

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 14 Issue 3



Produced without profit by dedicated volunteers who believe that exceptional works by the famous, not-yet-famous, and never-to-be famous deserve to be published side by side in a beautiful and creative setting.

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Front Cover: GAIA - 24" x 36" Acrylic on Canvas - *Chip Ghigna earned a BA degree in Studio Art from Auburn University. He has presented solo exhibitions of his paintings throughout Alabama and the Southeast and his work is seen in galleries and private collections in the US and France.*
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Back Cover: SERVE YOU - 16" x 20" 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. She lives in Dadeville, AL.* pamcope@yahoo.com

TIME

Jeff Kalafa

Time is of the essence, it's on your side,
and heals your wounds
It comes and goes but your time will come
Time is money but that's not why singers
try to save it in bottles
We all try to save it but have no place to put it
You can make it, take it, find it, lose it and waste it
Trial lawyers can buy time
Time is for acting, loving, starting, stopping,
and getting down
There's nothing like the right time
Singers can keep the right time
but they can't save it in bottles or anywhere else
Some of us have too much time, some too little
Some of us have no idea what it is or where it went
It's impossible to see it even though
it's standing still, flying by or marching on
Nice people give their time to friends
or donate it to charities
Pompous asses think theirs is too valuable
to give away
Some people have time on their hands
but can't wash it off
Some people are compelled to kill it
and don't care who they tell

.....

*Jeff Kalafa is primarily a songwriter. Originally from New Jersey, he's lived in south Florida for 23 years. Many of his articles have been published in newspapers and online. He'd rather write a book than read one. **jeffkalafa@yahoo.com***

THE LADY ON THE ELEVATOR

Stephen Edmondson

I want to tell you about a special day and a special lady on Elevator III in The Legal Towers Building on a bright June morning 13 years ago.

I got on the elevator with perhaps six others. The normal good morning greeting to them, nods to the strangers. As per usual, I scanned our group, and instantly my eyes fixed on a special lady, a very special lady. She was so beautiful, and perfectly dressed top to bottom. From her dark, brown, shiny heels, past sleek and perfectly curved calves to the skirt of a tailored outfit, she was complete. An off-white, perhaps light tan silk blouse with neat collar, and an artistic neck adorned with simple pearls. Her suit jacket surely was tailored also to her trim but very feminine body. A simple tan tam felt cap, pushed jauntily aside over her alabaster forehead, locks surely tucked neatly inside.

Men aren't supposed to know and appreciate things such as this, but there was variety in the colors of everything, yet all were shades of a soft brown and carefully blended with all else. Her makeup was perfectly matched to her face, soft and clean. A tasteful gold brooch. Expensive watch on a loose bracelet. A perfect mouth of sensitive lips, thin aquiline nose, and those eyes, those eyes that held me.

Deep and dark, a sadness that showed her intent to withdraw, to look above or through or around the rest of us. Eyes that spoke of something tragic in her past that still held her. As I stared at her, trying not to be obvious, we locked eyes again for the smallest of moments, and I felt I knew her hurt, but couldn't divine what it was. I wished that I could. I wanted to reach out to her, help or at least share her pain.

Then a strange notion came to me. I had to tell this goddess what I observed, and I had to do it honestly and nice. Why, I knew not, but this beautiful being needed to hear what I had to say. Even now I don't know why I felt driven to say what I did.

I looked straight into her face until I was sure I had her attention, yet there was what I surmised to be an invisible wall between us.

"Ma'am, pardon me a second, and forgive me for being so forward, but you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I don't know about styles and fashions, matching outfits and all that, but to me you seem perfectly matched in all that you are. You've got it. Body and soul. You're complete. You've really got it."

Suddenly I was embarrassed and rightly so. She dipped her head ever so slightly, then cut her eyes toward me, "Thank you. You are very kind." And to be sure, I was glad when the elevator stopped at my floor and I got off, hurriedly for me. I looked back, and there she was, looking straight at me, yet with a frozen expression I couldn't fathom. Perhaps she was smiling, as Mona Lisa, but more reserved. I discerned tears glistening in her eyes. This bothered me. What had I done?

I went on to my office, got busy planning my day. Still, the lady in the elevator held my thoughts. How did I ever get the nerve, be brazen enough, or careless even, to address this classy lady in such a personal manner? Was I perceived as rude? Worse yet, crude?

About an hour later, my assistant Sabrina called me from down the hall.

"Joanie on 17 said to ask you 'how did you know,' and said drop by her desk at lunch."

Joanie was the good-looking blonde who managed the front desk at Haskins & Taylor, a big advertising agency that took up the 17th floor. She knew most everyone in the building, maybe on the whole downtown block.

"She didn't say anything else? Do you know what she's talking about?"

Sabrina just shook her head no and said, "Go on up there and find out."

Joanie wasn't at the big reception desk, but a chipper young brunette in a dark blue dress was. Before I could ask about Joanie, she volunteered; "You must be Rudy. Joanie's waiting on you in the lounge," and motioned the direction. And there sat Joanie, munching on a sandwich. She motioned for me to get coffee and then to sit down. This was said with just a swoop of the hand, ending with her finger pointing to a seat next to her. I obeyed.

"How do you know Ms. St. Cloud?"

I shook my head. "I don't know a Ms. St. Cloud."

"Celeste St. Cloud, VP in Design here."

Joanie peered closely at me. "How did you know?"

"Joanie, I don't know her. What do you mean, 'How did I know'?"

"You met her on the elevator this morning. Commented on her outfit."

Oh, hells bells. I've messed up now. Have I got to go in and apologize? Has she got a big-shot husband that's going to set me straight? Or a mean boyfriend wanting to know about my advances?

"No, I don't know her. Why?"

"She called me back to her office this morning, wanted to know if I knew you."

When I told her I did, she told me about your meeting this morning. I told her that you could be silly or funny at times, but you were harmless.”

“So, what is the deal, Joanie? Was she complaining?” I didn’t know whether to expect a requiem or redemption.

Joanie smiled one of her sweet, knowing smiles.

“Then let me tell you a bit about Ms. St. Cloud. She’s recovering from a double mastectomy. Her hair hasn’t started growing back yet after chemo. She fears she has lost too much weight. She’s pale. She has missed a lot of work. She thinks she can’t do enough to justify her position, her salary. She says her husband looks at her in a nightie with thinly concealed disgust, seeing a scarred, breastless chest and a bald head. She fears she is losing him.”

“Damn,” I thought. “This woman has real troubles and I guess I just added to them. Why can’t I just keep my mouth shut?”

Joanie continued. “I knew all this about her beforehand. I thought she was losing her will to survive. Lord knows she has a lot on her plate. We’ve become friends and we talk a lot.”

She paused and continued, “When I entered her office, I could see she had been crying, but all the same, was smiling. She came around and hugged me, a long, warm hug, like filled with invisible emotion, perhaps an emotion only we girls could share and understand.”

“How did I fit in?” I was thinking.

“She was wiping tears aside as she spoke, as she told me of her morning. She held my hands firmly as she started to talk.”

Joanie hesitated a moment and then told me what Ms. St. Cloud had said to her.

“I was coming to work this morning, considering the futility of my life, considering resigning and going back to Connecticut to live what days I may have with my mother. Then this strange man on the elevator looked deep in my eyes and seemed to see my pain. He looked me over, not like most men do, but in a compassionate way. I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing. Then he apologized for his forward manner and told me very sincerely and directly I was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.”

Joanie smiled a crooked, knowing smile.

“Celeste had more to say. She said after meeting you this morning, she knew suddenly she wanted to live again, be that beautiful woman you saw. She decided to fight for all she had. She was going to get reconstructed. Start

back at the gym as soon as she could. Tackle the ad problems of her clients with a new vengeance. Go back to Sundance for a bright weekend, alone. She was near bubbling over with happy plans.”

Joanie continued her narrative, “When I stood to leave, Celeste rose, and we hugged again, and with tears now flowing down the cheeks of both of us.”

There was more. Celeste had spoken softly to Joanie, “I can be beautiful again! I am still beautiful. I’m really beautiful. That strange man told me. Just a few words from a strange man! Words I really needed to hear, words I feared never to hear again. And I believe him. I’ll stay beautiful, for him, for you, for me! He knew what I needed! I had to know, I just had to know, and he told me!”

Joanie hesitated, and I saw tears in her eyes. She added, “As I was opening the door to leave, Celeste pulled me back, a soft touch on my arm, tears flowing, a gentle question on her lips, ‘How did he know? How did he ever know?’”

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Stephen Edmondson of Homewood, AL, writes about characters in his life, past and present. A collection of his stories is in print, To Live and Die In Alabama.

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“I have gone back to paper, savoring each page and continuing to love that the books displayed on my bookshelves chart the journey of my life.”

—Jane Green

FIRST MEETING

Mark Burke

Rev your comet, make it howl,
roar a furrow
across the fields of night
sailing over the freeway bridge
on a growl to Orion.
Gun the engine,
tear the dark sky,
shout into the streaming air
as you rocket down
the throat of a concrete underpass,
stretching vowels into toffee,
consonants clanging
off the concrete walls
like cans tied behind a marriage wagon.
Scream a stripe across the air
shooting out the tunnel mouth,
a tear of light flying home
from Sonny's Friday night dance,
her phone number
burning in your pocket.

.....

Mark Burke's work has been published or is forthcoming in the Beloit Poetry Journal, Southern Humanities Review, Sugar House Review and other publications.

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CROSSING THE RIVER

Joan Dawson

I went across the river again today. As I crossed, all alone, I remembered a cold and sunny winter day twenty years ago when my sister, brother-in-law, and husband decided to wade across the river to have a picnic on the other side. The food, cold meatloaf sandwiches, was not the highlight of the trip. We were in it for the mystery and the lure of the other side!

The river was icy on that wintery day, and I was knee deep in the middle of the water when I announced that I could not go any farther. I reckoned that the freezing water would stop my heart, and I would die right there. My family ignored me and continued across. Finally, I followed them, protesting all the way. We found a sunny spot to sit and enjoy the picnic, and after we explored a bit, we waded the freezing water to go back home.

We live on the river—the Cahaba, and I frequently go down the hill through the woods to the riverbank with Cisco, the cat. We sit on the large, flat, black rock that lies in the shallow riverbed, and we pretend that we are wild things living off the land. Or sometimes we're just a school teacher and her cat too tired to pretend anything or too contented to need to. We never think of crossing to the other side. A mink lives over there, and he fishes for giant crawfish, and beaver come through in the night. Large woodpeckers nest in dead trees over there, and we worry about them and all the other animals when we hear the bulldozers and tree-cutting equipment behind the hill across the river.

I guess it was the recent noise of cutting and of large trees cracking and crashing that made me wonder if anything was left of the woods I remembered from the picnic that sunny winter afternoon. Now this particular day twenty years later, was in November. It was a true gift of nature—gloriously sunny, warm and dry—a little respite between some freezing nights a week ago and the winter to come. And best of all, it was Saturday.

The cat was not with me on this journey and I missed his company. I always felt more confident and safe with Cisco around. But I was alone, standing on the black rock just a few yards from the other side of the river. The water was shallow, ankle-deep in most places, and moving slowly. The weather had been mild for several days, so there was no chance of encountering heart-stopping icy current. Were there any trees behind the façade of growth on the other side? Would hunters take aim if I rustled the leaves? What other things were lurking there that would make it foolish for a

woman to traipse around alone in the woods? Would anyone ever think to look for me there if I never returned? No.

Would my husband disapprove when he found out what I did? You bet! Were snakes sunning themselves on rocks or hanging from tree limbs? Would I slip and fall in the river? None of this mattered. I really didn't care!

My snake stick provided support and stability as I tried to find traction on the slippery rocks, and I managed to get across the river easily. The water was not cold, only refreshingly cool, and I hardly got wet. Climbing the hill on the other side was a bigger challenge. The brambles and scrub were thick, and I lumbered through the brush, slipping and sliding, losing more ground than I was gaining and getting tangled at every turn. My agility had left me long ago. I was a little scared, because I knew there was no quick getaway from a dangerous situation, and there was zero chance of rescue, because no one even knew where I was. Nevertheless, I felt brave and reckless and continued to crash through the undergrowth, determined to explore the other side of the river and to see if anything wild had escaped the encroaching "development."

It is beautiful over there. Two hills meet and form a valley with a wet-weather stream running through. There is no sign now of the dreaded tree-cutters and their machines, and it seems the woodpeckers will get to keep some of their nesting trees for a while. The forest floor is covered with dry leaves, and there are plants that I have never seen on our side of the river. Oh, I want to stay and savor this experience, but my better judgment urges me to leave, and so I do.

I rarely take chances these days, so there was something exhilarating about crossing the river and climbing the hill by myself. I am glad I waded across again, put aside that dread of the cold water, and walked in woods that are truly a stone's throw from the black rock where the cat and I still sit. I'll never go back across alone, but I still remember feeling intrepid on that alluring autumn day.

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Joan Dawson is a teacher and a musician who has lived in the woods on the Cahaba River most of her life. She and her husband, Frank, enjoy music, poetry, art, and lively conversation with friends. This story was written many years ago, and Cisco is no longer around to explore the river with her. jdawson@uab.edu

PAVLOV HAD A CAT

Jeff Kalafa

Camelot, Camefew
Whippoorwill, whippoorwon't
Laramie, Lareau
Katmandu, Dogwomandon't

Asia, Bsia
Japan, Japot
Fairbanks, Foulbanks
Siam, Siamnot

Sergeant-at -arms
Serlady-at-legs
Alabama's dome
Birmingham and eggs

Italy, That'll
Shanghai, Shanglow
Panama, Panapah
Belfast, Belslow

Miami, Yourami
Iran, Youwalk
The Wrong sisters
at Puppy Hawk

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See bio on Page 1

Babylonia, Basalamia
Oregon, Orecame
Big Daddia, big mommia
Nova Scotia, Novacaine

Avalon-or-about
Portugal, Portuguy
Jersey shore, Jersey Doubt
Buffalo, Buffahigh

Singapore, Singarich
Tennessee, Tennesaw
Marrakech, Marrapitch
Bethlehem, Bethlehaw

Monticello, Montibuyo
understood, oversat
Oswego, Ostheygo
Pavlov had a cat



ROD IRON CHAIR

Maud Belser

15" x 30"

Acrylic on Canvas

Maud Corier-Belser is a native of Geneva, Switzerland, and long-time Birmingham, AL, resident. She is a self-taught artist whose works in pencil, assemblage, collage, watercolor, oil, and acrylic are collected by many. She is the illustrator of Grace and Marie's Little Farm on the Hill by Birmingham writer Leah Webb.

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THE ARTIST'S MOZART

Theodore Haddin

for Mysti Milwee

Now we have an artist
in her "Movement 1"
who paints to the musical
movements of Mozart --
radical dashes, splashes
and colored lines of *sturm*
und drang you can't play back
even to hear the music.
You won't find a beginning
as in the Jupiter symphony.
It all comes in a great flash,
paint to the sounds of music,
Mozart's rondo, rallentando,
serenade. You may not penetrate
to its essence, though someone
sees a fish in a gray mass.
But if color and line, bright reds
and yellows, can surround a field
of gray and blue and suddenly
reverse or be dotted with black,
then the eye may find movement,
and moment, and the artist's
musical miracle of her brushstroke.

.....

*Theodore Haddin, founder and long-time director of the UAB Humanities Forum, is poet, editor, musician, and Emeritus Professor in English from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He has published two books of poems, and his poems and reviews have appeared widely in the South, the Midwest, and the West, as well as in three southern anthologies. **tedhad@juno.com***

A SMELL OF SULFUR

Ken Dykes

I grew up in the Panhandle of Florida, in a small town, in a very rural county, before desegregation became the law of the land and even longer before it became much a reality in that small part of the world.

The black folks had their part of town and we whites had ours. The two sections of town were bisected by the Apalachicola Northern railway tracks which ran east to west into the Box Plant part of the St. Joe Paper Company. There was only one thru-street crossing between these two sections of town and that was U.S. 98, the main highway which ran right along the Gulf of Mexico.

That didn't seem strange to me. It was just the way things were. I don't recall anyone, black or white, questioning it, but Port St. Joe was a typical mill town in those days and nobody who expected to stay around and prosper questioned much of anything the power structure had in place. To get along, you pretty much went along.

While the black community located north of the tracks was smaller than the white community to the south, it had its own business district, churches, a school, and pretty much everything the white community had except the city hall, police department and jail—those “officialdoms” were on the white side of town.

The big difference to me was always the smell.

If you're unfamiliar with paper mills, you might not know this, but one of the most remarkable characteristics of a mill town is that, when the wind is right, it stinks to high heaven. It's a strong sulfur smell, like you'd get wading through a couple of tons of rotten eggs. At times, it's so very intense that you can even taste it.

That smell literally clings to everything it touches—if you worked in the mill, your clothing, hair and everything else you took to work with you was richly endowed. That was also true for the car or truck you drove to work and parked in the mill parking lot. Work vehicles got coated with that smell so badly that the people who could afford it usually had a special second-hand vehicle that was only used to go to and from the mill. The mill even provided workers with a free automatic car wash to drive through when their shift ended. Speaking from experience, there were some days that you were tempted to drive through the car wash with your windows down!

From that, I guess you might think that the locals hated the smell. In some ways we did, but in the most important ways, as bad as it was, it was still a smell of prosperity. It meant the mill was running, paper was being made and sold, and folks were drawing pay checks. When there was a shut down or lay off and that smell disappeared for a while, it's safe to say that most of us were pretty miserable.

As my Dad sometimes observed, mullet is good, but a good beef roast is a mighty pleasant change—there were a whole lot more folks eating beef when the north end of town smelled like rotten eggs!

Most of the time, the prevailing winds kept the smell pretty much contained to the north side of town. As a youngster, it was a bit of a mystery to me why the black folks would choose to build their part of town north of the tracks right at the foot of the paper mill and right amid that paper mill odor. As the years passed, that childhood innocence slipped away and I came to understand that, in our town, the sulfur-rotten eggs smell symbolized much more than our economic conditions—it was also an unmistakable sign of the ills of segregation.

By the early 1960's I came to understand that there were some very unpleasant things just below the surface of our quiet tiny town. For it was then that most of us learned that the “separate but equal” philosophy that underpinned so much of our lives did not bear up well under scrutiny. We were faced with a whole new way of thinking. In a county with miles and miles of beaches, why was there only one small area that could be used by blacks? Why couldn't black people eat in any restaurant they could afford? Why couldn't they use the restrooms at so many local businesses? Did we really need separate water fountains? And, where facilities for black people were provided, why were they usually out back or of lesser quality? Did the local hospital really need separate waiting areas and treatment rooms? And, if you were black, why did you have to make your home at the foot of the paper mill?

Thankfully, much has changed for the better all across our land in the intervening years.

That's certainly true of my home town. For better or worse, Port St. Joe is no longer a mill town. The old mill has been torn down and, like the smell of rotten eggs, is only a memory of an older generation. I guess that's an improvement, but, on the other hand, there are no mill-related jobs to be had and the local economy struggles.

While it's no longer a mill town, it remains a company town—the old DuPont interests who owned the mill still own about one-thirteenth of the rural property in the entire state of Florida, including most of the county. Much of this land is located right along the Gulf Coast and, instead of making paper, they're developing resorts and high-dollar gated communities. So, the old power structure has survived to wear new hats in a new order of things, still on top of the pile—and the locals continue to go along to get along.

These days, blacks and whites go to the same schools and live pretty much where they wish. The life of the community has an unprecedented sense of diversity...and, sometimes—at its finest moments—even unity. These are good things and I'm sure that they will continue.

For me, as I look back, I am pleased that so many of the injustices of the past have disappeared, and I cannot fail to take comfort in some important symbolic changes as well. For one thing, the old railroad track, a physical barrier which once separated the town into north and south sections, has disappeared. For another thing, there's not just one, but three north-south thru-streets which join the north and south sections.

Oh, and the biggest difference to me continues to be the smell—where ever you go in town, the air has the fresh, new smell of salt and sea.

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Kenneth E. Dykes was a lifelong reader and a closet writer. In his final years, he wrote and shared with his children several dozen tales about his life and history. This is one of those stories.

“The conscious mind is the editor, and the subconscious mind is the writer.”

—Steve Martin

FROZEN SPRING

Allen Berry

Early March cold snap.
It came on fast turning burgeoning
wildflowers to ice sculptures
Waterfall to stalactites,
flowstone.

I take out my camera,
advance to the last photo.
Same spring, last year
a man and woman
foregrounded,
frozen Smiles,
frozen moment.

All photography
is spirit photography.

I snap the picture
of now. It's funny
how quickly the weather
can turn.

.....

*Allen Berry is a 2013 PhD graduate of the Creative Writing program at the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. He is the author of three collections of poetry, including the most recent chapbook, Sitting Up with the Dead. He lives, hikes, and teaches in Huntsville, AL. **aberry4489@aol.com***

PASSING FANCIES ON THE JOURNEY TO IN-BETWEEN

Jim Reed

On the Kerouac Least Heat Moon Steinbeck road to somewhere that's not Here, parts of my mind are rattling around in an effort to remain awake and alert.

I'm driving a certain distance, watching the highway the cars the drivers the signs the markers the passing foliage, all in an effort to arrive safely and in one piece at my destination. But this bundle of alertness doesn't take up all the space in my head, so part of me just keeps on writing and making notes, marking notations, taking imaginary selfies of both world at large and thoughts internal.

Having never driven behind myself, I don't know what my car and I look like to someone approaching from the rear. But I do know what the rear driver and car look like because the three-rearview reverse-image mirrors in my vehicle reflect scenes from a life distantly lived, distantly imagined.

The Tastykake glazed cherry pie I'm munching on provides refreshment accompanying my three-screen viewing of this rear-approaching person, and I can't help recording details. She is dabbing at her nose with a tissue while glancing at the reflection of a car behind her. She is talking animatedly to an invisible friend, or to a small child I cannot see, or to a phone buddy...or to herself.

Diagnosis of schizophrenia is a complicated thing these days, it being the case that everybody talks to the vacant air just about all the time.

The great challenge of our species is how to fill the times in between with something worthwhile, or at least something non-damaging to others. What do I do with myself during the times in between? Observing what goes on around me, fore, aft, left, right, below, above, inside, out, is something to keep me busy and out of trouble.

The Tastykake is crunchy and dribbly, the roadway running beneath my car is potholed and patchy, the sky is cloudy and gray, the car behind me is mottled and old, I the driver am also mottled and old. But the neverending road leads on, the overlapping thoughts and feelings and imaginings continue unabated.

The reverse-image driver's rounded face is unreadable. Her eyebrows point up, like a theatre drama/tragedy mask. Her expressions alternate between wonderment and pain. But she stays the course, managing the endless

highway and the endless chatter and the runny nose and the hundredfold additional sadnesses and thrills with which she must deal.

I pass by a vacant Hamburger Heaven with an enormous CLOSED sign. I wonder whether this means Heaven is closed to all hamburgers, whether there are hamburgers in Heaven, whether Heaven itself has shut down, whether the neverendingly road is all there is.

At last I approach the City and watch as it absorbs the sunrise morning into its cement glass metal concrete brick self, only to reflect back at me its ambient light and heat. It is familiar and comfortable. It is my Kerouac Least Heat Moon Steinbeck Tastykake destination.

I dab cherry syrup from my beard, house my rusty metal steed in its stable, grunt my way to a standing position and continue the few steps leading to today's next adventures

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Jim Reed curates the Museum of Fond Memories at Reed Books in Birmingham, AL, and tells stories in his own time. jim@jimreedbooks.com

“There is no relationship between being smart and being wise.”

—Jordan Peterson

DIE TRYING BUT WE'VE GOT TO TRY

David Flynn

Max felt Lorenzo's hair. Imagine, an Afro in the 21st century. Max had shaved his head after losing some hair.

"Oh my God," he said. "I thought your hair would feel like wires."

"Nope. I am a human too."

The black young man spit in Max's face. Max's wrinkled old white face glistened.

"No need for that," he said. "I was just curious."

Lorenzo put out his hand. "Sorry about the spit. I'm just tired of this stuff."

"Sorry, too. I learned something," Max said.

Max walked to his drum kit. He knocked out a "four on the floor."

Lorenzo picked up his guitar. He joined in.

"Don't sing, though. You sound like an old white man with a cold," Lorenzo said.

The bass player, whose name he had forgotten, whacked a few strings. Charlie on the trumpet tooted.

"Let's make up something," Charlie said.

"I got soft hair. / kinda like a bear."—Lorenzo.

"Feel it good / so it's understood."—Max.

"Skin's like skin / Eyes like eyes."—bass player.

"I want some fries / and maybe some pies."—Charlie.

Everybody laughed.

Max started a shuffle. "Sweet home, Chicago," he said.

"What do you know about Chicago?" Lorenzo asked.

"Never been there. You?" Max stood up. "I'm tired of this stuff. Either we play together, black, white, yellow, red, whatever, or I'm going home."

"What rhymes with segregation? Chill everybody."—bass player.

"Conflagration."—Lorenzo.

"Damn, Schoolboy."

They laughed.

Max started the shuffle again.

"You Lorenzo's white boy?" Charlie asked.

"I'm just playing my drums. Have a nice day, gentlemen."—Max.

The bass player laid down a line. Trumpet player tooted. Lorenzo added a lick or two.

“Gotta get along,” he sang. “Or Die Trying.”

That’s the title, bass player said. “Die Trying.”

“Damn,” Lorenzo said. “I’m sorry Max. Just some kid got killed by the white cops in Dallas last night, and we’re a little on edge.”

“Not my doing,” Max said. “Let’s just play. Let’s just disappear into the music.”

“Damn,” Charlie said. “World’s too complicated.”

“Die Trying but we got to try,” Lorenzo sang.

“Nothing to it; just open your mind,” Charlie sang.

“World’s a hellhole and that’s no lie,” bass player.

“Die Trying but we got to try.”—Max.

.....

David Flynn was born in the textile mill company town of Bemis, TN. His jobs have included newspaper reporter, magazine editor and university teacher. He is both a Fulbright Senior Scholar and a Fulbright Senior Specialist. His work has been widely published. writing-flynn.blogspot.com, davidflynnbooks.com and david.flynn.writer@hushmail.com

“To create a class of things means
automatically creating another class
which are not those things.”

—Jay Haley

OF LOVE BUGS, GRAVITY, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE...

Mark Barrett

I guess it's really not the worst thing that could happen to a guy. But given the opportunity...I'm pretty sure I'd opt for it not to happen again.

Jim Reed reached out to me a day or so ago, asking if I would like to contribute a little piece for Birmingham Arts Journal - 1000 words or less, nothing too long, any topic that I desire. Considering that it's been over ten years since I penned anything for anyone in Birmingham, I happily accepted and began musing as to what I would like to contribute. Perhaps a piece that I'd previously written, something amusing, something thoughtful...

Well, I pondered and pondered, and settled upon a bit of "prose-etry" I'd written some time ago about the ocean, and the sunset, and the countless dancing, joyous stars cast upon the rippling currents by the reflection of the setting sun. It was a touching piece, thoughtful, replete with emotion, depth, and I dare say even gravitas...

But... well... in the end, it was only 228 words, and thus much too short to fulfill the request. So, I continued to seek other options.

I'm not unashamed to admit that after having spent the weekend in our French Quarter apartment, during Southern Decadence Fest, and having rendered upon myself and my wife some rather expensive alcohol-related injuries resulting in both physical and emotional weariness...frankly, I continued to draw a blank.

Well, now we're back here at our home in Biloxi, within sight of the Gulf. The air is uncharacteristically cool, the sky slightly overcast, and the threat of Hurricane Irma has become less of an immediate concern for ourselves, and more of a dire emergency for the residents of Florida.

So, I can finally relax and allow myself time to daydream, perhaps to write the greatest short story known to mankind, submit it to Birmingham Arts Journal, and thus wow the socks off the Birmingham literary community...

Now, if only I had some kind of an idea...

Hmmm...

I put my floppy beach hat upon my head, took my sandals in hand, crossed the sand to the water's edge, and casually strolled, kicking surf, stepping gingerly over broken shell and discarded beverage cans, thinking.

Thinking.

Thinking.

Nothing.

C'mon, Man! Think! There must be some wisdom you can impart! Some clever twist of words, a simple rhythmic trick... Think!

I finally gave up, went home, rinsed my feet, had a little lunch, and took a nap – a well-deserved nap, I might add.

After a short time, I awoke, fixed myself a nice Mai Tai, poured it into a tall insulated cup, popped a straw thru the hole in the cap, and headed back to the sand, once again seeking divine inspiration.

I strolled along the sandy boardwalk, sipping at my Mai Tai, wandered across to the long fishing pier, stepping lightly over weathered timbers, out over the water, brushing away fluttering Love Bugs, and there I sat.

I watched as the pelicans dove like Kamikaze fishermen, ambushing their prey beneath the waves, as the seagulls snatched tidbits from the shallows, as the cranes stepped with pencil-thin legs thru rippling waves, hunting small fish among the tide pools.

“In all of this, there must be some meaning,” I thought. “There must be myriad fanciful meditations that I can summon to impart the serene beauty and everlasting reality, words that convey both the complex simplicity and simple complexity of life...”

But none would come.

I watched as the sun settled lower, though still high upon the horizon.

And I watched as the rippling surf began to mirror the sun's rays, glistening with reddish reflection. And again, I began to feel that delightful sorrow, the ecstatic despair that I'd experienced when I'd written that earlier story about the waves, and the sunset, and the dancing, joyous stars...

And I thought, YES! YES! This time we'll take it a step further! This time, we'll truly get to the truth of it all! The meaning of life! The essence of being!! YES!! And I sat with expectant eyes, staring deep into the brightened void, awaiting that divine inspiration.

And at that very moment, a pair of Love Bugs, enraptured in their act of bug-love, settled upon my drink. I tried to blow them away with a puff of breath. But instead of blowing away - they blew down - down into my drink. Eek!

I quickly lifted the lid, but it was too late. The Love Bugs were now busily bug-loving in my Mai Tai.

Dammit...

I soberly tossed my drink into the ocean and watched as the ice cubes splashed into the waters below the pier. And there it is, my friends. That's it. That's the divine truth for which I'd so earnestly petitioned.

The ultimate, simple truth is that as arduously as we labor, as deeply as we strive, and as fervently as we reach out to grasp that next plane...

...

...

...somehow, gravity will find a way to drop a couple of humping bugs into your drink.

.....

*Mark Barrett, editor, author, humorist, bartender, musician, songwriter and wanderer, currently writes The Doorstep Chronicles from his headquarters in New Orleans, LA. **mjbarrett937@gmail.com***

“If but my faults could trick and please my wits, I'd rather seem a fool at ease than to be wise and rage.”

—Horace



PINK POPPY

Tom Dameron

9" x 14"

Watercolor on paper on wood panel with encaustic overlay

Tom Dameron is a true Renaissance Man: retired pharmacist, sousaphone player with The Legendary Pineapple Skinners and The Old-Fashioned Rhythm Method, and fine art painter when he can find time. tom@tomdameron.com



THE VATICAN

Sam Pezzillo

Digital Photograph

Sam Pezzillo, retired Birmingham-Southern classics professor, has had a life-long interest in photography. His experiences in world travel inform his choice of subject matter and lead him to concentrate on architectural and monumental subjects. His passion for photography is driven by a desire to see both the broad view and the details. He lives in Leeds, AL. spezzill@bsc.edu

HE SPEAKS OF HIS AWAKENING

Thomas Locicero

for Aaron

He speaks of his awakening with the fervor
of an atheist who lectures about dirt.

Each speaks of soil; the atheist mentions earth.
The man's weight has evaporated like mist.

Where does bulk go? Is it pecked away by invisible
vultures? The rhythm in his lungs has slowed
to four breaths per minute. The athletic atheist
is envious. He is like the man before the diagnosis.

Every man will live forever until told otherwise.
When that day comes, passions go. Regrets, however,

hover like ghosts and only forgiveness can frighten
them away. There are no more cravings but for water,
a well-timed word, a visit, something shared. A good day
is a successful toilet transaction behind a locked door,
a self-administered sponge bath, a shuffle to the mailbox,
a pain-free laugh. Love made. Twice. There are no more

promises, except the one that makes the atheist scoff.
The man knows the atheist knows not until he knows.

There are no more meaningless flesh-and-blood revelations,
no more fruitless words, no more scrabbling at the bygone.

The atheist understands life as a romance, as the living should.
The man, though, understands every single mystery about love.

.....

Thomas Locicero's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Roanoke Review, Boston Literary Magazine, Long Island Quarterly, The Good Men Project, Adelaide Literary Magazine, Jazz Cigarette, Quail Bell Magazine, Rat's Ass Review, Antarctica Journal, Scarlet Leaf Review, and Tipton Poetry Journal, among others. He resides in Broken Arrow, OK.

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THE CENTER HOLDS

Brenda Burton

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

William Butler Yeats

Paolo opened the door cautiously and peered around the jamb. He learned long ago this was the safest approach. He never knew whether he'd be walking into the remnants of a big bang or a collapsed black hole.

He slipped in quietly and, after seeing the Old Man absorbed in something on his workbench, closed the door noisily to announce his presence. He took a position several safe feet away, but within easy conversational distance.

Nothing explosive seemed imminent, so Paolo plunged right in, without any perfunctory greeting or small talk. "We've got trouble in Sector MK-14588 again."

"Hm?" the Old Man responded without looking up.

"Sector MK-14588. What do you want me to do about them?"

The Old Man set his tiny screwdriver down and took the magnifying glass off his nose, then looked up at Paolo. The swirling plasmas on his workbench continued to pulse with potentiality, energy on hold, shimmering with all the colors of the visible spectrum, and some outside it, waiting for his next adjustment.

Universes were his latest hobby and, left to himself, he could tinker with them for eons. He especially resented being interrupted when he was pondering the mathematical constraints and physical laws for his latest concoction. "Do about who?" he asked.

"Didn't you get my email? Your children. And it should be do about whom. You should use the objective pronoun after a preposition. What should we do about them?"

The Old Man sighed, picked up his tiny screwdriver again and re-positioned the magnifying glass on his nose. "What have they done now?" he asked impatiently. "And I don't do email. You should know that."

"Same as always. Murder and mayhem. It's just that there's so many of them now. They're creating a serious imbalance."

"When you say serious imbalance...?" Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a localized perturbation on his workbench and didn't finish his question. He peered into the swirl myopically. "By Jove, never expected that," he said as he plunged his finger into the middle of the plasma and jiggled it. "Guess I'm going to have to add a gravitational constant to this one too."

Paolo cleared his throat loudly and rocked back and forth on his heels, trying to regain his attention.

"What did you say? Murder and mayhem? There are laws. They can't break the laws."

"Oh, yes, they can. Remember? You gave them free will," Paolo said.

"Hm...so I did," he gazed into the void, but Paolo knew he was only thinking about the proto-universe in front of him.

"Sir?" Paolo said.

"Yes, well, maybe we could send a flood."

"We've done that," Paolo reminded him.

"How about an earthquake or a meteorite? Shake 'em up."

"Works for a while, but then they forget."

"Then send a messenger. Tell them to shape up." The Old Man turned back to his work as if the matter were settled.

"We've done that too. A few get it, but most of them twist and pervert it to suit their own ends."

"Maybe we should reconsider this free will thing," he said. "Make the laws mandatory?"

"Some of your children tried that on their followers and that didn't end well," Paolo said. "Remember the Inquisition?"

The space-time continuum on his workbench fluctuated wildly while he pondered. A few regions bubbled over the edge and fell on the floor. He bent over and plucked up the plasmic ovoid and pinched it out of existence. "A little less anti-matter, I think," he mumbled.

"Sir?"

"Anti-matter...got to get it just right or it goes kaboom." The Old Man

mimicked an explosion with his hands, chuckling, then turned to Paolo.
“Sector MK-14588, you say? Leave it with me for now. I’ll see what I can come up with.”

Paolo sighed, considering whether to mention that ending a sentence with a preposition was another grammatical infraction, but decided against it. He reached for the doorknob to let himself out.

“One other thing, Paolo. Who made up the rules about objective pronouns?”

“That’s not clear, Sir. William Caxton or Samuel Johnson, maybe, but I think Strunk and White finalized it all.”

“Then send them in. I want to have a talk with them.”

“Uh, can’t, Sir. So many grammar school children cursed them, they’re stuck in Purgatory for another millennium.”

.....

Brenda Burton works in a 9x10 room analyzing data for an insurance company and writing fiction. She says she “doesn’t get out much.” In Hoover, AL, she spends spare time discussing Angry Birds and Spiderman with her grandsons.

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“Things observed always come together in the brain with a delay, so that we basically live in the past. Everything we see has already happened.”

—Karl Ove Knausgaard

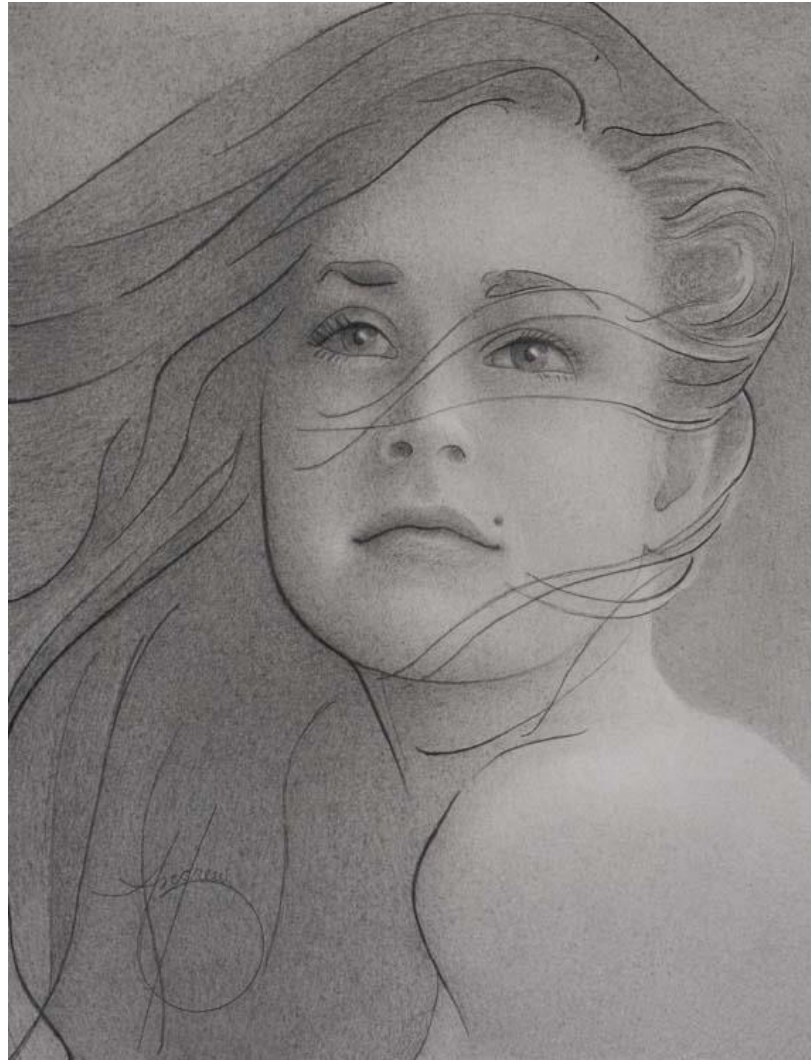
THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL

David R. Loope

She smelled of honeysuckle in sunlight
Just before the storms come,
Coursing arteries in the sandy mud
Beside the Wiregrass live oaks.
The delirium of early love and
Success, the white whale at your
Feet on the deck,
The forever need for new and more
Fulfilled in spasms between champagne
Cocktails at midnight and dawn on
The 18th green, shoes in the sand.
When all the world was America
For the too short days
Off Long Island, and all was possible,
Salient human strife
Awoke, the lone green
Beacon on the daybreak dock
Pulsing in the vast grayness of dawn.

.....

*David R. Loope lives in Washington, NC, where he works as President of Beaufort County Community College. His poems have appeared most recently in Broad River Review and The Wayfarer. **daveloope@hotmail.com***



LADY III

Andrew Tyson
Pencil on Paper
10.5" x 8"

*Andrew Tyson, an award-winning, self-taught photographer and artist in Birmingham, AL, has a degree in computer imaging and visualization. His artistic tools include graphite, pastel and the camera. His work has previously been published in Birmingham Arts Journal. **tysona@bellsouth.net***

PICKING BLACKBERRIES AT NIGHT IN THE SOUTH

Salaam Green

Ma 'Dear can't make blackberry pie until the picking gets done
Little girl hands reaching into the brier bushes getting bony knuckles stuck
in the grassy patch
Prickly pointy edges growing in-between knotted roots
Sticky, wiry, slimy, surprise
Muddy fog resisting the dark night's sky shining in persevered patches
where baby seedlings survive
Little girl wading in back road vines
Hot blue-purple fingertips held up to the dying sun
Ma 'Dear can't make blackberry pie until the picking gets done
Jaws thick and full of moonlight sweetness
Lips turned purple and tongue raw from the taste of tiny blessings
Ma 'Dear can't make blackberry pie until the picking is done
And the basket is full
Quick belly bulging momentarily vanishing into a Blackberry world
Sneaky seeds and hulls stuck in the middle of gapped teeth
Blackberry picking is finally done
Ripened spirit running home; sticky hands in pockets
Plump sweet cheeks praising God for the day's blackberry bounty
An almost empty blackberry bin tickling underneath her chin
Certainly, relieving Ma 'Dear of her pie making duties for yet another
blessed night

.....

Salaam Green's poetry and writing has been published in Southern Women's Review, I am the F-Bomb, Bust, Elephant Journal, YourTango, Al.com, The Birmingham Times and more. As a storyteller, she presents her work at Arc Stories in Birmingham, AL & Words of Fire Conferences.

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FROM WILD WOMAN TO OLD WOMAN IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

Barbara Gordon

I like to think of my behavior in the sixties as a learning experience. Then again, I like to think of anything stupid I've done as a learning experience. It makes me feel less stupid.

P. J. O'Rourke

In 1958, my sixth year of life, I had a revelation: life was not fair. Prior to this I believed that life was fair and there were no significant differences between my brother and me. That year I learned three important facts: 1) I was a girl; 2) I wanted to be a boy; 3) I couldn't change.

People living in small town deep South followed century old traditions about female behavior and dress. Young girls were expected to help with cooking and household cleaning. These expectations were unspoken, but at six years I already knew that girls cleaned houses and boys mowed the lawn. Little girls received adult praise for looking beautiful, keeping clean, and helping their mother with the house work. At six, I saw no advantage to living life as a girl.

In first grade, I was the only girl attending school in pants. I continued wearing pants until the third grade when the principal sent me home with instructions. He made it clear that I could not return to school unless I was wearing a dress. I realized that there was no fair reason that I could not wear pants to school.

Wearing pants gave me the freedom to play football and swing upside down on the monkey bars. I hated puny girls who jumped rope and worried about getting dirt on their dresses. I enjoyed making those girls cry. My belief that life is unjust was reconfirmed every day I had to dress like a girl and sit on the bench while the boys played. My brother tormented me with the idea that if I could kiss my elbow I could become a boy. I spent months bending my arm and body into a pretzel, but I never successfully placed my lips on my elbow.

At ten years of age, my body gave me even more reasons to believe that life was unfair. Maturing into a young lady placed more restrictions on my "tom boy" activities. The teachers called me a wild child and gave me poor conduct scores. No one appreciated my unwavering spirit and boundless energy. That year my parents were told I wasn't a candidate for



AUTUMN FAE

Camille Kleinman

Digital Art

*Camille Kleinman is an award-winning writer, artist, music composer, dog lover, and the co-Founder of CG Elves (an online school for 3D virtual fashion design). Her work has been featured on a variety of television news outlets. Camille currently lives on an island in the Caribbean. **CGElves.com***

(Continued from Page 33)

college because I was on the road to the penitentiary. This pronouncement always made me feel proud. It has been my favorite story to tell the college students I taught. Yes, I did go to college and even received a master's degree.

At fifteen I was sent to a girl's boarding "finishing" school, and my beliefs about the inequities of life became crystal clear. Most of those girls planned to attend college and obtain a MRS Degree. That fine old girl's school was determined to make us into an archaic vision of a southern belle. We were taught important skills like pouring tea from a silver service and the fine art of writing a Bread and Butter note.

In 1969 society was experiencing an upheaval. The school's administration tried with all their might to keep us insulated from the real

world, but the birth pains of change could be felt even on that isolated campus. Wonderful strong women had begun saying that a woman could choose her own destiny. Women could have a career, not get married, or do neither. This revelation made me reexamine my beliefs and gave me hope that my future could be full of new and interesting experiences.

As a Baby Boomer, I never thought about becoming an old woman. We were never supposed to get old, but here I am at sixty-five. At the age of fifty, AARP recognized me as a senior citizen and allowed me to join and receive all the perks of old age: discounts on groceries, movie tickets, hotel rooms, car rentals, etc.

How I got to old age is a mystery. In 1969, I knew my life was just beginning, and I didn't have any thoughts past that moment. It was a watershed year for Boomers. Woodstock, the Vietnam War, Birth Control, Women's Liberation, Hippies, Black Power and many more words and concepts were conceived in the 60s. It was the decade I entered college and strove to earn the label of a Wild Woman. I really had no idea what this meant, but I had seen television programs and movies with people dancing wildly, wearing unconventional clothes, listening to the Rolling Stones, and not being concerned what adults thought or said. I was not a unique individual in my pursuit of this goal. Hundreds of thousands of my compatriots also sought this wild person classification, and, like me, they enjoyed every step of this journey.

I did achieve my goal and look back on those years with amazement. I refer to that period as my glory days. Life has really changed since the 1960s. At sixty-five, I have the luxury of hindsight. I have experienced forty years of marriage, given birth to two children, worked in countless jobs, experienced the women's liberation movement, and broken through glass ceilings. I have even had the honor of casting a vote for a woman President.

I know that my Wild Woman days have long passed, but somewhere in this old woman lurks a determined little girl who wanted to live life on her own terms. I still wonder how different my life would have been had my parents celebrated and supported a girl child who was not meant to fit into a conventional mold.

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Barbara Gordon holds a Master's Degree in Child Development and Family Life and spent 40 years working with economically disadvantaged families. In Birmingham, she writes about baby boomers "from a southern Jewish woman's point of view."

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CHOPIN IN THE SHOWER

Wick

In the morning when you awake,
before you make your breakfast bowl,
give your ears a chance to partake
of Nature's quiet, private soul
by listening in your shower
to Chopin for half an hour.

The notes, which glissando and fall
like droplets, cascade over you
and run up your nostrils and all
like a sentient morning dew.
In music you bathe, become clean
and live the life inside the dream.

Don't think yourself silly or odd
finding transcendence in the tub,
finding yourself in touch with God
while you, with soapy loofa, scrub.
The dirt removed, your soul intact,
cleansed by your nonsensical act.

This music is life, filled with trills
and happy accidental notes
and highs and lows and wondrous thrills,
bridges to cross the castle moats.
In your kingdom, you are the prince;
You are all beautiful nonsense.

.....

Wick lives, writes, and performs in the cozy, sonic atmosphere of downtown Florence, AL. He has a degree in English from the University of North Alabama, where brilliant and kind spirits showed him how to hear and sing the music in everything.
jmccoy@una.edu

THE REVENGE OF NESSUS

Chase Hawkins

In the morning mist, the Athenian army fought off the high tide of invaders. The fiends dashed against their shields and pushed them back towards Marathon. Though the dry sand worked well to slow the rushing Persians, only the arrows raining down from the mount could truly stop the enemy.

High above the clamor of the beach, the exalted son of Alcmene stood on a jagged rock. No warrior in all of Greece could amble as Heracles upon the mount. His perch above the din was comparatively peaceful and the only disturbance was the wind in his hair and the sun on his chest. Steadily, he nocked arrows and, when the wind was right, released them into the crowd below. Hearing the pain caused by a successful strike, Heracles grinned and pranced from cliff to cliff, dancing to the music.

“How dastardly am I?” chuckled Heracles. “What swift eagle could reach my perch lest I pluck him from the sky?”

In a Persian boat off the coast, the herald Lichas sunned himself and lazily recorded the events of the battle. Along the beachhead dozens of Persians laid, twitching in the sand with great arrows sticking out of their necks and heads. Lichas knew the Athenians had hired the wild archer and scanned the hillside for him, wishing to record the rare sight. To his surprise, Heracles was jumping along the top of a rocky hill. He was alone and unarmored. Lichas sat for a while admiring the force of the glistening hero and was struck at how vulnerable Heracles’s flank was.

I’ll mount thy slick wall, thought Lichas, beating his bony breast. And place mine own honorable name in the histories!

Heracles danced and sang and killed from his safe perch, never glancing at the advancing ass or the lilac cape of the boy it carried. The men on the beach gave Lichas no second glance and cursed or praised mighty Heracles, terrible Heracles!

Nimble as a weasel, the boy herald leapt from hold to hold and made his way up the jagged hill. As he reached the plateau, he hid behind a small boulder and rested his arms. All the while Heracles, the honorable and erect sycophant of Juventus, shot arrows through the necks of Persians below.

“Oh, you foul beasts,” laughed the twirling warrior. “How you tremble for me!”

Lichas, the meek and learned proselyte of Clio, marveled at Heracles' wild laughter and removed a small gourd from his tunic. *I will cease thy sweet laughter with slight sorrow*, thought the boy, emptying the gourd along the blade of his xiphos. *But I shall remain to tell of thy triumphs and thy death by the hand of great Lichas, mighty Lichas!*

With arrow nocked and string taut, Heracles found a mark. Lichas lunged from the shadows and drove the fine point through the hero's back. Heracles' arrow fell flaccid onto the rocks.

"Not some strange fowl after all," moaned Heracles, wiping his finger down the greasy, poisoned blade. The warrior fell to his knees in agony.

Lichas shouted to the crowd below. "I, Lichas, have felled the hero on his rocks!"

Heracles turned to gaze upon the great warrior who had bested him and was pained by the sight: a skinny boy, past no more than his fifteenth year, dressed in a lilac tunic with yellow poppies sewn onto the breeches.

Heracles's skin bubbled around the wound and a warmth trickled from his eyes and nose. "Poisoned? Oh, you coward! You fiend! Come closer; do my eyes deceive me? My eyes do deceive me! The poison does act on my mind! Come closer! Tell me this is some trick! Where is the hoplite who defeated Heracles?"

Lichas stepped forward. "Do you not see me, Heracles? 'Twas I, Lichas, the honored herald of Datis! Know thee of mine histories?"

Heracles turned away from the boy and slumped. The poison churned in his stomach and burned his skin. He brushed the hair out of his eyes and a large clump came out in his hands. While he sat watching the battle, Lichas rounded him and stood between him and the scene. Seeing the boy enraged him, so he rose and pulled the sword from his back and broke it over a knee. Surprised by the resilience of Heracles, Lichas fell backwards and tried to squirm away.

"Better to die in bed than by the hands of a scribe!" shouted Heracles as he drove both ends of the smoldering xiphos through the villain's hand.

Lichas screeched and tried to pull them out. "No, great merciful Heracles, I beseech thee! I will write well of thy death!" The boy's hand smoked and bubbled as the skin was seared by the poison. His head ached and blood poured from his nose, muddying the ground at Heracles' feet.

Heracles took no notice of the boy's wailing and gripped his ankles. He felt them shatter under the pressure and the boy screamed again. He yanked the boy up and delighted at how the sword tore through Lichas's hand.

Gleefully, the hero spun twice and flung Lichas from the cliff. Heracles grinned as he watched the boy tumble down the hillside. The warrior stooped to retrieve his great-bow and nocked a final arrow, reveling in the wails of the enemy.

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Chase Hawkins is a writing tutor at Bevill State Community College in Sumiton, AL, and is liaison for the Fine Arts Association of Bevill. A visual artist, Hawkins lives in Mount Olive, AL. cahawk93@gmail.com



VULCAN

Digital Photograph
Ty Evans

Ty Evans lives in the Birmingham, AL, area and enjoys taking pictures in his spare time. His other interests include collecting antique books, playing the guitar, and traveling. ty.evans66@yahoo.com

IT'S FINALLY STOPPED RAINING

Robert Joe Stout

Jays flit from tall wet grass
to the lower limbs
of the almond tree, chattering
to each other. Their wings,
catching winter sunlight, flick blue signals
at the cat watching from the fence.
A squirrel stops in front of a spindly quince,
twitches, bounds away

as confused by the earth's
inner throbbing
as I am

thigh deep
in the grass,
awaiting
—sensing—something warm
creep up through my nerves

to bless me.

.....

Robert Joe Stout lives in Oaxaca, Mexico, where he works as a freelance journalist. He published his first book of poetry, A Perfect Throw, with Aldrich Press in 2013 and his second, Monkey Screams, with FutureCycle Press in 2015. He also has published three novels and three nonfiction books about Mexico.

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REMEMBER WHAT'S IMPORTANT

Karim Shamsi-Basha

A loud pop, combined with a howling scream from Mom, woke all of us in the backseat as the car began to swerve sideways.

Our 1973 Plymouth Sedan was humming along the road near Basra, Iraq, on our yearly journey from Kuwait to Syria. A writer and a poet, Dad had a clothing store in Kuwait that paid the bills while he did what he loved: wrote poetry about love—about how much he loved Mom, how much he loved us, and how love was his paradigm in life.

I was the youngest of four, growing up in an extremely rich country with more oil than it knows what to do with. Immigrants, including Syrians, were still treated unlike the natives (racism can be found in all cultures). We had to work harder and earn less.

Every summer we drove to Damascus, the city where we were all born. We would visit with relatives, play with cousins, suck the nectar from honeysuckle blooms, and steal dried apricots meant to be prepared for jam from trays on balconies.

On this day, 50 miles before Basra, the desert heat was melting everything, including the car and all of us in the back. My brother and sister had replaced the backseat with a mattress, resulting in a play gym for us on the two-day trip. We played cards, read, and fought, while mom peeled and handed us snacks from the giant cooler: cucumbers, oranges, apples, peaches, figs, pomegranates, and quince.

I was asleep on the mattress when I heard the loud pop, followed by the scream. I was then thrown across the width of the car and over my siblings to hit the windshield. The mad car flailed left and right, as the four of us in the back were tossed from one side to the other as if in a blender.

Dad had run over a nail and the tire had popped. I remember many things about that incident, but one thing is as clear as the black road parting the golden sand. While I was on the right side of the blender, ahem, the mattress, in the back, I saw Dad trying to commandeer the car to a stop—he looked like Superman. His sleeves were rolled up and sweat shined on his massive arms. He held on to the steering wheel, which at the moment, had a mind of its own, like a baby holds a play toy. Looking at the side of his face from under three bodies, I could tell he was grinding his teeth. That little piece of skin next to his ear was moving up and down ever so slightly.

The car finally stopped. He turned around and asked if we were all right, then proceeded to change the tire. We spent the night in Basra at a motel, along with every giant roach in Iraq. (Obviously, they had heard of our incident and decided to attend a roach convention at the same motel.)

My brother, Maher, and I slept on the mattress on top of the car. I'll never forget looking at the stars on that clear night and asking him a question that sounded something like this:

"Why are there so many . . . like stars . . . in the sky?

Five years older and much wiser, Maher said: "Shut up and go to sleep."

Driving to Damascus the next day, I decided to take up the question with Dad, who responded: "All the stars and planets including us, are out there for one reason only."

I nearly burst wanting to know what the reason was, when he looked at Mom and smiled, then grabbed her neck and pulled her closer. The black Plymouth hummed along the hot desert road with four good tires and much pavement to conquer, passing shepherds herding sheep towards an elusive oasis.

At that moment, things became clear to my young mind, even one busy with everything a ten-year-old can enjoy, from playing and misbehaving, to school and vacation, to cousins to see and places to visit. Suddenly, the answer was as bright as the sun bouncing off the desert sand.

I saw Mom lay her head on Dad's shoulder and he, in turn, played with her hair, and I saw the smile on his face in the mirror.

The stars, planets, earth, the Milky Way, and we were all there because of one thing indeed.

As you pack your bags this summer to get in that car, plane, train, or boat, remember our planet needs our gentle and kind notions of caring. If you hit a nail and your car begins to swerve, grab that steering wheel like you own it. Then look at your husband/wife/partner/kids/dog/or the people in the next car . . . and smile.

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THE CEREMONY

Cornelius Bridges was once a poet and author of national renown. Of course, in the later years of his life he became more famous for his reclusiveness and eccentricity than his actual work. To the public, he embodied Americana, even before anyone knew what Americana was. People couldn't get enough of his witticisms and musings, and stories about the man became a hot commodity in the writing world.

Wanting to make a name for myself, I set out to find the man and, hopefully, have my own story to tell.

Those days, Bridges was living in "The Kudzu Castle," his notorious Greek Revival mansion just outside of Murfreesboro, Tennessee—this was back before the mansion burned down from a lightning strike. I camped out just within the tree line of his estate, comforted by the notion that Bridges had famously stated he didn't believe in trespassing. I stayed out there for hours, and nearly drifted to sleep before being bolted upright by the manor's front door bursting open.

A line of people, led by Bridges himself, began to pour down the steps, carrying lanterns and torches that made their faces and torsos visible in the darkness. A few carried small candles, though they didn't provide much light in comparison. The people's shadows danced around on the orange-cast ivory white of the house behind them, and the people themselves were dancing too, somewhat. As they walked, they swayed from left to right, some more drastically than others.

Occasionally, someone would raise their hands and spin around. As they proceeded out into the field one of them began playing a jazz trumpet while others beat tambourines. Those without any instruments would hum deeply and sometimes emit a rhythmic "Oh!" or "Mm-mmm."

The lot seemed quite involved with whatever ceremony they were performing. I felt safe in leaving my hiding place and following behind them. After trudging through a field of shin-high grass, we eventually came to a willow tree, illuminated well-enough by the moon, but made much clearer once the lanterns and torches did their work. The line shifted into a semi-circle around the tree as they continued to hum low dirges, frequently interrupted by a sarcastically sorrowful moan.

"Ashes and dust and so forth," Bridges said as he sipped from a glass bottle. He then poured a few drops of its contents out onto the soil.

Forgetting that I was in hiding, and eager to find some meaning in what I was seeing, I called out.

“What is all of this?” I asked.

Bridges shouted back, “We are having a funeral.” The others all moaned in disingenuous tones and made other dramatic shows of mournful agreement.

“For whom?”

With a steady, purposeful hand, Bridges removed his hat and clutched it over his chest.

“For human decency,” he cried, adding a hearty guffaw.

The others stifled laughter between their false sobs and an “amen” or two.

I lingered for a moment, watching as Bridges and his friends began to sway and hum “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Bridges spoke out of rhythm. “Swing low,” he whined, “Oh, keep swinging.” The other funeral-goers started back to playing the trumpet and tambourines, bringing Bridges to rhythmically shuffle his feet. It was then that I decided to leave, half-certain I had the ideal Cornelius Bridges story, and fully certain that nobody would believe it.

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*“If but my faults could trick and please
my wits, I’d rather seem a fool at ease
than to be wise and rage.”*

—Horace

LLÁMENME A MI MAMÁ

James Miller Robinson

This little mahogany rocking chair was Annie's when she was four or five years old. The arms have long since been broken away, so I can sit low to the floor with one hip on the cane-woven bottom and tie my shoes. Annie's grandfather took her mother and me to downtown Veracruz from Boca del Río on a public bus to the municipal jail where the administrators sold prisoner-made mahogany furniture in an organized prison industry whose purpose, I suppose, was to both keep the prisoners occupied and make operating money for the jail. It was a compound of old colonial one-story buildings with tile roofs that had once been orange and stucco walls that had once been white. A staggered row of sick and elderly palm trees drooped along the outside walls. Oxidized iron bars guarded a few tall glassless windows. Inside, a series of tiled patios lay open to the light and shadow from above. Partitions of iron bars separated a crowded multitude of desperate men from the entrance lobby where a lone guard in a uniform sat at a metal office desk with a stack of log books laying tattered and soiled on its surface. My father-in-law signed us in and stated our purpose while the man at the desk kept nonchalantly reading a newspaper. He appeared impervious to the static noise of strangers brought together in captivity, arguing, shouting, crying, calling to us, their outstretched arms and hands reaching between the bars. The rear of the crowd was wrestling for a few moments of position near the bars where stood the hope of sending out a message to a mother, a brother, or a wife, begging for cigarettes, matches, pesos. My suegro warned us not to look directly into the face of any prisoner, and not to listen to anything they might say. The thick walls and high ceilings lay heavy with tropical summer heat and coastal humidity. A thousand chattering voices hissed in indistinguishable murmurs. My suegro negotiated a price with one of the administrators. A prisoner was sent to bring the little rocking chair with back and bottom woven in a meticulous enigmatic pattern with thin cane strips. I tried not to listen to the voices and not to look at any of the desperate pairs of eyes. I carried the little mahogany rocking chair above my head like an ant through the crowded streets of the public market district of Veracruz. We set it in the aisle between the rows of seats on the public bus for the ten-

mile ride along the coast to Boca del Río. We checked it at the ticket counter at the airport where a clerk used string to tie a baggage claim ticket to one of its legs as it flew with a pile of cardboard boxes tied with twine, canvas bags, and a diversity of suitcases all the way to the United States. To this day it sits in our den in Alabama, its woven back and bottom still intact and strong like the legs and the rockers where I sometimes sit to tie my shoes and look down at the scratched wood of the mahogany frame, the woven cane bottom, and see the desperate eyes in the weave and hear the desperate voices of anonymous strangers pleading for something I can neither give nor forget.

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*James Miller Robinson writes in Huntsville, AL. He is widely published and works as a court interpreter of Spanish registered with the Alabama Administrative Office of Courts. **Jmr815@comcast.net***

*“What good is the knowledge of things if
by it we lose the repose and tranquility we
should enjoy without it.”*

—Montaigne

BAD CHILD

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois

1.

The monuments are surrounded by cowboys and peasants, miners, pizza throwers, future popes, future ax murderers, white collar criminals of all denominations, and the guitar maker. They all want to gaze on the smooth marble, the Roman figure emerging in all her glory as the archeologist lovingly removes the ancient mud.

Balls fly from bats, soar briefly, are caught by outfielders. Life hacks into the guitar maker just as he's found his identity, just as he's crafted the small details of his Self, refined them, sanded them down like smoothing a guitar.

2.

I looked out the window at a dead patch of lawn. The grounds staff had set a sprinkler in the middle of it in a blind attempt at resuscitation, and the dispersed water was beginning to pool. Before long, the grass would be both scorched and drowned.

Life is a bad child with a gouging tool.

At the minor league ball park, we watch the Modesto Nuts, a minor league team. Wally the Walnut and Al the Almond prance around the foul lines. We yell, "Let's go, Nuts!" I yell as loud as I can and the people sitting close keep an eye on me. Some move away—there are plenty of empty seats.

3.

I took a sip of coffee, which I had over-sugared and over-creamed. I took a sip of beer, which the brewer had over-hopped. My friend John tried to catch a foul ball, and missed. A woman behind him made a rude comment. John was already vexed by loudmouth women, by aggressive feminists with chips on their shoulders. If it were up to him, he would have all female voice boxes removed at birth. What a different world it would be, he fantasized.

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*Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois has been published often in periodicals. His novel, Two-Headed Dog, is based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital. He lives in Denver, CO. **grabmitch@hotmail.com***

WHAT I BELIEVE

Mark Burke

When the day cooled into evening,
I walked down to the pasture
to watch the horses, how they moved,
how they stood and looked to me.
They stepped out of the birch shadows,
waited in their shy way
and came up until we stood together,
the wind stroking our faces.
Except for a breeze
threading the grass, turning its colors,
the meadow was still.
But along the far side,
where cedars draped the split-rail fence,
a darkness moved
in the shadows on this side
and shifted again.
A fawn, late born,
stood staring across the open field,
smelling the air, learning
to sift the wind for signs.
When I stepped around the horses
to measure this shade
as she breathed the dying day,
she burst her watching place,
leapt over the wedged cedar-rails
and became the dark.

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