsdon – 3rd Place (tie) Electra Award - Prose

The pungence of aged cedar is in my clothes. The wooden planks beneath me have begun to grow uncomfortable. Muscles cramp from a long stretch of disuse; yet, I cannot unwind, cannot relax, cannot drop my shields. How many times has light entered and fled from this cavernous attic?

Each turning of the earth reveals a fresh set of words carved in another corner, and whenever I look down, my fingers are bleeding in my lap. In some dream-like state, I must have moved while the moon traversed the stars, only to resume my vigil as the sun arose. Always to the same place, always back into the same ball of limbs.

Imposing, threatening, the Door looms in front of me. Sanded wood stares at me, as if to ask, “Will you not open me?” I know what waits on the other side, but the mere thought of it paralyzes. The words lining the walls jeer at me.

I can't.

Not now.

It's no good.

They will all think it's terrible trash.

“You're still here?”

A small voice rattles the silence, and I shift to find a pair of large, inquisitive eyes peering at me. She came again today, like the countless times before. A tiny waif of a girl, she sits cross-legged next to me. She takes in the state of the attic. The Door, of course, commands her fullest attention.

“You should open it, you know. I bet you'll be glad if you do.”

“It's locked,” I reply automatically, too quickly. The Door tugs my gaze like it's the center of gravity.

Her eyes look at me, then toward the Door, then back at me before she stands up, smooths the wrinkles from her dress, and moves forward.

“Don't,” I mutter with all the ferocity of a mewling kitten.

“I want to play.” She seems not to hear my protest, and her hand reaches

for the knob. Grasps. Turns. “It’s not locked at all,” she says as she faces me again. A smile reflecting time far beyond any she should possess touches her lips. She slips behind the Door, leaving it cracked just enough to entice me.

For a moment, resentment flares up. Confidence came so easily to her, as though she were a supernatural thief stealing the last reserves of my own. But the connection between us is electric and inescapable. What I thought was lost to me rebounds back twice over. A desperation pulls at my soul.

Though my body at last uncurls, the most I can muster is a slow crawl across the attic floor. Splinters embed themselves into my skin. Tiny slivers of me, the dead pieces, peel away and stay behind. I won’t need the extra layers if I can but reach the Door.

Perhaps I imagine the shadows shifting drastically, but it feels like hours before my hands brush the bottom of the Door. With the rest of my willpower, I push it wider and enter.

A room filled with blank canvases greets me. Paint, ink, pens, pencils, notebooks all lie scattered in glorious clutter. It’s wonderful and terrifying all at once, and some of the old paralysis begins to creep up my spine. The words upon the walls rush at me, a silent, deprecating assault. Just as I plan a retreat back into the safety of obscurity, a hand touches mine.

“Don’t go. You’ve made it here. You shouldn’t be selfish.”

Her other hand lifts my chin, and I sink into the warm assurance in her face. Her fingers slide a pen between my fingers. “Please, let me play,” she says. I acquiesce, and she embraces me, dissolves into me. I am left clutching the pen over an empty page. Solitary. I hover for eons, contemplating bridges between the eternal and the corporeal. When the tingle of pen meeting paper arcs up my arm, I breathe my release.

“The pungence of aged cedar is in my clothes...”

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Meagan Logsdon, a native of Athens, Georgia, and current resident of Birmingham, is a writer of speculative fiction she hopes to publish someday. She would love to write full-time without resorting to living in a cardboard box. She posts her writing and thoughts on her website. www.meaganlogsdon.com

SOME KIND OF CLOSURE

Rhiana Simon - 3rd Place (tie) 2014 Electra Award - Prose

From the outside, my high school looked like the scene of an eighties' high school flick that no one watched. Better yet, it looked like something on an education pamphlet people have run over countless times with their shopping carts, and the building's insides weren't much better.

Throughout the hallways, it smelled like Lysol, Windex, and chicken tenders, maybe with a dash of weed and summer sweat from time to time. Seriously, this building could have been an asthmatic child with its wheezing corridors. That was my high school experience in Pensacola, dabbed right onto the panhandle of Florida: suffocating academics and second-hand weed. Maybe I'm being too harsh, but, honestly, I never felt close to the other students at that school, even though we all shared the same home, the same community of scholars--you know, those *buzzwords*.

But, there was one student who would be one of the last people I'd ever forget. Picture this: some lanky kid who wore Ralph Lauren polo shirts or cotton striped long-sleeves every day. Or knit sweater vests and/or cardigans. Khaki slacks or washed-out skinny jeans, and Converse shoes to top off a brunette kid. This guy's fashion tastes were an off-beat dance between high class and teenage angst. I had only one class with him in high school, and I never really knew him because he never graduated.

My sophomore year, I think he was wearing a tie when we were standing next to each other outside the school. We were waiting for our rides home that day. His ear buds were in, cord dangling across his polo sweater, his hands in khaki pockets. His shoulders, melted into a slouch. Lord knows what I was wearing or what I looked like then, but we were standing about four feet apart--far enough for people at a distance to think us strangers to one another, but close enough where it felt awkward to be silent, at least to me. We must've been looking out to the trees and the ghettos across the road. He to the left and I to the right. I don't know if we both thought how we were close enough to speak to each other, close enough to at least make a mundane passing comment about the weather or about the school looking like it was falling apart. Close enough to complain about mediocre teaching or revel in whatever we would have had in common. God, I was *so* close to saying something. *Anything* like *how are you* or *what're you listening to?*

I'm not sure why, but I kept my trap shut and went my way. He went his. I didn't even acknowledge him. Not even with one of those nods-of-acknowledgement that aren't really *hello* but are rather *yeah, hey, I know your face. I know you exist.* Not even a nod.

Later that week, his parents found him dead in his sheets. Many people liked him. I thought he was funny too. This guy though (oh man) would crack some louche that's-what-she-said jokes during lectures on the Defenestration of Prague or whatever, and both he and our European history teacher would poke fun at anything from the Westboro Baptist church to Kim Kardashian and whoever else was related to her. He just sat in the corner of the classroom and smart-assed his way throughout the year. It wasn't until he died that I realized he was a fellow writer because I only knew the details of his personality I didn't care for. It was one of those oh-he-seems-like-a-prick-but-is-pretty-swell-once-you-meet-him kind of deals. I didn't take the deal when the chance sprang up, though, and it was too late for me to reconsider. It was like when you mull over buying something half-off, but you see a tear in the hem or tiny crack along some seam so decide not to buy it, leave the store, yet change your mind half-stride and turn on your heels to find someone else had paid the price you weren't willing.

Some kind of regret.

In person, anyone could tell he was sharp. Quick to understand and quick to shoot out comebacks. He had this lasting wittiness about his writing too. His writing was the kind that you could just skim over, get your feet wet, and you'd think, "Wow, this kid has what it takes." It was like his head, unlike ours all encased in cranium and sutures and all that medical stuff, was busted open, and *anything* he wanted on that paper he could just tip his head forward, and it would all percolate out into perfect streams that normal people must meticulously measure, draw, and sweat out themselves. He was a good writer. When someone is a good writer-- when their writing stirs my anxiety, makes me haunch over my own essays and ravage them apart to stitch the shreds together into something *better* than what I could have before. I didn't even know the guy, and even after he died, he still challenges me.

Not even a damn nod.

We were all a year and a half from graduating high school, but a seizure, idiopathic they said, didn't let him walk the stage. *Idiopathic.* For some people, graduation is a scary thing.

Some students, scrambling to rack up their GPAs and course-reqs, become scared they won't graduate on time or end up dropping out. But at the very least, it just seemed so easy to survive until graduation; it was just one of those things that anyone could do: *survive*. You know, *not die*. What a romantic way to go out, too. No cancer, no tuberculosis, no drunk-driving incident or fighter pilot crash. It was death by seizure as a junior in high school and as an only child. As loads-of-potential this world lost. I never would have thought to be friends with this guy before he died. I thought he was a prick with his smug face and snarky disposition. Didn't care for crossing paths with him because the most interaction we've had were instances of split-second eye contact and dodgy eye darts that didn't even have the courtesy to say anything more than *oh-yeah-I-don't-know-you-so-let's-not-make-eye-contact-again*. So, I wouldn't want to say, "Oh I wish we could have been friends" or "I wish I knew more about him," just because he died. It wouldn't be natural. It wouldn't be genuine.

It's hard to be on poor terms with someone when there were no terms to begin with, and it's hard to be on someone's bad side when tight-roping the fence. So I'm happy for that: we at least weren't enemies. Nemeses. Anathemas. Whatever. We attended the same school, breathed in the same weed-and-possibly-asbestos-laced air, and, in a way, graduated in the same class.

He just walked a little sooner than the rest of us.

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Born in Pensacola, FL, Rhiana Simon currently attends the University of Alabama at Birmingham as a second-year undergraduate. A neuroscience student, she is an aspiring scientist and avid insect collector. rhsimon@uab.edu

“People is all everything is, all it has ever been, all it can ever be.”

—William Saroyan

THE UNCERTAINTY OF LIGHT

Laura Hunter – 2014 Electra Publication Award - Prose

Here they are, a carnie who, at twenty-eight, passes through Realtown every August, awaiting the right time to empty his rage against the woman, just over forty, who refuses to accept that she is no more than a convenient bed.

Near dusk, Onnie leaves. She with her present, straight razor with its intricate elephant handle and prime hair shears wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. Ernest left with Spud before noon, smelly old Spud who carries cattle prods. “For wild animals.” He had grinned.

It’s the last quarter moon of a parched August. Papa had told her earlier not to go. “People been kilt down there.”

“He needs a haircut,” Onnie said. “I got fine shears and a razor.” Onnie shifted in her chair and tensed her ankles. She mumbled, “Called me a leach.”

“Devils work there,” Papa says.

“Ernest works there.”

Onnie drives Ernest’s truck toward Realtown, smoke puffing out the exhaust. Dust billows up and hides the Ford’s tailgate. She crosses the concrete bridge and bumps over the ditch into an abandoned field where the carnival is set up. When she stops, steam spits from under the hood.

Dusky dark begs for light, but she has none. The shabbiness of the traveling show startles her. Last August, blinking lights had mesmerized her, drawing her eyes upward. Tonight, a closer look reveals most bulbs are not working. Unwashed carnies glare and blow cigarette smoke her way. She scratches the nerve rash on her hand.

Evening in Paris in Ernest’s beard last night had said it all. Her eyes search for the dance tent. She heads to an oily black tent at the back where Papa said women dance naked. A quiver of music, and she quickens her stride. She breathes in spurts. To gather herself, she fingers the stiff tent flap. When she pulls it back, it creaks.

Inside, Ernest sits on a make-shift stage, cross-legged, chewing a cigar.

She offers her gift.

He does not extend his hand. “Humph.” He spits.

“Don’t you want it?”

(continued on page 26)



PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

58" x 10"

Composite 3-D landscape built from of 9 separate photographs
Walt Stricklin - 2nd Place Electra Award - Art

Walt Stricklin was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1982, and former Director of Photography at The Birmingham News. After a career working within the world of photojournalism, surrounded by moral and ethical constraints, he can now express his artistic vision of our world through his photographic sculptures which he calls 'Scapes.' www.waltstricklin.com

He grabs her irritated hand and pulls her toward the truck. They plod through waist-high broom sedge, brittle and tan, skirting the carnival.

“Where’re we going?”

“Shut up,” he says. “You want ever ‘body to see you acting the fool?”

“There weren’t no . . .” She stops. *The other women*. Now she knows. “The truck needs. . .” she begins.

“I said, ‘Shut up’.”

Ernest parks in front of her barn. The motor puffs, hisses and dies. Headlights cast a bleak glow through the double doors. He takes Onnie’s hand, pulls her into the light and glares at her. “You been a bad, bad girl, Onnie,” he whispers.

Onnie, now trembling, nods.

Ernest takes the package and rips the paper away. The straight razor pops open with a stark click. Inside, Ernest cuts a long strand of fishing line from the wall with one silent draw. The released line recoils into unraked hay.

“Lay down.” He points the blade to a splotch of yellow. “Here.”

Onnie kneels in the itchy hay and does not move.

“Lay down,’ I said.”

Onnie breaks into a sweat, flattens out on her back and grips her hands. “What did I . . .?”

“Shut up.” Ernest wraps fishing line round her wrists and ankles. He runs a strand from stall post to stall post and binds her neck so tight that, if she tries to move, she will cut her own throat. *Maybe I should*, she thinks. Then she won’t have to face him tomorrow when the truck won’t crank.

Ernest closes the doors as he leaves.

If tonight is like other August nights, Ernest sits in her kitchen, a near-empty bottle of rye whiskey before him. His dark eyes stare at red cherries clusters on her wallpaper. From time to time, he tries to rake his fingers through his long hair. It’s so matted he can only push it off his forehead.

Tonight, he reaches for a butcher knife and cuts clumps of hair at random. Soon he will slide down into the chair, falling-out drunk.

Her papa snores, a mile away on a naked mattress.

From the floor of the horse stall, Onnie examines the sky through a hole in the roof from the last storm. One vivid star blinks. “Who’s loving you?” it asks.

Shame burns on her forehead and she snickers. *This could be something special. Talking to a light.* She waits for another question. There is none, so she tenders no answer.

Clouds, one a brown rabbit, another two pink piglets spotted in black, pass over the opening. Her star is gone. She scolds herself then licks salty sweat from her upper lip. “Lord have mercy, it’s hot as hell.” *And it’s dark.*

Hay prickles her naked legs. Or maybe spiders, foraging for a late-night bite. Onnie shivers. The tremor ignites her rashy hand. She scratches and draws blood.

But it will be okay, she thinks. This dying. Better than this. She breathes deep. But there’s Papa. Alone. *Or Ernest. At next light.*

She rolls her eyes as far to the side as possible. An axe handle. Ernest could use the axe handle there by the door. She imagines him crushing her ankles as he whacks at the fishing line when it refuses to give. He will hand her a whittled-out crutch and say, “See, if it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t be able to walk.” She hears his laughter at her ear and closes her eyes.

From outside, a shaft of light slants through the roof’s hole. The light drops and strikes her bosom. A brighter beam this time, stronger than the talking star. More powerful than arcing carnival spotlights.

Onnie takes another deep breath. Her eyes climb the light to the roof’s opening. And up. There awaits a transformed sky. The moon is out.

“Ah. Now.” She sighs. *This radiance, she can talk to.*

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Laura Hunter lives outside Northport, AL. Her work has appeared in Belles’ Letters, Climbing Mt. Cheaha, ALALITCOM, Crave, Explorations, and Marrs Field Journal, among other publications. lhunter@hotmail.com

THE STUD TABLE

Jo Middlebrooks – 2014 Electra Publication Award - Prose

Susan McQueen left her office on the fifth-floor of Watkins, Jones and Barker a bit early on Thursday afternoon. She made her way to the small watering hole appropriately named, The Bar, nestled into the first-floor corner of the law firm's building. The heavy, beveled mirror behind the bar reflected the well-appointed mahogany paneled room and the back of Nick, the bartender's graying head.

"A bit early tonight, Susan?" Nick asked.

"Yes, Nick. I knocked off early to make an important call before the boys show up for the Thursday night game."

"Have anything to do with the announcement at the lunch meeting upstairs? I heard a rumor while I was up there with set-ups."

"Rumor, Nick?"

"C'mon, Susan, you know that I know stuff about the firm before most folks hear about it. New partner?"

"That's the gist of it," Susan said.

"Gist? He's a kid right out of law school is what I heard."

"You must have mighty good sources."

"The best, Susan, the best."

Not necessarily, Susan thought, as she took her cell phone out of her shoulder bag and cued the first number in her phone list. The call went to the number's voice mail.

"Hi! It's official. If your flight is delayed, call me. I'll play the weekly card game with the boys from the office and leave for the airport around 8:15."

"It won't be much of a game if you take off at 8:15, Cakes," Rex said from behind her. All three of her Thursday night poker buddies had arrived, Rex overhearing the end of her phone conversation and Kevin and Henry ordering drinks at the bar. Nick completed the drink orders and took them to the table.

"So, everybody feels secure tonight?" Nick asked.

"You have always been a rather cruel bastard," Rex said. "Have you considered the new guy might not be a fan of corner bars?"

"No, Rex, but I did consider that the big announcement might have you guys a little concerned. I liberated a platter of deli sandwiches from the upstairs lunch meeting to provide a bit of comfort food for the firm's underlings. Help yourselves. There are plates on the bar."

Kevin and Henry headed for the tray of stolen sandwiches on the bar. Rex and Susan stayed at the table nursing their drinks.

"Tell me what you really think, Sweetie," Rex said dipping his head low to one side to make eye contact with Susan.

"Think?"

"Yeah. How will the shuffle go . . . uh . . . within the firm? You should know if we will be affected by the matter."

"I don't know, Rex, but I can't see a new partner caring about our area. The firm has bigger bonfires to fuel than mere property law." Susan's eyes were set on a smoke ring rising from the cigarette Kevin had left burning in his ashtray. He and Henry wandered back to the table with their sandwiches.

"C'mon, boys," she said. "The evening is slipping away from us here, and I have other places to be."

She removed her blazer and unbuttoned the two top buttons on her blouse. The smoky, low light of the room softened the age freckles on her generous cleavage. Her bright red nails flashed a strange reddish-purple as she dealt the cards.

Kevin lined his cards into a perfect row on the table, little Bicycle soldiers ready for battle.

"Oh my, we are a bit testy tonight," he said. "Just where would you be headed at this hour, Sweetheart?"

"Yeah, Babe, I thought you had already arrived," Rex exclaimed in his usual self-touting tone. "You're sitting at the best stud table in town." Susan's cheeks glowed a deep pink.

"Well, Sugar," Susan replied in her smoker's rasp of a voice, "that would be one man's opinion now, wouldn't it?" Susan slid around in her chair, crossing her long, shapely legs. Rex took full advantage of bared thighs not amply covered by her wisp of a skirt. The pink glow on her cheeks disappeared and magically reappeared in the open neck of Rex's dress shirt. With a lash-flashing stare she continued. "Anyway, Sweetie, we all have our other selves in life, the little secrets that make us who we really are."

Rex tried to avert his eyes, but he remained focused on the promise made by the shadow of her skirt against her bare inner thigh.

"Damn, Susan," Henry said, "let's play the hand before Rex slips off into fantasy land. Hit me with two, and that's cards, not legs." He picked up his two cards in his usual paranoid manner, but his earlobes slowly filled with an extra supply of blood.

The usual discussion of Henry's red lobes moved around the table. "You guys really love to stack against me, don't you," he said.

"Aw, Henry," said Kevin, "it's not personal. We would do that to any poor slob with good lobe circulation."

"That's just great," Henry said. "Now I am just any poor slob, huh? Can you believe this poor slob calls with a Royal?"

"Well, Sugar, light my lobes! You've finished me," Susan said.

"Best hand I've had in weeks," Rex said, "just not good enough. When was the last time the crown flushed on this table, anyway? It's your lucky night, Henry. Enjoy it, son, 'cause it'll be a while before you see that again."

"Yeah", Henry said, "there's probably a thing or two you won't be seeing for a while either, and it ain't cards."

This time Rex passed up the laugh that made the round of the table to check out the skirt angle, higher now, on Susan's thigh. "Where are you off to tonight, Cakes?" he said. "Who gets your action this time?"

Kevin picked imaginary debris from under his perfectly manicured nails, holding a hand up to the light, checking, picking again. "One thing for sure, Rex," he said, "it won't be you."

Susan's face turned purple with disgust. "Listen, you three," she scolded.

"I don't think you need to lean on me, too, Susan," Henry insisted. I didn't. . ."

"Shut up, Henry," she said, "and put your thumb back in your mouth."

Kevin stacked the deck in a perfect stack. He carefully adjusted and re-adjusted himself in his chair and returned to his nail inspection. As he reached for the deck, yet another attempt at perfection, Susan slapped her hand over the perfectly stacked cards. "This game is over, boys, and it isn't the only game that has come to an end. I will leave here in a few minutes to pick up my son at the airport."

All eyes widened. The three men were motionless, unable to look Susan in the eye. "What son?" Rex whispered, "Whose son?"

"My son," she said. "Alexander graduated from law school last year and will be joining the firm on Monday."

"Damn, Susan!" Rex said. "The least you could have done was to tell me . . . uh . . . we've been . . . so close for a . . ."

"If you want to know what close really means, ask Kevin," Susan said. "Close is just another one of his little compulsions. Anyway, I am telling you all now, and that's

soon enough. Alexander is very bright. He will join the firm at a salary none of us ever dreamed of making. He is well aware of who you are and how close you have been to the mother who had tuition to pay every quarter."

Susan stood. She put on her blazer, her long nails slipping pearl buttons through the two top buttonholes of her silky white blouse. The strong scent of cinnamon perfume floated from her body.

"Furthermore," she said, "thanks to our closeness, Alexander won't have to get close to anybody at the firm. He will start his career with his own power." Feigning sensuality, Susan blew a kiss to the dumbfounded stud table, checked her watch, and walked to the bar.

"Nick," she said, "I'm calling it a night. I have a son to pick up at the airport in a bit. We will join you for a celebratory drink when he finishes his introductory rounds at the firm tomorrow." Nick and Susan exchanged a high-five and she left.

"Well, crapola," Rex said, "that screws a perfectly good situation for me. Susan is a real piece . . . of work, that is. I've worked with her for thirty years."

The waxed, bald oval on Kevin's head, now deep red, moved in strange contractions as though trying to contain too many thoughts under its hard surface.

"Susan is right," he said, "being close to her is a compulsion with me."

The men sat in silence, avoiding eye contact. Ashen faced with fear, Henry broke the silence. "Do you think the boy might look like his father?"

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Jo Middlebrooks is a 71 year old retired theatrical costumer. Her interest in writing was inspired by her job as Resident Costumer at the Springer Opera House in Columbus, GA. She is a founding member and secretary of the Chattahoochee Valley Writer's Conference created and held in Columbus, GA. jomiddleb@bellsouth.net

2014: A HALLOWEEN HORROR STORY

Beware Martians and Terrorists Bearing Gifts

Jim Reed

Winning at any cost is not something we humans get to do very often.

To win at any cost usually translates into some suicidal act. That's why the battle cry "Victory at any cost!" is likely to be mere bluster, more empty saber-rattling.

To win at any cost means you're probably going to have to die in the process. That doesn't sound like winning to most of us, but to those who think outside the box, the idea of dying for victory is a valid one.

Some examples:

The Trojan War dragged on for a decade and might never have ended, had Ulysses (Odysseus) not stepped back and resolved to win the war at any cost. What warlord, trained in the rigid format of weaponry and mass military strategy, would have predicted that a handful of unarmed soldiers could wrap themselves in a gift horse and take over an entire city? For thirty centuries, the tale of the surprise, innovation and cleverness of this suicidal act has been repeated, until the myth has become a myth of itself. And, as we all know, myth turns to metaphor.

Perhaps storytellers in the Middle East for the next thirty centuries will repeat the tale of a handful of unarmed soldiers hiding themselves in the bellies of flying metal beasts to bring down the mighty towers of the Western Devils.

In 1897 the author H.G. Wells, knowing his history and acutely aware of its perpetual repetition, tried to warn us all of what happens each time we rely on structured machineries of warfare, each time we forget to use our creative thought processes to anticipate the worst and prepare to deflect it. The novel *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS* was the result: a Trojan Martian attack from an unexpected direction and for an unknown motive. Sacrifice of a handful of soldiers in a---to the aliens---just cause was the result, and quite effective. Thirty centuries from now, the tale of a handful of outsiders stomping the vermin of Earth in order to colonize, will be told and its metaphor unconsciously understood. The Martian storytellers just might leave out the part about eventually dying after the attack.

And do we learn from such monolithic, in-your-face mythology? Let's see...

At any moment, the people of Earth could be exterminated---this time by forces known and understood---but very little is being done to prevent it. The reasons are clear. Day-to-day life and politics distract us from preparation. The mosquito on the arm is immediate and can be dealt with in a rapid and unimaginative manner. The five-mile-wide asteroid that's headed our way is *way out there*, invisible, and perhaps won't make itself known till it's too late. Its effect will be a trillion-fold worse than a mosquito bite, but it's, *like, man, it's like something that might not happen, man, and don't bug me about it---I gotta take care of this mosquito.*

I suppose Trojans and New Yorkers, somewhere in the backs of their minds, knew that Something Bad could happen at any moment, but we all go on living, knowing that. When we read about H.G. Wells' Martian war or Homer's Trojan war or the Twin Towers or an impending meteor, we understand that it *can* take place, but we are all betting in the same reverse lottery---it's a long shot, expecting to draw the winning apocalyptic ticket number. *Probably won't happen in my lifetime, so not to worry!*

I live in Alabama, a virtual magnet for tornadoes, but each time one misses me, I'm secretly grateful that somebody else is being made miserable, while at the same time feeling bad for them. It didn't hit me *this time*. Oh, as a poet, I feel guilty about this, but I'm sitting here, eating chocolate chip cookies and breathing more deeply, just the same.

In order to conquer a planet, you have to think like a Martian. In order to conquer a society, you have to think like a Greek warrior. Then you have to be willing to evaporate along with your victims. Since most of us aren't willing to make that leap, a lot fewer terrorist acts take place than you would imagine. There are still lots of people who can see beyond politics and dogma and focus on the important things, such as watching sunrises, burping babies, holding loved ones, protecting neighbors. We just aren't *motivated* to die violently---if we can help it.

Once you think like this, wars, sports events and contests lose some of their appeal. The way to win a fencing match or a chess game is to pull out a gun and shoot your opponent(s) dead. If you're not willing to do that, then you don't really want to win, do you? Besides, most of us want the losing party to survive, so that we can gloat and strut.

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS was a cautionary tale, but the peculiar thing about humans is that, even though we know things could end badly, we just go on living in

denial, hoping that something bad, if it happens, will happen somewhere else. Wells knew this, but he also knew that to be human is to try and try again to survive, against all odds, against all mockery and ignorance and hostility

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Jim Reed has spent a lifetime writing stories both actual and true. He is curator of the Museum of Fond Memories and proprietor of Reed Books in Birmingham, Alabama. www.jimreedbooks.com



DISCOVERING THE DOG HANGED

West Finlayson – 2014 Publication Award - Poetry

We turned the corner and saw
the taut red leash like a rod

from up on the wall down to the porch's edge.
It took a second--that triangle.
A ghost turns inside me. Stay there. Stay.

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West Finlayson is a recent graduate of the University of Montevallo. He is now working as a freelance writer in Gadsden, AL.

JESSICA, ALMOST SIX

Liz Reed

We set out on a day of grandmother/granddaughter time, starting with breakfast before shopping for shoes. The waitress said to Jessica, “You’re mighty pretty – how old are you?” “I’m five, but I’m almost six,” Jessica explained. After finding her new, shell-pink Mary Janes, we wandered into a coffee and chocolate shop. The person behind the counter gazed down at Jessica.

“Oh,” she said, “looks like someone got new shoes. They are very pretty. How old are you?”

“I’m five, but I’m almost six,” Jessica said. The barista nodded knowingly.

After our coffee/hot chocolate break, we went in search of an outfit to go with the shoes. In every shop, someone asked Jessica’s age, and the answer was always the same. “I’m five, but I’m almost six.” [Jessica’s birthday is in March and we were spending a bright and cool October Saturday together.] We went to lunch, to a movie, and on the way home stopped at an ice cream shop. Everywhere people commented on Jessica’s strawberry-blond hair, or her new shoes, or her outgoing personality, or her packages. Whatever the comment, the same question always came at the end: “How old are you?” And with the same question came the same answer: “I’m five, but I’m almost six.” We had a long, fun day. Jessica was a joy to be with and chatted merrily. She was very observant and had an opinion about everything. By late afternoon we were headed home to meet Poppy, have supper, read some stories and go to bed. A few days earlier, I had taken down the low, single bed in the guest room and replaced it with my parents’ high, antique bed. One look at the height of the bed and Jessica asked, “Where am I going to sleep?”

“This was my parents’ bed; they were your great-grandparents. Now this bed is for you.”

“But, Grammy, Jessica wailed, I’m ONLY five!”

Jessica is twenty-nine now, almost thirty. Seems like last fall she was only five.

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Liz Reed lives in Birmingham’s Southside and divides her time between grandchildren and artistic pursuits. lizreedartist@gmail.com



WINDOW REFLECTIONS

Richard Modlin

Digital Photograph

2014 Electra Publication Award – Art

Richard Modlin, is an author, a photographer, and professor emeritus at University of Alabama in Huntsville. His books include Newfound Freedom (2013), Malachite Lion (2002) Chasing Wings (2008). His short stories and articles have appeared in Sea Frontiers, Bird Watchers Digest, Encyclopedia of Environmental Issues, Birmingham Arts Journal, Muscadine Lines, and other magazines and literary journals. He is a former president of the Alabama Writers' Conclave, on the advisory board of the Huntsville Literary Association, and a member of the Alabama Writers Forum, Tennessee Mountain Writers, and the National Maritime Historical Society. Modlin's interests lie in nautical history, history of the American Revolutionary War, natural history, and travel. rfm1937@earthlink.net

STILL LIFE WITH INFIDELS #4

David Hornbuckle - 2014 Electra Publication Award - Prose

There's a faint fecal smell throughout the hospital, except the bath-rooms, which smell like cinnamon. For four hours Ryan and Renee have been in an exam room waiting to find out if Renee will be admitted. Ryan is trying to remain calm. They brought a suitcase because they know she'll be staying a few days. It's the middle of the night, so there's little sound in the hallways outside, though occasionally the intercom will squawk to call a doctor to the ER or a lone gurney will squeak from ward to ward.

Earlier, Renee called Ryan and asked him to come over. She said she'd made a decision. Her bag was already packed. She said she's having vividly detailed daydreams about shooting herself in the head. No matter that she doesn't own a gun; these visions are hyper-realistic, right down to the spider-webbed pattern that the blood spatter will leave on the wall, the gross bits of flesh and bone. Suicidal ideation is what they call it, what she called it. Renee is a psychiatric nurse at another hospital, and she has diagnosed herself with this. It hasn't gotten to the point of a realistic plan, but it's bad enough to get her admitted on the ward.

In the claustal exam room, Ryan feels watched, as if by that fabled omniscient God in which he hasn't believed since childhood, as if his response to this crisis will determine his fate forever after. He is trying to remember that he's here because he's her friend and lover and because he believes he's the only person now who can take care of her. Of course, at times he has also thought about killing himself before, though *wanting* to do it is another thing altogether. He has imagined what it would be like, and what the world would be like after. But the violence of it is not a thought he can hold in his mind for long. And it passes -- usually with a hangover.

Later, Renee will suddenly look panicked and ask could Ryan call the ward where she works and tell them she won't be in. They had to go to a hospital in Tuscaloosa, so she wouldn't have to be among the same patients that she was taking care of in Birmingham yesterday. Ryan will walk the long, bland hallway past the other exam rooms, past the lobby where three or four people are dozing in the crimson and white plastic chairs, to the exit. He'll stand underneath the awning behind a parked ambulance and say, "She's fallen ill. She's in a hospital... She may not be in all week... No, I can't really get into why. It's personal."

Ryan's eyes are closed to block out the intruding fluorescent lights. His mind is filled with the events of the past months, during which he was too busy enjoying the benefits of Renee's mania to prepare for this crash, which, in retrospect, was probably inevitable. After they'd broken up each other's marriages by having an affair, which they made little effort to hide, they'd spent a couple of months apart, regrouping. Then, once the divorces were final -- that was at the beginning of July -- they decided to continue on as a couple, in an open relationship. That part was working just fine, though there had been some awkwardness at times. What wasn't working was that Renee was apparently slowly losing her mind. Earlier, during the drive over, Ryan was thinking about whether or not he's a "good person," which already is a concept he's always found rather suspicious. First, it implies that there is some essence or purpose to being a person, and if you fail at that purpose, you fail at *being a person*, and if you're a person, that's just a natural, indisputable fact, and he's not sure it's all that meaningful to say that someone is a "good" one or a "bad" one. Similarly, it sounds like a skill that can be acquired, along the lines of being a good golfer or a good mathematician, and he supposes that could be a helpful metaphor if one is in the process of "trying to be a better person," as he is, but one might just as likely throw one's hands in the air and say, "I guess I'm just not that good at this 'being a person' thing. Maybe I should try to be something else, like maybe an end table."

Ryan is keenly aware that for this relationship to work, they have to be able to trust each other completely, and yet he wonders how they could ever actually trust each other when they already know that they are both the kind of people that will lie and cheat and manipulate to get what they want. His rationalized hope in the beginning was that the shared experience, getting out of the stifling marriages and making a new start together, made trust possible, but they've learned in practice that trust is way more complicated than that. Now, Ryan thinks, they are about to go through something together that will bind them much more deeply than the affair and which also further complicates the trust issue because now the threat of Renee harming herself will always be lingering in the background.

Later, the attending physician, an older white man with bifocals and a patrician Southern accent, will examine Renee. There will barely be enough space for all three of them to stand in the room, so Ryan will go wait in the hallway. She'll tell the doctor about the gunshot fantasies and that she's been depressed, listless, sleeping like a cat, sixteen to twenty hours a day. She's had delusions of being able to read peoples' minds

and control their actions, which, as a nurse, she recognizes as a manic phase now that she's crashing. He'll agree to admit her, and they'll have to wait another hour while the hospital prepares Renee's paperwork and assigns her a bed on the eighth floor.

Later, when Ryan gets back from making his phone call, the admitting doctor will be back, finally, and he'll inform them with some caution that the nurse on the floor knows Renee and wants to know are they okay with that. When Ryan asks, the doctor will confirm with a nod that the nurse is Jessica, a friend of theirs. He hadn't realized that Jessica worked at this hospital now. Renee will answer that Jessica is a good nurse and that it's okay. Ryan will think this is remarkably clear thinking for someone in a suicidal state. He'll think about the trust issue again, wonder if there's any chance that she's faking this for attention or something, and then he'll hate himself for being so cynical. He won't be able to decide whether it will be nice to see Jessica, whether it will be awkward or ironic because he'll be too busy wondering how far he can be from being in that other chair -- the one with the crazy person in it.

The smell is ever-present and disturbing. It doesn't smell the way a hospital should, antiseptic and slightly acidic. Ryan can't think of a time when he's felt more unsettled. Everything about it seems wrong -- the smell, Renee's suicidal thoughts, the drama. Renee never seems to run out of men willing to play the role of boyfriend number two, but when it comes to something like this, he is the one watching her slumped over in her emergency room gown, chin in her dainty, pale hands. Nothing that happened before tonight seemed crazy to Ryan -- not "admit yourself to the psych ward" crazy anyway -- but he thinks he might have lost his perspective on it along the way.

Later, when finally they arrive on the eighth floor, Ryan will sit on a padded bench while Renee checks in her belongings. Jessica, in mauve scrubs, will come by and ask how he's doing, and he'll shrug. She'll put her hand on his shoulder and say that Renee will be fine, not to worry, and then she'll see Renee off to her room. Ryan's fingers will be clenched on the edge of the seat, feeling that he's grasping equally tightly the last traces of his own sanity, knowing that to be good -- and for the first time in a while, he sincerely will want to be good -- he'll have to share what little goodness he has left.

.....

M. David Hornbuckle is the author of the novel Zen, Mississippi and short story collection The Salvation of Billy Wayne Carter. He lives in Birmingham, AL, and teaches English at a local university. david.hornbuckle@gmail.com

MR. GEORGE THE THIRD I'D LIKE TO ASK

Lucy Jones – 2014 Publication Award - Poetry

Can I build trenches in the folds
of your undergarments?
can I wage war across your skin
and spend my after-battle feasts
in the dark red of your cloak,
as thick wine drips like potions
in your belly?

King, there is no ocean in your eyes,
not like the one you'd like to rule,
because you are the sky before midnight
when everything is waiting,
you are the pounce of a flickering candle flame
onto a curtain,
listen to the screams of the people under your boots
and tell me

did the painter do justice to your crimson cloak
or did he water down the color
to try and cover up all the blood you've shed?

.....

Lucy Jones is a junior creative writing student at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. She grew up in Birmingham and Dublin, Ireland and is looking forward to going to college somewhere in the northeast and studying art history.



SCOOTER AND ALLEY

Dj Boyd
Digital Photo

Dj Boyd photographs landscapes from her travels, local scenes in Birmingham, and cornfields in her native Nebraska, as well as events and weddings, always with an eye to capturing important moments in time and light. Her series, Alabama Civil Rights Landmarks-50 Years Later, was on exhibit in 2013 and her image of Vulcan Yoga was published on the cover of Shutterbug Magazine in 2011. Dj is a former president of the Shades Valley Camera Club. djboydphotos@gmail.com

LOVE AT FIRST SOUND

Ricky L. Statham, Jr.

Her fingers

Slid

Down

The

Ivory

Keys

As I stood

Up

Gazing

Eyes closed

The notes dancing

Left

to

Right

Up

and

Down

The melody unfamiliar

This stranger's song

Sends me

F

A

L

L

I

N

G

I can see the future
We will have
As her fingers
Slide
 Down
 The
 Ivory
 Keys

.....
Ricky Statham graduated from Athens State University with a BA in English. He has been writing since high school and is currently working on two novels. He and his wife reside in Oneonta, Alabama, where he works at the Oneonta Public Library.

“No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love...”

—Nelson Mandela

WHAT YOU TOLD ME

Charlie Ritch – 2014 Electra Publication Award - Poetry

I remember when
you told me about love.
You were standing there
at your work bench,
fresh, wet stain
on your fingers and apron.
On the table between us
your latest, a real beauty--
hollow body electric,
solid maple, both sides,
with sterling humbuckers--
stretched out there like a long-legged, buxom pin-up girl
teasing me because
she knows I want to
but can't for shame.

“Commitment,” you said,
and rested your hand on it
like you weren't afraid

.....

Charlie Ritch lives in Birmingham with his wife and four children. He teaches history and literature at the Westminster School at Oak Mountain. critch@westminsterknights.org



STORM APPROACHING

Marian Lewis

Digital Photograph

2014 Electra Publication Award – Art

Marian Moore Lewis; photographer, writer and naturalist, lives near Huntsville, Alabama. Her photographs have appeared in Life on the Water magazine, juried exhibits at the Huntsville Museum of Art Prozan Gallery, and venues throughout north Alabama. Her book Southern Sanctuary: A Naturalist's Walk through the Seasons will be released in March, 2015.
www.sanctuaryartists.com bo325sky@earthlink.net

NO SUCH THING AS SILENCE

Irene Latham

Even the quietest moments thrum,
punctuated by treefrogs' throaty song
followed by snapping caiman jaws.

When you arrive sweat-soaked,
the river fish gnash their teeth,
swell their bladders,

and slap their tails in symphony.
More more more, the rain appeases,
but as soon as we've finished

at last with words, I hear you
moving away from me again,
stealthy as a jungle cat,

the heat of your leaving
a million moth-wings
battering the net.

.....

*Irene Latham is a poet and novelist from Birmingham, AL. Her latest book of poems for adults
The Sky Between Us features poems that explore what we can learn from nature about being
human. www.irenelatham.com*

“To know one thing thoroughly would be to
know the universe.”

—William James

IF SOMEONE WERE TRYING TO STEAL MY MEMORIES

Aurora Lee – 2014 Publication Award - Prose

It is the strange combination of Disney songs and alcohol that always gets the best of my twenty-four year old heart: memories. Things I have thought of over and over but am supposed to be trying to forget. Memories cannot be stolen by any outside force, which is one thing that makes them so valuable; it is also the single characteristic that makes them worthless. Oh, that someone could come in and steal a few of my memories. Problem with that is they'd probably take the ones I actually want to keep and leave behind only the ones that torture me.

If someone were trying to steal my memories, they would take the time we went to the beach as a small family of five. When my older brother, older sister, and I laid on the sand just beneath the break of the waves, holding on for dear life as each wave tried to pull us with all its might into the ocean. They would take the smile from all of our faces and lock it away so that I would forget the feeling. They would take the early morning when we waded out with colorful inner tubes to float on the calmness that is just past the breaking waves, the look of absolute peace on my daddy's face.

If someone were trying to steal my memories, they would leave behind the beach vacation that was the summer between my senior year of high school and my freshmen year of college, when there were seven of us rather than just five. They would leave the phone call daddy received while we drove in his old red pickup down the highway. They would leave how he called Mama in the other car in front of us and told her to pull over on the side of the road in the Florida heat. They would leave the expression on her face forever burned in my mind, the expression when my daddy told her that her brother was dead.

If someone were trying to steal my memories, they would take the time I went to my first education class and gave a presentation of Horace Mann and school reformation. They would take away the old professor's face and the way he watched as he listened to my words. They would take away the look of admiration on everyone in the class, my audience, as I ventured through my first successful presentation as if I had been doing it for years. They would take away the conversation the professor and I shared afterward when he shook my hand and said, "You're gonna make a good one, kid."

If someone were trying to steal my memories, they would leave behind the first time I taught high school on my own when I was twenty-two and had graduated college only three months prior. They would leave that entire day for me to remember piece by piece:

what I was wearing, how my hair looked, where I parked my car, what I had planned (plans that did not come close to being followed), the principal coming to my room during fourth block to comfort me as I cried. “Don’t cry,” he said. “You’re too pretty to cry.”

If someone were trying to steal my memories, they would leave behind more than they would take I am afraid. There wouldn’t be much to take perhaps, not many memories, in fact, but the memories would be made of the stuff that makes things worthwhile.

If someone were trying to steal my memories, I feel as though I would be at the door, offering to give a few away, and the thief would just look at my offerings and sneer. Thieves have a type of attitude about them that way, only want things because they want the privilege of taking that which is not wanted to give. I understand him. He is a man, and if I try to give him things, he will feel as though he is less of a human than I am. I get it. I have been there myself, didn’t become a thief because of it, but I still know his heart, and I believe that his heart is worth knowing.

He is not here to steal my memories because he thinks he can eat them or sell them at a high enough price to eat anything at all. He is here to steal them because they are things that I have that he does not have. He will have to be quite meticulous in choosing; he cannot simply run in, take as much as he can, and leave, hoping he has acquired at least a few good things. No, he will have to take time and sort through the memories. I will offer him a cup of coffee, and he will accept it without thinking, having become engrossed in his work.

When he first saw my face, he assumed that all of my memories would be worth stealing, but when he looks at the first few, he realizes he has misjudged me greatly, and he is confused. He looks at memories that remind him of his own, only he has no good ones to separate from the bad. With this confusion of his, he looks into my face again as if to double check: smooth white skin, bright hazel eyes, silky blonde hair, an hour glass figure. After taking his second look, he confirms that he was not mistaken when he first saw me, only he did not know that people who do not look like him also had these types of memories.

.....

Aurora Lee, 24, currently resides in Montgomery, AL. She graduated from The University of Mississippi with a BA in English Education in 2012. Her first set of short stories was published in 2013. During school, she won competitions in creative non-fiction and poetry.

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