

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 12 Issue 3



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\$5.00



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Front Cover: **BRIGHT AUTUMN LEAVES** Manipulated Digital Photograph - Ty Evans
Ty lives in Birmingham, AL, and enjoys taking pictures in his spare time. His other interests include collecting antique books, playing the guitar, and traveling. ty.evans66@yahoo.com

Back Cover: **ELEANOR AND REZA** Digital Photograph - Eleanor Bennett
Eleanor Leonne Bennett is a 15 year old artist and photographer in England. She has been published in Quiet Shorts, NG Kids, Big Issue, BBC News, and Guardian. She is a winner of the 2010 National Geographic Competition UK Kids Photography. eleanor.ellieonline@gmail.com

DAYS OF YOU

Jessica Jones

You read me itineraries
of our lives like the menu
in the dim restaurant where
I've forgotten my glasses.

I wonder how life
flows on without you—
how I ever existed at all.
Do you know how hard
rain hammers on our tin roof
when you leave every morning?

You reflect in iridescent puddles
under live oaks in Bienville Square.
You pull out my chair
every evening in our
favorite cafe—where the lamp
lights flicker like life
within your eyes.

I'm looking for you:
under covers in our unmade bed
while the chimney whistles
in winter. I search behind
books, between blue
suede couch cushions.

I find you peering out
from your sunglasses,
full of naked breakfast
Sundays and Jacuzzi nights,
dancing in my ruffled apron
as your strands of hair fall to the floor.

.....

A native of Mobile, AL, Jessica Jones earned her B.A. and M.A. degrees at the University of South Alabama where she studied under Alabama Poet Laureate Sue Walker. A former teacher, reporter and freelance writer, she works at the City of Orange Beach as the Marketing and Children's Programs Coordinator for the Coastal Arts Center. JJsaysPoetryPlz@me.com

HE DIDN'T GO WITH HER

Debra H. Goldstein

The flames flicker until a harsh wisp of wind extinguishes them. He stirs the ashes with a stick hoping to bring an ember back to life before the last heat in the igloo dissipates. Realizing the fire is truly out, he clutches the fur of his coat close to him, wraps his arms around his knees and rocks back and forth. Had he gone with her before the snows came, there might have been a question about the level of warmth, but never about the existence of heat.

He glances at the doorway. Snow and ice block it almost to the top of the opening. He bangs at it with his stick, but it is frozen solid. Although the walls aren't moving and he makes no effort to open his arms to touch them, they close in on him.

Daylight fades and his eyes strain and then adjust. For a moment, he remembers playing a game in the dark created by his older brother. Eventually, his brother would tire of either the game or him. Until that happened, he refused to whine.

He doesn't whine now. He can't. He didn't go with her.

.....

Debra H. Goldstein is the author of the upcoming Should Have Played Poker: a Carrie Martin and the Mah Jongg Players Murder Mystery and the award-winning Maze in Blue. Her short stories have appeared widely. She writes in Birmingham, AL. dhg@debrahgoldstein.com

GUIDING

Gates Shaw

Some many steps ahead of the party
my eye floats the high sedge and open pines
for sight of the white setter way out front.
My red ear plugs leave me deaf to the trailing hunters
and their talk of better shots and past days in the field.

My dog is all nose raised high above his muscled shoulders
his body running wildly beneath his pursuit of the faintest scent.
On the wind he can smell a single quail at 30 yards,
slam to stop as the whiff of game runs up his nose to his throat.
Some say a good dog can smell with his tongue.

I cherish his very instinct, his fearless covering ground,
his heart set on discovery and claiming.
He doesn't feel the briar rip his ear to bleed
nor the thorn in his paw.
The bird is out ahead
and there he runs for prey
'til he locks up "as one" with the
dry musty feathered aroma of his find
lost to everything but his moment.

.....

*Gates Shaw is a retired Episcopal priest who served in Birmingham's
Ensley/Fairfield area among the inner city poor. He and wife Margot Rafield have
three adult daughters. He enjoys quail hunting, bird dogs, and storytelling.*

FarmerGates@aol.com

FLYING IS REAL

Joseph Whigham

Summers in Alabama: to some, swimming in the lake, to others, camping in the woods. My story takes you to the dusty dirt side roads of Cherokee County. Everyone rides something! Whether it is a skateboard or a treacherous motorcycle is up to each individual.

I chose the middle ground! I chose the almighty four-wheeler. The four-wheeler, or quad as some like to call it, is an elegant mechanical beast. One would not think this stationary object could be a force to be reckoned with.

You straddle the metal wonder as if you were riding a bucking bronco, very gently. You place the key in and ignite the gas engine. The rumble of thunder between your legs is exhilarating for some.

This day is warmer than others. Humidity is a constant enemy of kids and adults alike. My longtime acquaintance Jake and I decide it would be a good idea to ride. He is on my father's Honda while I ride the smaller, slower Suzuki; we want to race, but it turns into a game of cat and ant! He rides twice as fast as me. Dust is flying all around. I cannot see my own hand in front of me, but I am bound and determined to catch up. This little engine is not one that could but one that will.

The dust finally clears and there's my buddy — BAM! I t-bone my dad's quad! Neither my friend, his quad or mine is hurt, but I go flying off like a rocket.

They say time slows down and you see your life flash before your eyes when you die. I don't see my movie life, but time slows tremendously. I'm soaring through the air seeing the dust fly around me and my friend's bewildered face. Well, my body starts to turn and perform a flip. Time doubles in speed; I tip my helmet and fall on my back in the woods. Thank god, I choose to wear my helmet today! This is my take on how flying is real!

.....

Joseph Whigham is a writer, veteran and actor in Cherokee County, AL.

joseph.e.whigham@gmail.com



ON THE LOOSE

Eric Johnson
Metal Sculpture
18" x 20" x 8"

Eric Johnson was born in 1969 in Adamsville, AL. He worked as a heavy equipment designer early in his art career but now devotes his full time and attention to creating art. www.rejohnsoniron.com eric@rejohnsoniron.com

COWOIDS

David Flynn

Cows rained from a hole in the sky. Black and white cows, brown cows, tan cows, but with evil, triangular faces. They crashed into the earth of Jones Farm. They marched in rows of hundreds in four directions. One row of cows marched toward the house.

Farmer Jones ate his breakfast. He gazed at rolling green crops beyond his back yard. When he saw the cows raining from the sky, marching in lines, he dropped his cup.

Farmer Jones grabbed his shotgun. He fired as the first line entered his back yard. One black and white cow fell. But the line, and the lines behind that line, marched forward. The cows marched over his pasture; the cows marched over his fence; the cows marched over his garage, collapsing it into a pile of wood. He fired again. Another black and white cow fell. The line of cows marched forward.

Cows marched over the next farm and the next and the next. They marched down the road; they marched toward the town.

The mayor was eating breakfast at the cafe when he saw Farmer Jones running down the road. Other farmers ran behind him. When Jones arrived at the door, the first line of cows appeared on the horizon.

“Drive,” Farmer Jones said, “drive far as you can.”

Cows reached the water tower minutes later. The tower smashed to the ground. The line marched through the first neighborhood of houses. Onward through the town square. Onward through the cafe. Lines of cows behind the first line broke the rubble into pieces with their hooves.

The mayor and Farmer Jones drove down the road. Reports came on the car radio. Cows from holes in the sky all over the Earth. Lines of cows marched on every square kilometer on every nation on every continent.

Another hole in the sky rained cows ahead of the mayor’s car. Lines of cows marched toward the mayor’s car from four sides. The first hole healed, so that over Jones Farm was blue sky. Those cows stopped and began chewing on the grass. They lost the lustre in their eyes. They grazed in groups.

“What are we going to do?”

Farmer Jones and the mayor sat in the car.

“Let’s hide,” the mayor said.

“Where?”

The cows marched closer and closer. They trampled over fences; they trampled over houses. From the land rose screams of pain. They trampled over people. The mayor looked around. There was a cave.

“Run,” he said.

The lines of cows were a few feet apart when the mayor squeezed into the small opening of the cave. He had to wiggle in. Behind him he heard a scream. Farmer Jones screamed as he died. The mayor didn’t look. Inside he was safe. The cave was cool and damp. It was a small room of dirt and hanging roots. He let fifteen minutes go before peering out the opening of the cave.

Thousands of cows dotted the rolling farmland before him. Each contentedly chewed the grass. A cow close to the opening turned its black and white face toward him. The eyes were normal cow’s eyes. The mayor dipped his head back into the cave.

The mayor slept on the wet floor. When he woke, he was hungry. For water he licked the dirt. Cows had been food. Now they weren’t.

Every few hours the mayor stuck his head out the cave. During the day the cows ate grass; at night they huddled together in sleep. He tried walking at night. The cows woke as one and stood. They faced him. Their eyes became the lustre again. He ran back to the cave.

A thousand thoughts ran across his mind: those with guns could kill cows and eat beef; the army would attack the cows. The holes, though, might open up again and new cows rain on the Earth. God wanted humans gone, the mayor thought, and liked cows instead.

Pale light at the opening meant dawn his third day in the cave. The mayor had to find food or die. He licked the wall. The mayor put off the outside long as he could, then eased out. The cows munched on the grass. Hundreds of the faces turned toward him. Their eyes became lustres. The human got down on all fours. He munched on the grass and found he could swallow it o.k. The cows’ eyes returned to normal. They went back to chewing the grass. The mayor moved slowly among them, munching the grass on all fours.

This, he thought, will be my life.

When night came, he huddled with the cows. They accepted him.

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David Flynn is a widely published author, editor and journalist. He publishes a writing blog, where he posts a new story and poem every month:
writing-flynn.blogspot.com **www.davidflynnbooks.com**

PICKING UP MY MOTHER FROM THE AIRPORT

Ace Boggess

planes at midnight bats on fire
flashing beneath a barn roof

engines cry out from lift & carry
as they resist a greater pull toward space

its glittering fobs full of mesmerism
there is Orion adjusting his skirt &

there the little bear
running from nothing to nowhere

I hope she arrives through the black doors
while I still remember why I came

.....

Ace Boggess is the author of two books of poetry: The Prisoners and The Beautiful Girl Whose Wish Was Not Fulfilled. His writing has appeared in Harvard Review, Mid-American Review, RATTLE, River Styx, and many other journals. aceboggess@gmail.com

“Which comes first, the fried chicken or
the fried egg?”

—Davey Williams

THE MAN IN THE FRIDGE

J.D. Frost

“It’s your mother; there’s a man in her fridge.”

“What?” Cameron McKay squinted at his wife.

“Don’t look at me!” Anita said. “She’s your mother.” She widened her eyes, daring him to disagree. “She needs to be in a nursing home before she hurts someone. The woman is still driving for crying out loud.”

Cameron raised his chair to a sitting position. Their daughter, nine-year-old Gracie stood, giving up her perch on the front of the same threadbare recliner.

“Ma, what is it?” He spoke loudly. She seldom wore the hearing aids that had cost him six thousand dollars.

“There’s a man in my icebox,” she said. “I hear him but I can’t find him. I’m hanging up so I can call the police.”

“Ma! No! Don’t call the police.”

The police knew Amy McKay’s house as well as they knew the doughnut shop. She had called them when her car wouldn’t start, when the weatherman predicted a storm, to find out church times. They had as good as told Cameron she was crazy and if she called again, they would take her to the hospital for an evaluation.

“Don’t call the police,” he pleaded. “I’ll be right over.”

“You’re going?” Anita said. “I married you not your crazy mother. You should be with us.”

“Can I go?” Gracie said. “I want to go to Grammer’s.”

“No!” Anita said.

“Let her come. You should come. You think this is easy. You think I enjoy this.”

Cameron scooped up his wallet and keys. Anita sighed. She and Gracie followed.

They found her in the kitchen. His mother had gutted the old refrigerator. Eggs, mustard, everything sat on the dinette table.

“Ma, what are you doing?”

“I had to empty it, so I could look for him.”

Cameron shook his head.

“Okay, you don’t believe me. You open it.”

He pulled the door. The fridge was empty and spotless. He was ready to slam it shut when he heard a voice.

“Just drive, tow–trailer it if you have to—your trade to our showroom on the South Parkway.”

Cameron raised up. “Ma, it’s Mr. Thompson’s television.”

“Whaaat?” She looked from his face to the empty fridge.

“Mr. Thompson, the man who moved in next door. It’s his TV.”

“What’s his TV doing in my refrigerator?”

“It’s the sound coming through the wall. You’re hearing it through the wall,” he yelled.

His wife puffed in disgust and turned.

“It’s okay, Grammer.” Gracie hugged her grandmother.

Amy McKay walked out of Gracie’s arms to the sofa in her living room.

“I didn’t know.” Her lip trembled. She looked from Cameron to Anita.

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you. I’m not *crazy*—you heard it.”

“We just worry about you,” Cameron said. “Living here alone, I mean.”

Tears worked their way down her cheeks. “I don’t want to go to a nursing home. Your father’s spirit is here and I talk—no, that’s crazy too.”

They watched her cry. The inevitable staring them all in the face.

Then Anita spoke. “Mrs. McKay, let me have your car keys. You can live here but you shouldn’t be behind the wheel. It’s just not safe. I’ll take you wherever you want to go in the mornings. If you need anything at night, Cameron can drive you. We don’t come often enough anyway.”

Cameron’s mother studied Anita’s face, uncertain if she recognized her own daughter-in-law.

“And you can call us,” Anita said. “even if there is a man in the fridge, but don’t call the police.”

.....

J.D. Frost lives with his wife in Arab, AL. His novels, Dollface and Face2Face, are set in Chattanooga, TN. jdfrost4@gmail.com

I WALK A CROOKED LINE ON A TIGHTROPE WITHOUT A SAFETY NET

Carey Link

1.

I found 5 centimeters after a shower.
It's wiry, defuse, bilateral, inoperable...
What did I miss--
What was I doing in the months it took to multiply?

2.

Who are the shadows I will meet?
What are the signs—
colors—language—passages—arches—
customs—traditions—
How will they change in a breath?

A conversation with Hercules and Apollo—
A toss in the arid open.

.....

Carey Link works at Redstone Arsenal. She holds a degree in Psychology from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and is currently studying for a master's degree in counseling at Faulkner University. Her chapbook is What it Means to Climb a Tree. careylpoet@yahoo.com



THE BRICK PATH

Mike Jeffcoat

Digital Photograph

Mike Jeffcoat lives in Abbott, AL, and works in computer technology. He specializes in indoor and wedding photography, and enjoys street photography.

THIRTEEN REASONS I'LL NEVER BE A SAINT

Jerri Beck

I.

Once I hid on the river bank
so Granny couldn't make me
pull tobacco worms.

II.

In the tenth grade, I cut
P.E. and played poker behind
the Whittier First Baptist Church.

III.

I stole packs of cigarettes
from my daddy, thinking
he wouldn't notice.

IV.

I forgot the Alamo.

V.

The man who became
my sister's first husband
put his hand on my breast.
And I left it there.

VI.

For the bowling league's luncheon, I place
the bakery's masterpiece on my own
cake carrier. When asked for the recipe,
I say: *It's a family secret.*

VII.

I split infinitives and dangle participles.

VIII.

I have coveted Buffy Saint Marie's hair
and Joanne Woodward's husband.

IX.

I don't care who wins the Iron Bowl, the Super Bowl,
the Sugar Bowl, the Orange Bowl, or the Rose Bowl.

X.

I have not loved my neighbors.

XI.

I continue to climb apple trees,
play with snakes, and help
plow under the garden in the fall.

XII.

My cat believes she is my god,
her box the altar
where I kneel to worship.

XIII.

Later tonight ...

.....

*Jerri Beck is originally from North Carolina but currently calls Birmingham home. A retired writer /editor, she now spends her time writing, bowling, and volunteering with students at Avondale Elementary School. **aphra@att.net***

A GREAT NEW LIFE

Liz Reed

My father died at his home in Florida on a November day many years ago. My parents had been married a few months shy of 50 years when Daddy took his own life. Shattered but always stoic, Mother bore her painful dismay with customary strength. She had always subordinated herself to my father's wishes and never disagreed, at least aloud, with his strong political leanings and pronouncements. A Goldwater Republican, he was a member of the John Birch Society, Ku Klux Klan, White Citizens' Council, Sons of the American Revolution, the NRA, and anything else he could join to support his idea of what was right with America. He delighted in his closed mind and his bourbon; my brothers and I had no inkling of what our mother felt, or feared. Daddy had left her financially secure; she was born emotionally strong; but what did she believe? We had never known and I worried about her future.

Our family of five flew home for the funeral and though Mother had besieged us not to tell the children the circumstances of my father's death, Jim and I decided it would be healthier for them to know. After arriving in Tampa, renting a car, and settling into our hotel rooms, we held a family meeting and presented them with the reality of my father's choice. There were questions...and answers...and tears...and hugs...but they bore it well. We drove the 25 miles to my home town where there were more tears and more hugs, but no questions; there wouldn't have been any answers.

Six weeks later, our daughter, a student at the Alabama School of Fine Arts, danced as Clara in *The Nutcracker*. To give Mother a break from the arduous task of new widowhood, we planned for her to come to for a visit. As part of the gift, I asked what she would like to do during her visit: watch her granddaughter dance, of course, meet our friends, have her hair cut by my favorite stylist, and meet the man who married Jim and me, a pastoral counselor about whom she had heard much. That is what we planned.

I hosted a luncheon for my friends and their mothers. It had never occurred to me to tell Mother that some of our friends are black so she was surprised to find herself in the company of one guest who lived on Dynamite Hill in the 1960s, whose husband was a fearless leader of the Civil Rights movement, whose home had been bombed more than once by the Klan.

Mother was polite, of course, and very conversational with all the guests. She met a white friend who had opened her home as a safe meeting place for Dr. Martin Luther King and others who visited Birmingham as part of the struggle to establish a new frontier in Civil Rights. Later in the afternoon, a friend who had not been able to attend the luncheon because she was having her hair done in cornrows, came for a visit and brought a lovely torte to have with tea in our kitchen. I watched as my mother conversed with a beautifully stunning woman who had been an assistant to the mayor of Detroit before moving to Birmingham.

Shortly after Hildreth left, came another friend who was a field representative for U.S. Senator Jeremiah Denton, much more in Mother's comfort zone. I excused myself briefly and left them to visit. When I went back to the kitchen I heard my mother saying to Philip, "We don't really know how we got Elizabeth in our family."

The next day we headed to the beauty shop. As Jim cut her hair he chatted merrily about "Jerry." It was common in those days for gays and lesbians to omit personal pronouns when discussing their friends or partners so the word "he" never was uttered. As we headed home, Mother asked me about Jerry. Without pause, I told her that Jerry owned an art gallery, had been an Amtrak attendant, enjoyed the outdoors and was very creative – never, of course, using a personal pronoun.

Finally, Mother said, "Elizabeth, is Jerry a man or a woman?"

"A man," I said.

"So, Jim is gay?"

"Yes."

For a few miles there was complete silence except for the terrific racket going on as new experiences, new ideas, new perceptions jostled for their rightful places in her heart. And all the while I wondered about her future, about whether she would continue to live under the cloud of hatred and bigotry or open herself up to a new world.

"Well," she said, "I've met your white friends and your black friends. I've met your Republican friends and your Democrat friends. Now I've met a gay friend. Have I met a lesbian yet?"

With that question, I knew she was going to have a great new life.

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Liz Reed is the Art and Layout Editor of Birmingham Arts Journal. She lives with her husband, Jim Reed, on Birmingham's Southside. lizreedartist@gmail.com

TOOTH DECAY

Janet I. Buck

I feel a lump inside my breast,
consider it a garlic clove,
catch its scent beneath my
tattered fingernails,
go back to sleep, dreaming
of the mammogram I should have
gotten years ago. Our porch swing's
creaking as it moves.
Rusted screws are no surprise.

Too many other troubles brew
with morning coffee every day.
This is just a sly aside of destiny,
like rubbing tongues across
the acorns of old teeth.
Can't put everything that's wrong
in crock pots just to stew for hours.
I'll shake garlic from a jar—
all my dread will disappear.
In the end, we all play bridge
with tattered cards, aces fall
from baggy sleeves.

If I pickle every mini-cuke I eat,
my veins will fill with vinegar.
Despite edema in my calf,
I'm eating twelve potato chips,
the biggest ones inside the bowl.
No time to watch alyssum buds
become thick bags of cotton balls,

float the air before
they hit their graves of dirt.
I study peach geraniums,
wish against all wishes lost,
their petals last through August days.

Dots are rubbing off the dice.

.....

Janet Buck is a seven-time Pushcart Nominee and the author of three collections of poetry. Her work has appeared in BLUE PEPPER and Boston Literary Magazine; new poetry will appear in Offcourse, Mistfit Magazine, Antiphon, and PoetryBay. jbuck22874@aol.com

“People may spend their whole lives
climbing the ladder of success only to
find, once they reach the top, that the
ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.”

—Thomas Merton

THE BEAUTIFUL CHICKEN

Elizabeth S. Sztul

A long, long time ago in a far, far away Communist country, there lived a chicken. She was young and beautiful and she strutted around in arrogance, in the manner of those with youth and beauty. She was vain and lazy, and thought that laying eggs was something the “little chickens” did, but beneath her.

The beautiful chicken and her plainer coop companions belonged to my grandmother and resided in the little town of Opole in the West-most part of Poland. They happily scraped the ground of grandma’s garden, feasted on grain she threw them, and listened carefully when the alpha hen reminded them that “there is no free lunch, and if you don’t lay eggs, you will be lunch.” This golden rule was strictly enforced by grandma— a woman of hardy German stock whose motto was “work till you drop” and who quickly dispatched non-laying chickens to their maker on the chopping block. And to inspire and motivate the chickens, the chopping block with the ax on top was placed right in front of the coop. Grandma worked hard and expected her chickens to do the same.

I met the beautiful chicken in the summer of 1966, when I was 11. My family had the habit of going camping at the seashore for the summer, although it escapes me to this day why the icy-cold Baltic Sea, which opens to the North Sea, which in turn opens to the Arctic, was deemed the perfect vacationing spot. That fateful summer, my father, my grandma and I were to vacation together. My mother would be absent because the Polish army, for which she was an accountant, was holding military exercises with the Soviet troops, and she was refused a holiday leave. Why an accountant in Opole was essential for military exercises on the Polish-Russian border in the East was not obvious to anyone, but nevertheless, one fine morning in July, my father, my grandma and I started packing the car for the drive to the sea.

First went in the tents and the bedding, the towels and the sheets, then the suitcases with clothing, then pots and cooking utensils, and finally the food. This was 60s Communist Poland; there were no restaurants, and the few stores that were open had nothing that a sane person would want to eat. So we packed all the food we were going to eat over the next three weeks. In went loaves of bread, bags of potatoes, rice, macaroni, strands of kielbasas, cured hams, rings of aged cheese, jams and pickles, tomatoes,

cucumbers and radishes, and whatever else we normally ate at home. We packed enough to sustain us through breakfast and supper, knowing that we would buy fish from local fishermen for dinner.

As we were piling into the loaded car, Grandma scanned her garden in a last farewell and spotted the beautiful chicken. A grand idea occurred to her: since the chicken hadn't been laying, Grandma did a quick cost-benefit analysis and decided we would bring the chicken with us, fatten her up for a week or so and then make chicken fricassee, chicken cutlets, chicken wings, and chicken soup over the camp fire.

And so, with my father and my grandmother on the front seat and me with the beautiful chicken in the back, we started our drive to the shore. Father was in high humor and was singing a slightly off-color Russian song he learned somewhere in Azerbaijan during his walk from a Siberian labor camp back to Poland. I was much too young to know that my father was an officer in the Polish army when WWII erupted and that he was one of the lucky few who were not shot by the Russians and instead was sent to Siberia for hard labor. Much later, I learned the story of his survival, and how at the end of the war when the guards opened the camp gates and simply said, "go," he walked more than a thousand miles back home. To me, watching his balding head from the comfort of the back seat, he was just Father and there wasn't much more I could say about him.

He was leaning hard on the steering wheel, concentrating on driving the bouncing car, with pots clanking in the trunk as he navigated the roads full of potholes and tried to miss the biggest ruts. He regularly swore at the hay-laden carts that would block our way, and Grandma would shoot him a disapproving look, but then smile and continue to mumble her prayers in German, trying not to fall asleep.

The beautiful chicken was remarkably well behaved and only clucked now and then when we hit a particularly bad pothole and she had to use her wings to reseat herself. She seemed to enjoy the trip, and probably imagined that the whole excursion was for her benefit—she was that full of herself!

I soon realized that the chicken was plotting something. She perched on the back window of the car and with one beady eye was pretending to appreciate the outside scenery while the other one was busy assessing the dynamics of the car occupants. It slowly dawned on me that despite being beautiful, arrogant, vain and lazy, the chicken was also smart. And that she remembered the alpha hen's admonition and was starting to worry that "if

someone is taking you on a lovely trip to the seashore, you better believe they are expecting something from you—maybe, just maybe, they would like you for lunch."

And so the chicken followed closely our interactions, trying to figure out whom in our little group had the power of life and death. She dismissed me quickly and focused on the two bigger humans in front. The muscular one with the short hair and driving the car seemed to be the male of the species and quite sure of himself, so maybe he was the decider. But then the chicken remembered that it was the alpha hen that ruled the roost, and that despite his size and bravado, the rooster was afraid of her. She also remembered, and it made her shudder, the quick efficiency with which Grandma dispatched wayward chickens on the chopping block. So maybe the smaller one, the old one with the bun on her neck called the shots. The chicken watched closely, and, sure enough, the little one would tell the muscular one to stop the car and he always stopped and did as he was told. And now the chicken knew—the old woman rules! And now was as good a time as any to start kissing ass.

The chicken started her offensive the minute we unloaded the car. She faithfully followed my grandmother, never strayed, was always present and smiling at her — yeah, that chicken knew how to smile when she wanted to. Over the following days, the chicken intensified her campaign. She ate from grandma's hand, looked lovingly into her eyes, and disgraced all poultry by sitting in grandma's lap and letting herself be petted. She was shameless in her adulation! But it worked. Grandma was amused by the chicken's antics, and a week and a half later the chicken was still very much alive. Worst of all, grandma started to lie for the chicken. She had the nerve to tell us that the chicken wasn't fat enough to make a meal quite yet but I knew the chicken had her in her beautiful claws!

We had fish for dinner every day, and after a week and a half of nothing but fish, I started having nightmares of sprouting gills. I knew I had to do something fast. Sunday was approaching, and so I began nagging my grandmother about the chicken. I wanted chicken cutlets, chicken wings, chicken salad, grilled chicken liver. I was starved for chicken! I was Grandma's first and forever favorite grandchild, and she was torn between the chicken and me. The chicken's life was hanging in the balance. I had to push Grandma over the chicken edge so I started to pretend I wasn't feeling

well and needed chicken soup to recover. Grandma was convinced, and the chicken's days were numbered. But I underestimated the chicken.

This chicken was no fool; she saw right through my plan and she ante'd the game. On Saturday morning, a day before EDD (estimated day of decapitation) she laid an egg! I knew then that I was beat! There was no hope of a chicken dinner now. A laying hen was a valuable asset, and as a provider of fresh eggs was as good as gold. To seal the deal and to show off, she laid two eggs on Sunday! Clearly the chicken was thriving in the sea air. It was all over. My dreams of chicken fricassee were shattered and I resigned myself to piscatorial meals for the rest of our stay. The chicken winked and smiled triumphantly at me, and out of spite continued to lay two eggs a day for the duration of our seashore sojourn.

When the time came to head back home, the chicken and I again sat in the back of the car, glaring at each other. If looks could kill, that chicken would self-combust into nuggets. After we arrived in Opole, the chicken was released into Grandma's garden and, with victorious clucking, rejoined her coop companions. Of course she was a blabbermouth and had to brag to the other hens about her triumph, and I swear I could hear all of them cackling at me as she told the story.

The beautiful chicken lived a long and happy chicken life in Grandma's garden, but in the end I had my revenge. Ultimately, when the chicken stopped laying eggs, she lost her head on the chopping block. And since revenge is a dish best served cold, the chicken was cooked, and then diced and folded into aspic to be served on chilled lettuce leaves.

I have learned two important life lessons from this experience: first, just because you are beautiful, vain and lazy doesn't mean you are not smart and can't do great things; and second, provided with the right motivation, anyone can lay an egg.

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Elizabeth S Sztul, PhD, is a professor in the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Department of Cell, Developmental and Integrative Biology. Before coming to UAB, she served on the faculty at Princeton University. esztul@uab.edu

GREY ROSE

Noel Conneely

I am the grey rose.
I take my colour from the sand.
At night I listen to lost prophets
call out in desert dreams.
God lives in the air
so when they pray
their fingers close on nothing.
The sword they bring down on chance
carves it into sliced certainty.
They carry nothing but still
their feet indent the endless way.
They lie until dawn on my prunings.
The pain they glory in
does not make them whole.

.....

Noel Conneely has had poems in Poetry Ireland, Willow Review, Cimarron Review, Coe Review, Yellow Medicine Review, and other publications in Ireland and the US. noelscon@hotmail.com

“When we remember that we are all
mad, the mysteries disappear and life
stands explained.”

—Mark Twain



SELF PORTRAITS

20" x 16"

Acrylic on Canvas

Annie Rose Allen, age 9
Bella Dragon, age 10

Molly Wright, age 12
Witt Kessler, age 10

Elodie Shirley, Age 5
Amelia Rose Harp, Age 4

Sloane Powell, Age 5
Harper Godbee, Age 4

Liza Snyder (see Centerfold, BAJ Volume 12, Issue 2) teaches art classes for adults and children in her studio near 30a in the Florida panhandle. www.lizasnyderart.com

BUNICU DOES ORANGE BEACH

Alina Stefanescu

While everyone pledged allegiance to the hallowed fabric, I murmured the immigrants' incantation: "Lord, just give my parents the perfect defection and I'll mow any lawn you throw my way..."

In a sense, my prayer was answered. I left the defector's dress at the door of the US Immigration and Naturalization Services, exchanged it for more suitable citizen-style garb. But the relics of my Romanian birth persisted in a subterranean form and prevented me from becoming wholly absorbed in American culture. Over time, the relics faded from sight and buried themselves within my bones. Subversion hides deep in the marrow of me. I know this because *home* still smells Romanian — carries the pungent aroma of cabbage boiling on the stove. Cabbage is a story unto itself, but the connotations of a word lack narrative arc and I'm aiming for what the sport of baseball calls a home run. I'm aiming for nothing less than solid American pie.

There are words that straddle the boundary of native country and homeland. My grandfather is one of these words. He stayed Romanian. Or, at least, he remains handled by the Romanian word for grandfather. He remains *Bunicu*, unconjugated, never the *faux* transplant. In a garden I maintain with native plants, we are a non-native species. Possibly invasive. The neighbors are all heirloom.

Bunicu is 95 years old and he knows how to drink a beer on the beach. It's one of the few skills he has maintained with fluency. Last year, Bunicu accompanied us on our annual seaside vacation.

"I'm going to float on my back like a turtle," he announced in Romanian.

When he leaned back into the shallow water, he sank like a mill stone. I grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him up, a stunned expression on his face. A cavalcade of confusion and surprise crossed Bunicu's brow as he stared, eyes wide, muttering, "I don't know, I don't know, my body just wouldn't listen when I told it to swim..."

Enter soothing remarks from female voice.

"But I KNOW how to swim...", he shook his head and then began to flick the sand from his arm.

Soothing remarks from female voice who hopes he learned his lesson. The plans for summer vacations begin again. Bunicu expresses an opinion.

“I’d like to go to Orange Beach this year,” he declares, basing his pro-beach case on the enormous amount of fun experienced last year while perfecting his breast stroke. Bewildered, I find myself bereft of any stories except the ones which respond affirmatively to his request.

Bunicu beats our toddler, our infant, and our middle-schooler for the title of Chief Complainer during the five-hour drive to the shore. His skin hangs beneath his eyes like ill-packed luggage. We rent a boat and plan an island adventure. So I beg him to wear a life jacket during our boat ride to the small unpopulated island that plays paradise to young drinkers and couples hoping to escape prying eyes.

"But I KNOW how to swim...", he shakes his head and then begins to wipe the sand from his arm.

Soothing remarks from female voice return.

He gets very angry, explaining that he *knows* how to swim and that he has been alive for 60 years more than me or my husband or those kids.

Soothing remarks from female voice beg him to reconsider. To consider the present in light of the recent past. Female voice (my own, it seems) explaining that the law in America requires any elderly folks including veterans to wear life-jackets in boats once they have passed the distinguished age of 80. Female voice insists that it is an honor, a recognition of wisdom, to see an elderly person wearing said life jacket, as it indicates their long life and success. Female voice complicit in gendered lies. He accepts this with a grunt, slips his bony arms into the orange life jacket. When we arrive at the island, he looks around and drinks a Coors light, watching the shadows made by passing gulls in the sand. Bunicu sees things differently—sees things like a man who never felt the hot sarcophagus of defection in his bones. A man who never made the choice between one citizenship and another.

I do what I can to bridge the differences. I make up stories, a beach for us to stand upon, knowing I can’t protect him from the way in which everything looks unfamiliar. Even love tastes salty; the word feels flimsy on the tongue. Mostly, I watch in wonder. And keep the line open to soothing remarks from a female voice.

.....

Alina Stefanescu was born in Romania and raised in Alabama. She lives in Tuscaloosa with her family. She has been published in PoemMemoirStory, Kindred, small po[r]tions, and Rivet, among others.

www.alinastefanescu.com

LIFELINES

Sophia Pandeya

the road's gray snakes
through a sieve of sweaty palms
once was rain, now straw pales
beside the brilliant autumn gold
of vineyards this year
I will see the gradual
denudation won't miss
heart skipping tumbling airport chaos
the sudden grey underground another river this
time cold metal steel faces and feet
as though the river itself were a centipede
so envy birds that fly without luggage
the lightness! swooping into vast nothing
& everything-ness a biker is swerving
into view I pull to the knobby median
down the steep curve now the three yellow arrows
look like birds I am always leaving leaving leaving
call them the Three Fates the wheels
they are spinning are yours
float the air before
they hit their graves of dirt.
I study peach geraniums,
wish against all wishes lost,
their petals last through August days.
Dots are rubbing off the dice.

.....

Sophia Pandeya is a widely published Asian-American poet whose new book is
Peripheries. sophia.pandeya@gmail.com

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Shawn Wray

I climb out of the chamber and remove my helmet. My jumpsuit is soaking wet. One of the interns helps me get out of it. My clothes I have on underneath are dry as a bone. It looks like they've fixed that leaky seal.

"Was it a good jump?" the intern asks as she puts my jumpsuit into a bin. I shrug.

"It was okay," I tell her. "Kind of boring. Disabling a hot rod in Iowa."

"What year?" she asks.

"1957," I reply. That's all the info that I can give her because it's all that I have. I did what my work order said and nothing more. The truth is that I don't know why I had to disable that car. Maybe some kid was going to drag race it the next day and get killed. Maybe now that I did my job he'll grow up to be the president. Hell, for all I know he'll grow up to be the antichrist. I just follow my work orders. It's my job.

I go into the break room and pour a cup of coffee. It's a necessity for the night shift. Management has just put up some new regulatory posters and I'm looking over them. One has to do with health insurance. The other one reminds us that the chambers are not for personal use. I chuckle. The new QA guy takes his job serious. I've been here for ten years. I know there's no way to track jumps. The guy that sits in the control room watches the timeline for subtle changes. Anything else is off his radar. These posters are just a scare tactic.

Some of the hot black liquid splashes out of my mug onto the counter. I'm wiping it up when Phil comes in. He pulls down a mug and starts to pour a cup.

"You jump yet?" he asks. I tell him yes and that I have another one after lunch. He says he's headed to the chamber now. His work order says he's headed to the old west. He's supposed to keep some guy out of a general store for five minutes. That's it. Talk to him, knock him down, or punch him out. It doesn't matter.

Phil heads down the hall and I go back to my cubicle. The red light is blinking on my phone. I have a message. It's probably Carol. She usually wants me to stop off for milk or something on my way home.

“Henry?” she was saying. There’s an edge to her voice that I’m not used to. “Oh, god! I’ve got your machine.” Her voice lowers to a whisper. “I hit someone with my car!”

My heart jumps into my throat. She goes on telling me what happened but I only hear pieces of it. Sweat breaks out on my forehead and it runs down my cheeks.

“...Main Street...around 6:00...so much blood...had a few drinks...didn’t see him...arrested...help!”

I hang up the phone and put my head on my desk. The whole room is quiet. I can hear my heartbeat. It feels like it’s never going to slow down.

I could go bail her out. She’ll have to go to court. We’ll have to hire a lawyer. She could go to prison. I can’t let that happen.

There’s another poster like the one in the break room on the wall across from me. I grin. After I get my next work order its 3 a.m. I get into another jumpsuit. The intern hands me my work order. I’m headed to the twenties. There are other instructions but I’ll read them when I get there. It’s hard to read through this helmet.

The pod closes and I punch in my destination. I’m a little dizzy for a second. When I get my faculties back I’m standing on the sidewalk outside a restaurant. I’m not in my jumpsuit. I’m wearing clothes that look right for the time. It’s a holographic projection controlled by the pod which is hanging out in the timestream, waiting for me to finish.

I finish my task quickly. All I have to do is claim a coat from the coat room. The ticket was attached to my work order. I don’t know why. Maybe it belonged to someone that will now be delayed from doing something later tonight. They’ll have to spend time looking for their coat. I may have prevented a murder or a robbery. It could be significant. It could not.

Once I’m back in the pod I skip the recall button and punch in new coordinates. I’m headed back to 5:00 this evening. That should be enough time to stop Carol from getting into the car.

I hit *activate*. A moment later I’m climbing out of the pod but I’m back in the office. I should be at my house. Something’s wrong.

There’s a guy looking at me from the control room window. I know immediately who he is. He’s the new QA guy.

“We have a policy against using the pods for personal use,” he says. I tell him that I don’t know what he means but he says that he’s installed software that tracks it all. He says he was conducting a quality audit. I know he’s

figured me out. He presses a button on the control board and I feel sleepy. I'm vaguely aware that I'm being immersed in water. I'm being put into the pod.

When the sleepiness passes I'm not in the pod anymore. I'm standing on the sidewalk a few miles from the office. It's daylight, but just barely. The sun is going down. It must be the next evening.

I start to cross the street. A car comes around the corner going way too fast. It's out of control. I catch a glimpse of the driver's face. It's Carol.

It's not the next day. It's earlier tonight. The car gets closer...faster.

I realize now that I've failed the audit.

.....

Shawn Wray writes in a variety of styles and genres. He resides in the Birmingham, AL, area with his family where he works and attends classes at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. swray1977@gmail.com

“Everybody is ignorant, only on different subjects.”

—Will Rogers

CENTRAL STATE

Tina Mozelle Braziel – 2014 Hackney Literary Award – Third Place Poetry

Once the world's largest mental institution, Central State Hospital in Milledgeville, GA, has six cemeteries where an estimated 30,000 people are buried. Their graves are marked by numbered iron stakes.

Oaks creak on unseen hinges along the hill.

The iron markers, tilted or thrown aside
by mowers, murmur and rust.

Wait.

Now that the trees are swinging,
she wanders out, masking her face

with her hands. Staggers

down the slope, bends

as if gathering pecans.

She stoops again, searching

the engraved numbers for her own.

I follow, say nothing,

as if I too were shedding my name.

.....

Tina Mozelle Braziel, a graduate of the University of Oregon MFA program, directs the Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Her poetry has appeared widely and her chapbook is Rooted by Thirst. tinamozelle@gmail.com

THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS

Allen Johnson, Jr.

In the spring of 1998, Ten Speed Press published my book, *A Breeze in the Willows*. The publisher did a superb job designing the book. When the book was printed, much to my pride and joy, I found we had a little gem. I wanted to make a good effort to introduce and promote the release of our book, and therein lay another story.

When *A Breeze in the Willows* was published, I sent out advance copies in hopes of reviews. I generated a list of publishers from my old prep school alumni directory. One of these was the publisher of the Little Rock *Democrat Gazette*.

He received the book at home and, not recognizing my name, sent the package to the newspaper to have it “checked out.” The paper sent the package to the main post office. By the time the post office got the package, somebody had used the word bomb. The bomb squad was called. Soon they had evacuated the post office and cordoned off two blocks around it. The police and firemen were called in. There were nine emergency vehicles. A television news truck arrived. Two men from the bomb squad suited up in body armor snuck up on my little book of poems and blew it up!

A young reporter poked through the remains of the package, found the address label and did what somebody should have done in the first place—he called me up.

After I heard what had happened and had stopped laughing, the reporter said he was writing a front-page story for the paper, and did I know why the “panic button” had been pushed? I said, “Yes” and told him about the following poem:

DANGER! OVERINFLATED TOAD
Conceited? Yes, he’s so puffed up
One fears he may explode.
An ever-present danger when
A toad’s too full of Toad!

“Clearly,” I told the reporter, “this poem is the reason the bomb squad was called out!”

.....

Allen Johnson, Jr. was raised in Mountain Brook, AL, attended Mountain Brook Elementary School, the University of Alabama and the University of Miami, FL. He served in the Army in Germany and founded the Vermont State Craft Center. Johnson lives on Mercer Island, WA, near Seattle. His award-winning series of youth novels can be studied at www.Blackwaternovels.com.

allenacreejr@gmail.com

“Things never were ‘the way they used to be.’ Things never will be ‘the way it’s going to be someday.’ Things are always just the way they are for the time being. And the time being is always in motion.”

—Alexander Evangeli Xenopouloudakis

WHAT MATTERS

Barry Marks

On the morning I realized that I was dying
nothing else seemed to matter.
My wife tried to interest me in unimportant things:
our children, her feelings, the dishes,
and I just walked
away.

I went to work but sat calculating
how many years I had left
according to insurance industry actuarial averages
and then, of course, I quit because
it hardly seemed important whether
this piece of paper or that was signed
or this number or that went into
the bank account I would only have
for another 40-odd years.

I moved to some place,
which place didn't matter.

I tried to read
but nothing seemed worth the effort;
fiction was just someone else's dreams,
some other dying person's story.
Biographies and histories were just about
people and things that happened.
Science was interesting for a while I suppose,
then even it seemed trivial.
I did not mourn the death of newspapers
because the news was hardly newsworthy;
I surfed the internet until I realized that
while it was forever,
none of it made any difference.

But there was math,
and that alone seemed worth
my time, such as it was.

At first I turned away because every equation,
each arcane pairing or halving,
could be nullified simply multiplying by zero,
but that was before I learned
that anything, simple or complex,
infinitely small or infinitely large,
could be divided by zero
and produce anything, everything,
nothing, something,
something else
Something more.

.....

Barry Marks is a Birmingham attorney and author of three award-winning books of poetry and several acclaimed chapbooks. His poetry has appeared in over 100 journals and anthologies. Barry was Alabama's Poet of the Year for 1999.

barry@leaselawyer.com

“I prefer the errors of enthusiasm to the
indifference of wisdom.”

—Anatole France



SET THE WOODS ON FIRE

Ben South

3.5' x 4.5'

Mixed Media on Artist Canvas and Quilt Pieces

Ben South's art combines the sophistication of French Post-Impressionists with the simplicity of Southern folk artists. He lives in Cullman, AL, and is represented by Midtown Gallery in Nashville, and his work can be seen at

www.southernness.com sthrnss@bellsouth.net

REEFER AND JESUS

Dave Swan

Back in the late '70s, you could usually find Jesus lounging on the porch of the old Victorian house on 16th Avenue South in Southside. Reefer was around too but he was the shy one, apt to be camping out under the kitchen table or snoozing in the big antique fruit bowl when it was empty. Jesus was big and black as a country midnight. Every Halloween, Ellie put on a witch's outfit and she and Jesus greeted the delighted trick-or-treaters together.

Of course, the names were a constant conversation piece. If somebody wanted to know what possessed her to name an orange tabby cat after an illegal substance, Ellie always replied, "Because no matter how dry it gets around here, I'll always have Reefer." When asked the same question about Jesus, she'd say that when he was a kitten he was just the sweetest thing she'd ever seen and was the only living being who loved her unconditionally, not asking for anything in return. So she decided it fit.

There was talk about Ellie, too. The prevailing story was that she was a Deadhead who'd fallen away from the mothership. Some people even claimed she'd had an affair with Bob Weir, who was the best-looking one in the band. She did love their music; on any given night you'd hear *St. Stephen*, *Uncle John's Band*, or *Ripple*, her favorite, drifting out of the windows. But mostly she was in a perpetual in-between state, sometimes working at a bookstore, other times waitressing at different spots. She'd gotten her teaching certificate but then discovered, as she put it one night over beers at Grundy's, "I just couldn't make those kids plow through all that junk and waste their time like I wasted mine."

Her boyfriend Luke was sort of like her, as he had some education past high school and figured he'd get more someday, but in the meantime was a welder at U.S. Steel. On their first date, when she said without explanation that she found Jesus down by the railroad tracks, he grinned and said,

"It never happened in church for me either."

Later that night, he woke up, saw Reefer staring down at him from the headboard, and felt sweet Jesus curled up around his feet.

But the next year, layoffs started and Luke couldn't cover his share of the rent, moved someplace cheaper, and pretty soon they weren't together at all. Ellie struggled too and even tried teaching again, but could only get hired as a substitute once in a while. She was spending a lot more time on

that porch with the “boys,” and folks still stopped by and fussed over them, but people who walked by late at night sometimes thought they heard crying.

Then in August they were all out there one evening when the phone rang. Ellie ran to get it and while she was talking, a late-summer thunderstorm suddenly blew over the mountain. Before she could get them inside, lightning lit up the whole sky, a massive *crash!* shook the earth, and Jesus and Reefer, spooked, bolted into the night.

In a panic she called Luke and he came with a couple of his friends. They rounded up a few more, and soon the posse was out all over Southside, seven or eight or maybe a dozen eventually, peering into yards and trees with flashlights and calling, “*Reefer! Jesus! Reefer! Jesus, honey, where are you? Is that Reefer? I think I saw Jesus over there! Here, Jesus! Here, Reefer! REEFER! Can you see him? JESUS! Reeeee-ferrrrr! Jeeeee-ssuuuussss!*”

The police got more than one call, but had real emergencies to tend to after the storm and never responded. After about an hour, one of Luke's buddies spotted Jesus under a shed. Ellie came and gently lifted him out, hugging him and stroking his soaked fur and crying all at once. They didn't find Reefer before they finally called it a night, but a few days later there he was on the front steps like nothing happened.

They all left town soon afterward. A couple of years later, a letter arrived at the last place Ellie waitressed, where some of the rescue party still worked. Inside was a picture of her and Luke standing in front of a little house with Ellie holding the cutest little baby girl.

The letter said Reefer had recently died at the fairly ripe old kitty age of 14. Jesus had disappeared in the woods near the new house some time before. Ellie wrote that she'd been all broken up, but when she first held her daughter she felt just like she had when she got him, and so the baby was named Jessi, the closest girl name she could find. She also had two new tabbies and was thinking about calling them Fred and Barney. Or maybe Jerry and Hunter.

*“Reach out your hand if your cup be empty,
If your cup is full may it be again,
Let it be known there is a fountain,
That was not made by the hands of men”*

—*Grateful Dead*

Note: The cats in this piece are based on real felines but all of the humans are fictional. No kitties were harmed in the writing of this story.

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Dave Swan is a writer, editor, blogger, and former broadcast journalist. He divides his time between Atlanta and Inlet Beach, Florida. davesswan@gmail.com



CHIWEENIE COZENRY

Thomas N. Dennis

Hey! Cute dog you got there.

Yeah, she's unique, this houndess. Her name is Harpo Li.

Everybody thinks their dog is unique, you know?

But this one, she is *deeply* unique.

Nice name. Okay, tell me the unique thing, I know I can't avoid it now...

All right. You would not know it but this cute face —

Wait, do you mean the dog, or ...?

Well, both of us, though my wife, I mean, my *ex*-wife Lieza started it all, she started in training this little girl. She had the original idea. I suppose there was a tradition—well, there *was* that guy decades back, I forget his unpronounceable name, who painted the wings of sparrows—he's living off the street in Slovenia or some-such place, selling the birds to gullible tourists as the "American canary." Is it wrong to take mild advantage of a social milieu created by mindlessness?

[pause of silence]

I think I read about that. But with this one, you said you train her in ...?

Escape. How to nuzzle air vents aside, slip quickly out half-opened doors of all types, screen-chewing, you know, that sort of thing. Gotta hit the Kairos, roight my friend? She needs no training in being a cute dog.

How do you train a dog to escape, I don't get that.

This one is a genius—and one rewards genius. Lieza found out she likes a certain type of treat, and she says this works well.

I still don't—you've been selling the same dog again and again, is that it?

Yeah, I thought, I uh ... She had to know how to escape the people we sold her to.

Oh. For how much per? A hundred?

Two, usually. Harpo Li escapes after a few hours, and trots down to where we sit broiling her favorite meal – Gorton's fish-sticks – on the little cooker in our van.

Wow.

Yeah! And as far as the buyer knows, the dog just ran away. I had the idea of seeding the person's imagination by mentioning (as if by accident) the tendency of backyard raptors, the red-tailed hawk in particular, to swoop down without a cry, snag the beloved pet, and soar utterly, soundlessly away.

Can you, uh, can they really do that?

Oh sure now. You might hear a light *Yeep* but not much more. I think that helps the mark the next day when the dog's gone. They can tell a story about how a hawk might have come down and grabbed him.

Ohh! Does anything ever go wrong? She looks like a happy enough dog.

Hmm, well, yeah. There were some tight spots. We went into the second day, once, before she got out. North part of the state. They're huge Chiweenie folks up there.

. . . she just sleeps like that on your lap all the time?

Much of the down time. Seems so relaxed yet the slightest unaccustomed sound will perk those bat-ears up and off she goes. Lotsa potential dog energy.

So you and your ex-wife saw nothing wrong with making a tiny dog complicit in your depredations?

Wuh—

Sir, I am with the – well, I guess you know by now.

No!!

That's right.

Flee, Harpo Li, flee!

.....

Thomas N. Dennis lives and writes near Lovick, AL. He is the author of two memoirs, a collection of short stories, and other works. He is a practicing yogi.

thomas.neil.dennis@gmail.com

ROSA'S TRANSFORMATION

Sarah DeArmond

Rosa hauled the full length mirror from the basement into her room. It was dirty. Darn! She would have to start cleaning it in order to see her reflection. For the past year and a half, Rosa had banned all full length mirrors in her house and avoided them in public settings at all cost. She wanted her big reveal to really mean something.

This wasn't just any reveal. Three years ago Rosa and her long-time boyfriend had broken up. He said that he had gotten too busy with work and that it wouldn't be fair to her to drag her through it, but she knew the truth. It was her weight. Her boyfriend would often walk ahead of her in public and ignore her in social settings because of it. It hurt her still, to this day.

It made Rosa eat emotionally for two and a half years, until one day she realized that she was only hurting herself. Food may have been a quick source of comfort for her, but it had only hurt her long term. She finally decided to embark on a complete body transformation.

She started cleaning the mirror from the bottom first. It quickly revealed her toned legs and well defined thighs. She gave a crooked smile. In the past, her thighs had resembled cottage cheese and she was too insecure to wear shorts. Now that she truly got a good look at them, she saw just how chiseled they looked.

Next, as she continued cleaning the mirror, she saw her stomach. It was a lot more toned. Her eyes lit up. A few times, her ex had poked her stomach and told her to do some sit-ups. That hurt. She sure showed him!

She then saw her arms. Strong and muscular. Back in school, she had been laughed at for being physically weak and not being able to lift anything heavy. Now she could bench press with the best of them!

Rosa stopped cleaning the mirror. She sure had come a long way, but did she do all this just to prove others wrong? Who was all this for? She started thinking about the past year and a half. Rosa had impressed herself so much. She could lift weights, run five miles and hold a plank push-up for five minutes. The old Rosa would have just eaten a tub of ice cream, but the new Rosa radiated self-esteem. It was now clear to her that she really could do anything she set her mind to!

Rosa cleaned the top part and revealed her face. Tears started flowing as she looked at her whole body in the full length mirror. She looked amazing, but the transformation had only just begun. There would be new goals, but she knew she could handle it. She then thought about the old version of herself, the one that had often been teased and neglected, and she put her hand over her heart. That young girl didn't deserve to ever be forgotten. She deserved to be loved and she would always be kept in a safe place inside of her. Ready to comfort her at any and every low moment. "You are loved," she whispered.

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*Sarah DeArmond lives in Calera, AL. She lost 100 pounds and runs her own health blog at www.myhealthysite.wordpress.com. She has also been featured in Women's Health Magazine. **brockstar86@yahoo.com***

“Happiness? That’s nothing more than health and a poor memory.”

—Albert Schweitzer



Play House

Kay Vinson

24" x 30"

Mixed Media

Birmingham artist Kay Vinson, arranges textures, shapes, and found objects, then adds layer upon layer of glazes to create a multisensory experience for the viewer.

Play House is part of the art collection of Peggy Bonfield.

www.wildwoodarts.net

STRAGGLERS OF THE ORPHANAGE OPEN HOUSE DAY

Jim Reed

The library basement room is filled to overflowing with wandering patrons searching for books that librarians want ousted from their shelving.

Every kind of person you can imagine is here tonight, roaming the aisles, searching for just the right volumes to take home or to auction on eBay or to re-gift or just to collect but never read, or simply to place on the coffee table to look pretty...or perhaps even to read and cherish.

Here at the book sale, I am wending my way through the throngs, looking for a niche that everybody ignores, a corner bereft of shovers, space hoarders and aggressive acquirers. Ah! The Humor Section. Nobody looks there, so it's the perfect spot to seek treasure. I am alone in a sea of grabbers.

Wham! Plop! Wham! Plop!

What th- Where is that noise emanating from?

Wham! Plop! Wham! Plop!

I peek around the corner of the next aisle to spy an intense woman who is stooping down to knee level, ignoring titles and subjects and authors and simply methodically grabbing one book at a time, scanning the back cover with a hand-held device, then slamming each book aside loudly and messily to make room for the next scan. Oblivious to others attempting to examine and open each book, she is working hurriedly, unsmiling and avid.

Wham! Plop! Wham! Plop!

I get it. She's working from a want-list of books that are sought by the hundreds on the Internet. She'll use ISBN numbers to fill some boxes, then ship them out of state to humongous used book entities that will sell them at the rate of thousands per day.

Wham! Plop! Wham! Plop!

Most people here are having a grand time. Kids sit on the floor and read, anxious moms grab titles they hope to read in their spare time and other titles they hope their kids will read, cookbook collectors search for their favorite recipes, history buffs search for Churchill and Durant and Ambrose and Herodotus, donors look for beach reads, teens seek vampires and zombies, nerds all have their specialties...

Then there are these two guys who have cordoned off a corner of the room where they accumulate stack after stack of books and guard them from

examination by others. These are out-of-town dealers who are not purchasing these stacks of books. They are simply roping them off so that they can leisurely pick out the few they want to take with them, leaving a jumble of volumes behind. First come, first served.

Now things are thinning out a bit and I can pick up a few more books to read. Now, as the books disappear, I look at what is left.

I am the only one who spends time in the philosophy section, so I silently converse with the oldies and make my selections. Then, when most of the assertive customers have left the building, I carefully look for the wonders they missed, the special books with intrinsic value that cannot be detected by tattooed numbers or overly zealous grabbers.

I find them and am pleased.

I eventually leave with my trove, bidding farewell to those straggling books that will never, ever sell, those orphans who are passed over again and again...books that once meant much to someone but now are passé or outmoded or untrendy or battered.

Where will these orphans go now? What will be the final book that no-one will purchase?

When I return at the end of the sale, I will spend some time with these volumes, searching for special traits hidden to the untrained eye. I'll find something worthwhile about them, mostly because nobody else took the time.

It's one of my guiltless pleasures, a game I play all by myself, taking a second and third look at these foundlings to see what they have to offer an uncaring world

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Jim Reed writes in Birmingham where he curates the Museum of Fond Memories at Reed Books. jim@jimreedbooks.com

HOW MOWGLI MADE A MARINE

T.K. Thorne

Early in my marriage, a stepson arrived on my doorstep every other weekend as a troubled 8-year-old. A learning disability imprisoned him as poor reader and student to the point that all his tests had to be read aloud to him. He didn't fit in. He knew it and acted out. Naturally, he hated the sight of books, and all my efforts to read to him were spurned. One day, a misbehavior earned him time-out, and I offered him his choice—either an hour in his room or sit with me while I read him one chapter of a book. (I know, I know—it's contrary to all behavioral advice to make reading a punishment, but I was at wits' end.)

He considered it and asked how long it would take to read a chapter.

“Probably about 15 minutes,” I said.

Fifteen minutes versus an hour. He wasn't bad at math and chose the chapter. I went to my collection of childhood books, my heart pounding. It thumped away in my chest, warning me that this could be my only chance with him. The books, stiff and dusty in their rows, whispered of cherished hours. Which to choose? I stopped at one, remembering pulling it from my mother's bookshelf, hopeful from the title, though the company it kept was grownup stuff. By the first chapter, I knew I had found treasure. Once again I pulled it out and took it back with me, clutched to my still thumping chest and sat with my stepson on the hard cement of the porch (part of the “punishment”).

“Here are the rules,” I said sternly. “You have to sit still and listen. I will read one chapter. After that it is up to you if you want to hear more or go.”

He agreed, and I opened the book. I read my best, in honor of all the hours my Granny read to me, her voice cracking with the effort to bring the characters to life. I hoped to reach a young mind with the gift she had given me. I read and did not look at the boy beside me, afraid to see on his face the boredom of a prisoner doing his time.

When I finished the last word of Chapter One, I snapped the book closed, deliberately keeping my voice matter-of-fact. “That's it,” I said.

“What do you want to do?”

There was a long hesitation—maybe it wasn't so long, but I remember it that way—a silence so deep, you could fall into it, and then one intense word from him—"Read."

In the years ahead of us, he would repeat that word many times. We finished the book, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, and moved on to many others. He began to sit next to me, at first to see the pictures, but when there were no pictures, he stayed to move his eyes over the words as I read. Eventually, I feigned a sore throat and asked him to read a sentence or two, and then a paragraph, and then a chapter, never criticizing as he stumbled and only offering help when he needed it.

One day, I poked my head in his room and asked if he was ready to read Part III of "our" current book.

"Already read it," he said. And once again my heart pounded, this time with mixed joy. He was reading on his own, voraciously, and we were never again to have those special moments together. But I am not complaining.

He read a lot about ordinary young boys becoming heroes, and I think it helped give him the courage to sign up for the Marines. Though not a physical boy—he played in the band and was ho-hum about sports—he thrived, and today is a successful career Marine with a wife and two sons I hope he will read to.

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T.K. Thorne is a former Birmingham police officer. "It was a crash course in life and what motivated and mattered to people," she says. Since her retirement, she has written extensively, and her works continue to receive literary awards and recognition. She writes at her mountaintop home in Springville, AL. <http://tkthorne.com/>



The non-profit Birmingham Arts Journal is sustained by its editors, donors and readers, with additional support from

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