

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 14 Issue 4



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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Arts Journal

Birmingham Arts Journal

Table of Contents



ANDREW GLAZE POETRY PRIZE - 2017 WINNING POET – Jeff Kalafa		1
PAVLOV HAD A CAT	Jeff Kalafa	2
ON THE SCENE	Tarik Townsend	3
PINK ROSE	Camille Kleinman	5
FALLING! LOOK OUT—ABOVE!	John Richmond	6
STORM’S APPROACH	Mary Celeste Schreuder	7
WHEN LIFE COMES FULL CIRCLE	Claire Datnow	8
PERFECT	Anastasia Crown	11
40’ HIGH	Carrie Raeburn	12
A HOT KANSAS WIND	Karen B. Kurtz	13
CHRISTMAS WITH THE SHARK	Debra H. Goldstein	15
1001 WORDS	Carol Hamilton	17
CONFESSION	Gale Acuff	18
MY STORY BEGINS	Jim Ferguson	19
ROCKY THE THREE-LEGGED DOG	Paul Howard	21
THE AVENUE	Liz Little	24-25
TERMINAL	Andrew Plattner	26
THIS	Franchot Ballinger	27
BOOMERANG	Stacey Michelle	28
O BRAVEST OF BRAVE NEW WORLDS	Jim Reed	30
PANTOUM FOR AN AMERICAN SOUTHERN		
LADY WHO ENJOYS TEA TIME	Joy Godsey	32
THE RIVER	Luma Lumière	33
BOUGAINVILLEAS	Micaela Walley	35
SANDWICH!	Henry Levkoff	36
THAT DRESS SHE WORE	Ramey Channell	38
THE LADY IN THE LAVENDER BLOUSE	Nina E. Woody	39
ZOE DOODLE	Zoe Radford	41
A DAD’S ANGST	Andrew Toler	42
THE TOOL BOX	Roger Barbee	43
WHITE HOUSE VINYL HAVEN	Christopher Woods	45
WAITING	Noel Conneely	46
THE FISH TRAP	David Strickland	47
UNWORLDLY FRUIT	Atraxura	48

Front Cover: VIENNE RIVER – Digital Photo - Tom Gordon is a former reporter at the Birmingham News. He received his undergraduate degree in political science from the University of Alabama and a master's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri. The cover photo was taken in France. He lives in Birmingham, AL.

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Back Cover: UNTITLED – Encaustic – 20” x 32” – Maralyn Wilson, is an encaustic wax artist who does encaustic paintings and sculptures. She lives in Birmingham, AL.

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2017 Andrew Glaze Poetry Prize

Birmingham Arts Journal established the Andrew Glaze Poetry Prize in honor of Andrew Glaze (April 21, 1920-February 7, 2016), our friend and author who served as Alabama Poet Laureate 2012-2016. Mr. Glaze was inducted into the inaugural (2015) Alabama Writers' Hall of Fame. This annual award in the amount of \$200 is presented to the poet whose work is deemed most distinguished of the poems published in the Journal the previous year. Each year BAJ Editors will select an out-of-state juror who will receive an honorarium in the amount of \$100. Juror and winner will be announced on the Journal website in January of each year, www.birminghamartsjournal.com.

Winning poem from those published in *Birmingham Arts Journal* during 2017

PAVLOV HAD A CAT

Jeff Kalafa

See Page 2

People are drawn to poetry for many reasons – for small comforts and large consolations, for confirmation and quiet reflection. People are less seldom, it seems, drawn to poetry for delight, for a good laugh, for exuberance, for a nudge towards playfulness, and for a dazzling reminder of what fun can be had with language we usually take for granted. When I first read Jeff Kalafa's poem, "Pavlov Had a Cat," I felt that delight and I laughed. So, laughter is one reason I'm awarding it the Andrew Glaze Poetry Prize. But what it does goes deeper than that for me. Johan Huizinga, the Dutch cultural historian who wrote *Homo Ludens: The Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, once wrote, "You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play." He argued, convincingly, that "Culture arises and unfolds in and as play" and "poetry was born in play and nourished on play...and never leaves it." "Pavlov Had a Cat" turns familiar words and phrases on their heads. It has the music of song. It stops us in our tracks and helps us hear something the way it should be heard – words renewed and reinvented. This poem reminds us, through wordplay, that we should never take language for granted. Brilliant.

Julie Larios, Juror, 2017 Andrew Glaze Poetry Prize

For poems by Andrew Glaze, visit his website: andrewglazepoetry.com

PAVLOV HAD A CAT

Jeff Kalafa - 2017 Andrew Glaze Poetry Prize

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monticello, Montibuyo
Understood, Oversat
Oswego, Ostheygo
Pavlov had a cat

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

Jeff Kalafa is primarily a songwriter. Originally from New Jersey, he has lived in south Florida for 23 years. Many of his articles have been published in newspapers and online.

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ON THE SCENE

Tarik Townsend

Smoke.

Lots of smoke.

Which is appropriate, since the music has been described by a few critics and many of the patrons as “smokin’.” And so here I am, under New York City in a dim basement of a jazz club known as the Village Gate in Greenwich Village, surrounded by strangers in suits and dresses, surrounded by smoke.

Lots of smoke.

Which is appropriate, it being 1962 and all. It seems like everyone smokes. Everyone and everything. People, cars, buildings, the South, even the music. The music! The whole reason I’m here. I check my watch. 9:55 pm. About five more minutes until the set begins. I choose a small table off to the side of the room, along the wall. Incognito is how I like to be. All the better to be a part of the environment, for even though I’m an observer, for the duration of the set I want to become a participant. Just in private. The musicians dig you more that way.

Last week I caught a 1957 performance in San Francisco by a cool vibraphone player, a guy by the name of Cal Tjader. The week before that, a 1954 club performance by a piano player named Dave Brubeck right here in New York City.

Yep. Not only am I a serious jazz fan—I’m a time traveler, too.

Live jazz is the best jazz. Studio sessions only reveal so much about a musician and a group. The sterile environment of mixing boards, producers, sound guys, a clock telling you how long you can solo—it’s just not as conducive to free, raw creativity as playing in front of an appreciative audience in an intimate setting like a small club. Instead of being surrounded by cables and microphones, jazz musicians would rather be surrounded by people.

And smoke.

Lots of smoke.

The announcer gets up and speaks into the mic. Sonny Rollins and his group are ready to play. Enthusiastic but not obnoxious clapping starts up as the four musicians climb up to the stand. There’s a bassist, a drummer, a trumpet player—no, that’s a cornet—and Sonny Rollins himself on tenor saxophone. No piano? This’ll be some interesting music, all right. Sonny is the main reason I decided to drop in here to the club. The man is a living legend. A few years back in 1959, he just up and quit the music scene. People said he was living on a bridge in New York City, just playing his sax all night long for hours.

He returned to the scene last year, and now here he is with a new band. After being a hardened bebop player, he was now dabbling in free jazz. Free jazz. An oxymoron if I ever heard one. Or is it? Like jazz, to be American is to be free. Yet at the same time, the creators of this music are yearning to be free Americans.

Ironic.

Sonny now turns his back to the audience and whispers something to his bandmates. They nod in agreement and he turns around. A hush falls on the crowd. He begins playing a rather disjointed series of notes, and the cornetist jumps in with him. The two horns play this weird series of competing lines for a few seconds, and it takes me a minute to recognize the tune. Ah, now it sounds familiar. Ish. It's an old tune of his, a famous ditty he wrote and played with Miles Davis on a record back in '54. It sure sounds different minus the piano. The bass finally jumps in, and like a cannon the drums make their sudden entry. This is jazz all right, but it's unlike any kind of music I've ever heard. His sax sounds more like a human voice, making yelps, honks, and wails.

A full 25 minutes pass and they're STILL playing the same song, stretching the tune to its limits. Or at least I think it's the same song. Drum solo here, cornet solo there. I'm just trying to make sense of it. At times, I forget what the tune is.

Some dude sitting a table over from me who is obviously more hip than me (He's wearing his sunglasses. Indoors. At night.) nods his head and loudly, yet without shouting, makes a confirmatory "yeah." The tune wraps up, and the audience erupts in enthusiastic clapping. Caught up with emotion, I can't even find the strength to clap, instead just nodding my head like I'm in a trance. I don't know what the musicians are doing, but I like it. It's modern, different, and it swings.

As I sit at my small table deep in a fog (literally, the cigarette smoke is almost like being in Frisco again), I realize it's awkwardly quiet, only the soft whoosh of people taking drags on their cigarettes. Looking around, I notice everyone is looking at me, including the musicians. I quickly get up to fix the reason they're looking at me so, stepping over the record albums as I go. By the time I get back to my seat, everyone has forgotten I'm there, and the band is getting ready to play again.

They play two more equally lengthy tunes, then walk off the bandstand.

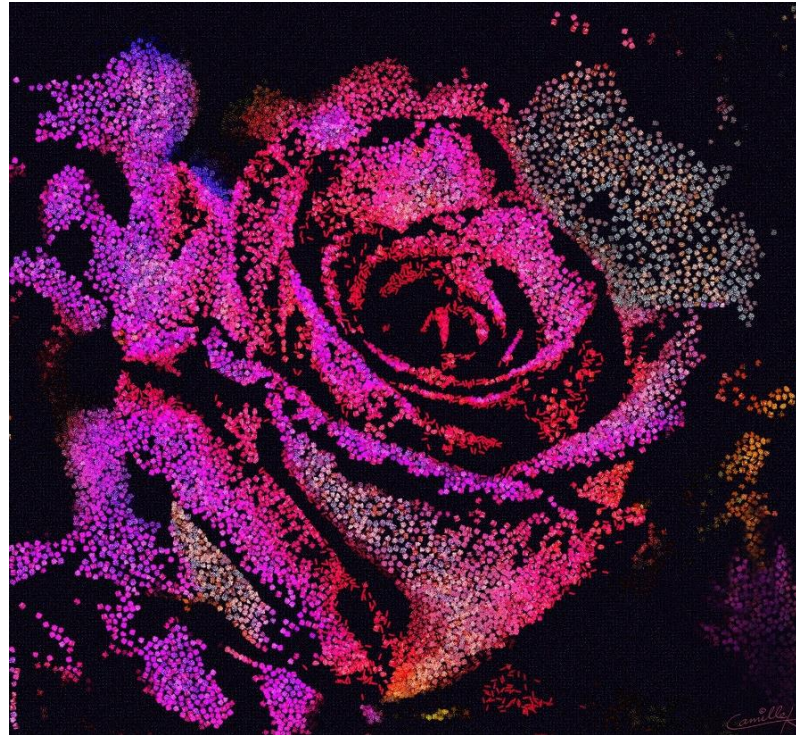
Throughout their 45-minute performance, the musicians didn't announce a tune. In fact, other than a polite nod to the audience, the musicians didn't seem to acknowledge the audience much. Fine with me. Easier to immerse myself in the music. The set over, I reluctantly bring myself back to reality.

Almost in a daze, I stand up and wonder as I wander out the smoky club, up the steps, out the building, onto the sidewalk, across the street, out of Greenwich Village, and over to my record player.

As I put the record back on the shelf, I look for my next destination. Hmmm...

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Tarik Townsend is a nursing student at Oakwood University in Huntsville, AL. He was born and raised in the Southern California city of Loma Linda. When he is not outside birdwatching, he is inside listening to jazz. jazzdrummer1@hotmail.com



PINK ROSE

Digitally enhanced photograph
Camille Kleinman

Camille Kleinman is an award-winning poet, writer, and artist. She has been writing poems and stories since 2nd grade. Her work has been published in Crab Fat magazine, Hermeneutic Chaos literary magazine, Four Ties Lit Review, NY Literary Magazine, and WordsWell among others. CGElves.com

FALLING! LOOK OUT—ABOVE!

John Richmond

It had only happened a few times in his life, but this last time—when he had to have stitches in his hand—was the starting point from which he began to give the occurrence some serious thought and consideration.

Many of the aspects connected with the “occurrence” were always the same; it happened at the kitchen sink; he was washing drinking glasses; the dish soap made the glass slippery and then—crash!

The glass would fall from his hands and the next thing he knew was that his fingers or his hand had been cut and was bleeding. It was quick, it was fast and sometimes it was painful.

These were the things that he knew. But what he didn’t know was why, if the glass was already broken, why would he try and grab it?

He thought about this for quite some time, and it wasn’t until he was back at the sink washing a bowl that it came to him.

The bowl, like the broken glasses in his past, fell from his hands, but after hitting the bottom of the sink, did not break. In the instant that followed he realized that what he did was to try and catch it before it hit.

But, he had not caught the bowl in midair. No, rather, his hands were on the still-intact bowl as it sat at the bottom of the sink. It was a eureka moment that allowed him to understand that by the time he moved his hands to catch the bowl—or the glasses—it was too late. The only thing he was doing was grabbing at broken glass, thus the cuts.

So, with that firmly ingrained in his mind, he decided to discipline himself at the sink—whatever fell from his hands, be it utensil, metal pot, plate, or especially a glass—he would just let it fall.

Did he drop glasses after that? Sure. Did he ever cut his fingers or hands again? Never.

.....

John Richmond has wandered parts of North America for a good portion of his life. These “wanderings” have taken him from the Great Lakes to Chicago—then, eventually, New York City. jrichmondnyc@gmail.com

STORM'S APPROACH

Mary Celeste Schreuder

I watched it come;
sun still streaming.
The bees a flurry,
midair circling
dogwood blooms
before stillness...
bird songs falling
silent
in the nestling trees.

It took its time.
Measured and even
like breath,
gripping the light
in its hands,
dragging its
black-blanketed
body
across the sky.

I do not
understand
the way of nature.
I do not
understand
the way
the world from
light
to darkness turns.

Mary Celeste Schreuder is originally from Minnesota but has also lived in Nashville, TN and Oxford, England. She now resides in Anderson, SC, and is a doctoral student at Clemson University. Her poems have appeared in the National Gallery of Writing, Unbound Magazine, and The Broad River Review. maryschreuder@hotmail.com

WHEN LIFE COMES FULL CIRCLE

Claire Datnow

“Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you [have not yet] lived them. At present, you need to live the question. Gradually, without even noticing it, you may find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.”

[An excerpt from The Fourth Letter in *Letters to a Young Poet* from Rainer Maria Rilke]

Why on Earth has a girl from Johannesburg, South Africa ended up in Birmingham, Alabama? That question kept echoing in my head when my family and I moved to Birmingham in 1972. I wondered what ironic twist of fate had brought me to these two cities. Although Johannesburg and Birmingham are thousands of miles apart, both are indelibly associated with racism, riots, police brutality, apartheid, and segregation. The answer to why my journey in life has brought me to these two cities would become clear years later. At the time, I felt that this ironic twist of fate was sending me a message that I needed to decipher. I sensed that the answer lay in two brutal historical events, the Holocaust and Apartheid, which have shaped my thinking and my life.

The terror of learning that my grandmother, Blume Klein, and my two aunts, Dora and Toby Klein, were murdered in the Holocaust filled me with horror. What seems equally sinister, in hindsight, is the society in which I grew up, torn apart by cruel racial barriers. I clearly recall the election that brought the apartheid government into power in South Africa. In my memoir, *Behind the Walled Garden of Apartheid: Growing Up White in Segregated South Africa*, I write:

May 26, 1948

What happened on that fateful day sticks in my memory like the thorns of a burr weed. On that day, the Afrikaner Nationalist Party was voted into office, implementing a system of racial segregation and white supremacy that would shape every aspect of life in South Africa. The night before, I overheard my parents discussing that pivotal election and what it might mean to our family's future. I wondered: Why is Ma so upset, when Dad is so pleased by the Nationalist Party's victory?

This brutal, all-pervasive apartheid regime was not something abstract. I saw the horrible consequences of bigotry from what befell those I actually knew.

I liked Basil Kakoris, the Greek immigrant who owned the café down the street from my parents' grocery store. Basil never failed to greet me with a piece

of candy and a happy smile. When I was in my teens, the police, tipped-off by someone, hid outside Basil's tearoom after closing hours. When he emerged with a black woman, they charged him under the Immorality Act. The act prohibited any intimate physical contact between whites and people of other races. Even a kiss could lead to criminal charges, with a punishment of up to seven years in prison.

Cases like these made headline news. Before the case came to trial, Basil drowned himself. Ironically, many years later, perhaps by divine justice, Basil's daughter married the renowned advocate, George Bizos, who defended Nelson Mandela on trial for treason. Years later, Bizos served as judge on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to restore justice, after the fall of the Apartheid government in 1996.

Then there was Andy Lungu, a member of the Xhosa people. He worked for Premier Fisheries, my parents' store, for twenty-five years. Until the day he died of lung cancer, Andy never missed a day's work, arriving at the store before dawn. Slowly and deliberately Andy carried out his daily chores, a homemade cigarette cupped in the palm of his hand to catch ashes. He lived in a men's hostel an hour's walking distance from the store. The hostels housed migrant workers who were barred from bringing their wives and children with them. They became fertile breeding grounds for prostitution, disease, and crime. Dad would willingly pay the fine for Andy when the police arrested him for not carrying his "passbook" with him. By law "non-whites" had to carry passbooks authorized by their employer, allowing them to be in white only areas after curfew. Little wonder I never saw Andy crack a smile.

Please don't get me wrong, I was not immune to indoctrination. All along my unbiased child's view was being molded by the values and prejudices of the society into which I was born.

Keeping all this in mind, you may begin to understand why my husband and I made the choice to leave South Africa and immigrate to the United States, leaving friends and family far behind us. When we left South Africa in July 1965, apartheid continued to roll on like a gigantic machine flattening everything in its path. By then I had graduated from college and was working as a schoolteacher. I was ready to take a more active part in my country's affairs, but the officers of apartheid had exiled, gagged, censored, and banned leaders and organizations that I might have joined. So, when my husband, Boris, received a fellowship from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to work at the space research center in California, we jumped at the chance. Being young, adventurous, and full of optimism, we believed that we would succeed at whatever we put our minds to.

Now fast forward to present-day Birmingham, Alabama. After sojourns in California, Minnesota, and Canada we settled in this city—exactly forty-five years ago! And the answer to my question, *why has my journey in life brought me from Johannesburg, South Africa, to Birmingham, Alabama*, has become clear.

In January 2011, soon after I published my memoir of growing up under apartheid, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute asked Boris and me to help prepare Birmingham students for an exchange visit to Johannesburg. We were honored and excited to meet with our city's students, and then later to celebrate the arrival of students from Johannesburg. Both groups said that they were surprised by the historical similarities between the civil rights movement in the United States, and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Mary Ngcobo from Johannesburg told us, "Our history and your history, they aren't that different. Both events took place with aggression and the youth were involved. In the United States, the great leader was Martin Luther King, Jr. In South Africa, it was Nelson Mandela."

To my delight I met three young South African exchange students. When they told me that they had graduated from the same school I had attended, it was a real eye-opener. Back then it would have been completely illegal for them to enroll at my segregated, all-white school. Under apartheid these students would have been relegated to the lowest rung of the educational ladder.

Looking back, I can see how the two halves of my life have come full circle. Hopefully, the brutal historical events that sensitized me to the inequities of racism have molded me into a better mother, grandmother, teacher, writer, and citizen. Unfortunately, the good fight is far from over. Recent events have called upon me never to forget the lessons of the past, but to take action to right injustice in the best way I can. Why else would a grandma like me be marching down the street in the middle of thousands of protestors?

Because the tides of history coursing through my veins and my life have served as touchstones, reminding me who I am and where I have come from, and charging me to do good deeds so that evil will not triumph over good.

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Claire Datnow wears many hats—author, educator, nature lover, conservationist, world traveler. She writes about the environment, historical fiction, memoirs, and medical mysteries. www.mediamint.net

PERFECT

Anastasia Crown

We hide our thoughts beneath suave manners
And take great pride in being disguised
By dirty masks and ragged banners.
We're shallow snobs who posed as preachers
Reproving snobs
We've idolized.

We spare ourselves the disappointment
Behind the veil of cold indifference
That's woven from the thinnest strands.
We try to hide from ourselves
Becoming someone else.

We keep us warm by the dying embers
Of an elusive fairy tale
Surrounded by eternal ice
And dream of being exclusive members
Of an exclusive fancy club—
The locked door of redesigned
Paradise.

We follow all the top-list trends
Pursuing beauty and success
Along the winding road to bliss...
But at some point, we start to pass
Off glittering glass as uncut diamonds
For our renewed ideals—

The perfect look...
The perfect life...
The perfect world...

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Anastasia Crown earned an MA degree from Academy of Business Administration, Zelenograd, Moscow, Russia. She is a poet and a writer; some of her work has been published in magazines such as The Writers' Union, Green Avenue, and Literary Day.

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40' HIGH

Carrie Raeburn

27" x 34"

Soft Pastels and Pan Pastels on PastelMat paper

Carrie Raeburn is a Pastel Society of America Master Pastelist; a juried member of the Salmagundi Club, NY; and the Degas Pastel Society, New Orleans; a Member of Excellence of the Alabama Pastel Society; and President of the Pastel Society of North Florida. Her work is featured in Art Journey Abstract Painting: A Celebration of Contemporary Painting (2017). She is the 2017 recipient of the Alabama Pastel Society Birmingham Arts Journal Publication Award. carrieraeburn30@gmail.com

A HOT KANSAS WIND

Karen B. Kurtz

Adam Miller squinted at the wispy cirrus clouds. *Good day to work*, he thought. A meeting, another order to get out, a good supper. Smiling at the mere thought of food, he started the pick-up and headed across town to the Excel factory.

Adam did not see any clouds on the horizon, but the hot Kansas wind blew in from a different direction that day. A savage straight-line wind was heading directly at him.

In a trailer park near Newton, the police served a domestic abuse protection order to a man they knew well. A convicted felon. "He seemed to take it OK," the officers congratulated themselves.

Billowing pockets of instability rose in the felon's thunderstruck mind. Fear, anger, and rage collided and tumbled. He was isolated in solitary anguish.

In the heat of the afternoon, bent on revenge, he threw an AK-47 rifle and a Glock 22 pistol in his car and raced to Hesston. He shot at two cars in a drive by and wounded an innocent bystander. The shooter fired randomly at oncoming traffic. Pressure in his mind continued, unabated.

He crashed into a gray van and rolled down the ditch. He scrambled up, ripping open the van door. He shot the van driver in the leg and stole the van. Now pressure tumbled from dizzying heights. It needed to spread out.

He hit an old woman sitting in a car in the Excel parking lot. Then he entered the factory where he and Adam worked, and began to open fire.

Pandemonium ensued.

Adam headed back to his office after the meeting.

"Fire! Fire! Get out! Fire!" Excel's code word for "shooter" encircled Adam. Wild noise ricocheted against the walls, but an immediate sense of calm came over him. Adam helped workers get moving, up and out.

Suddenly the killer pivoted, confronting Adam directly in the face. For a split second, both men froze. Then Adam stepped up into harm's way.

"Fire! We need to go!" Adam said quietly.

The killer hesitated, confused by Adam's calm interruption.
"Fire!" Adam repeated.
Searing pain penetrated the mask of madness on the killer's face.
Poppoppoppop! He shot Adam four times.
Workers wailed hysterically.
Sirens screamed.
Ambulances roared to the rescue.
The Chief of Police was the first to arrive at the scene. The killer fired at him, too, but the Police Chief permanently stopped that torrential, evil downdraft forever. The killer's rampage lasted 30 minutes, the average life of a single-cell thunderstorm.

In the aftermath, dozens of first responders comforted dozens of wounded. Adam did not need surgery. "It was a God thing," he told reporters from his hospital bed. Four people died, and some were his friends.

It will take time for the bucolic community of Hesston, Kansas, to heal. Adam believes *all* human life is sacred, yet he cannot forget the day the Kansas wind changed direction. He can never be the man he was on the day before the shooting.

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Karen B. Kurtz writes in Fairhope, AL and has been published in the Birmingham Arts Journal and elsewhere. www.karenbkurtz.com kkurt@bnin.net

*"If the universe is so vast, and its age so old,
and its stars so plentiful, where is everybody?"*

—Enrico Fermi

CHRISTMAS WITH THE SHARK

Debra H. Goldstein

When it comes to jumping into the ocean, two things always hold me back — my fear of sharks and how I look in a wet bathing suit. Last night, Pete must have plied me with a lot of drinks for me to be standing here shivering, waiting for a high noon plunge into the Atlantic Ocean. I can't imagine what possessed him to want us to take the poor man's Christmas version of the Flora-Bama's New Year's Polar Bear Dip.

Maybe he thinks the shock to our systems will baptize us anew. Sort of his twist on how the meaning of Christmas celebrates a birth. Being honest, I was on the same wavelength when I agreed to come to the beach for the holidays; except, I thought of it as being the rebirth of our relationship. After all, he promised it would be different this time.

I figured, at least for a little while, we would either stare out the condo's window, mesmerized by the swirling waves, or simply get drunk and let the good times roll. We obviously did that well after we plugged in our table top tree and began toasting each other. Otherwise, I wouldn't be standing here staring at my goosebumps while Pete fetches us another beer.

When Pete announced, while we were watching the moon glow against the darkness of the water, he'd signed us up for the Polar Bear Dip, I raised myself up on my elbow and said, "No."

He laughed and assured me it would be fun. I told him, "No way. I've done a lot of things you wanted, but I'm not going to be eaten by a shark. Feel free to paddle around to your heart's content, but without me."

"You're being silly," he said. "There aren't any sharks in this part of Florida."

"But there are. I saw them in that movie, *Jaws*."

"That movie was set in New England in the summer; not Florida at Christmas."

"Doesn't matter. Look outside, it's the same. There's a small town, a beach, blue-green water, and a bar. Nobody in the movie wants to admit a shark is out there eating people, but it is. And there are sharks here, too."

Pete pulled me back to him and held me tightly. "Honey, relax. They've been doing this for years without anyone getting hurt. We'll take the plunge, swim around, and run back up on the sand so fast you'll hardly know you were ever in the water. Besides, you're safe with me."

At that, he tickled me. As I caught my breath, he said, “if you’d feel better about it, you can barely dip your toes in, scream about sharks, and let one of the he-man lifeguards rescue you.”

I leaned on my pillows. “And what will you be doing while the hunk saves my life?”

“Picking up a few things folks left on the beach.”

“Pete!” I frowned at him.

He laughed. “Either scenario will be fun. I promise.”

Feet planted in the sand, I peered at the horizon wondering when Pete will comment about the pounds I’ve gained since I last wore this bathing suit. I shift my gaze from the churning water to the Polar dippers gathering at the water’s edge. Hearing my name, I glance behind me. Pete is working his way through the part of the beach where the crowd has thinned.

Reaching me, he snakes an arm around my waist and hands me a beer.

“Perfect, isn’t it?” he whispers into my ear, his cold lips barely touching me.

I look at the waiting swimmers and at Pete and shudder. I can’t do it. As he firmly grasps me, I realize Pete will never understand sharks don’t discriminate. Hot or cold, tall or short, doesn’t matter to them. All they want is a fleshy piece of blubber they can sink their teeth into – holding on until the life is squeezed out of it. It won’t be different this time. There will be no rebirth. Shoving my beer back at him, I pull away and walk toward the condo eager to shed my too tight bathing suit.

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Debra Goldstein writes the Sarah Blair mysteries for Kensington Press (NYC). Previous books include Should Have Played Poker and Maze in Blue.

www.DebraHGoldstein.com

*"It is the spectator, and not life, that
art really mirrors."*

—Oscar Wilde

1001 WORDS

Carol Hamilton

In a book on chance meetings, *
The author said he felt the need
To add order to such randomness,
So, each encounter is described
In 1001 words, exactly. Shorter
Entries all end with 101. Exactly.

I wrestle chaos down at dawn
By dividing the day ahead
Into parcels of 60 minutes,
Which I cross off as they pass.
It never works, though, and List 1
Soon metamorphoses into List 7 or 8.

Countering disorder is surely the birth
Of human wisdom, taxonomies,
Measurements, weather forecasts.
As children we knelt in clover
Our feet green-wreathed, our fingers
Busy to find one four-leaf clover.

How deeply I pray, right now,
For the key to unlock the secret,
A way to keep it all from tumbling out.
The roots of wild sorrel, which when young
We loved for its lemony leaves, branch,
Tendrils every which direction through the soil,

And why, I ask myself,
Do I try to pluck it out anyway?

*[“HELLO, GOODBYE, HELLO” by Craig Brown]

.....

Carol Hamilton has recent publications in Paper Street Journal, Cold Mountain Review, Common Ground, U.S.1 Worksheet, Homestead Review, Dryland, Visions International, Turtle Island Quarterly, Inscape, and others. She has published 17 books, most recently, SUCH DEATHS. Hamilton is a former Poet Laureate of Oklahoma. hamiltoncj@earthlink.net www.carolhamilton.org

CONFESSION

Gale Acuff

I don't know much about God, but I know
Miss Hooker, my Sunday School teacher, who
loves me, I'm pretty sure, and is at least
real but I wonder about God sometimes,
if He is, real I mean, nobody asks
that in class or during church service but
maybe they should, it might get 'em involved
a little more and God as well and then
there's Jesus and the Holy Ghost—I think
that if God speaks out then they might, too, and
then we could all go back to our praying
as if we really mean it. I confess

that when I pray my mind is really on
Miss Hooker, I hope to marry her when
I'm not just 10 to her 25 like
I am now but more like 18 to her
33, when I'm old enough to know
what to do with a full-grown woman that
you're not supposed to talk about, I mean
what to do and not Miss Hooker herself.
Then maybe at our wedding I'll see God
or feel Him there at least or, what the Hell,
Her. That would be an answer to a prayer
but it's funny, I don't think I've prayed it,
at least not word-for-word. But who wouldn't?

.....

Gale Acuff has taught university English in the US, China, and the Palestinian West Bank. His poetry has been published in Ascent, Ohio Journal, Descant, Poem, Adirondack Review, Coe Review, Worcester Review, Maryland Poetry Review, Arkansas Review, Carolina Quarterly, South Dakota Review, Sequential Art Narrative in Education, and other journals. Acuff has written three books of poetry: Buffalo Nickel, (2004), The Weight of the World (2006), and The Story of My Lives (2008), all published by BrickHouse Press. asadgale@yahoo.com

MY STORY BEGINS

Jim Ferguson

“Oolamai” said Mother, “Why are you not like Tsilinn? She is a pretty and a smart girl. You are a disappointment to me Oolamai!” These words of maternal love were spoken to me often, yet I had no answer; I was not pretty or clever or smart, for no mother would tell her child so unless it was the truth. The only time I heard differently was when Mother tried to give me to the Leading Woman in our village, the venerable LiWoon, who was of such exquisite quality that she could afford to recline on a silk bed during daylight hours and receive whichever callers she deigned worthy of the honor of an audience with her Redolence. I witnessed the scene as in a dream this evening, a dream of long times ago and far places from those times and places occupied now. And lest you think I invented this story let me remind you I am not clever enough to create whole tales out of nothing; for I was a stupid child, who would not remember details like the loosely pleated dress with pinpoint crinoline Mother made for me to wear the day she tried to curry favor with LiWoon by giving me to serve her, as if a four-year old ugly girl could be of any service to such a refined woman. Nor could I, a dim-witted nuisance to the Mother who bore me, recall the hunger that burned through my stomach and reached out of my finger tips for the morsels of food spilling out of the grasp of the beautiful Tsilinn, a wicked hunger that deserved the Mother’s glare before giving me the evening portion of rice that was food enough for a lesser child to steal from the mouth of the more worthy one.

For her part, LiWoon seemed little interested in the “gift” my Mother offered; yet she finally smiled faintly as if to say “Yes, put her on the shelf with the others, she may amuse me yet.” In fact, I was placed on a shelf, a wooden shelf with a roof, from which I peeped and noticed the folds of my pin point dress and enjoyed the smell of the soap with which my Mother had bathed me for the auspicious occasion. “Oolamai, you be good servant for LiWoon” Mother said with a hidden look that reminded me I was not Tsilinn and had created my Mother’s discomfort by not being so, “for LiWoon is a woman of quality whose whisper is as the sound of birds in the morning...” but I could not hear the remaining words as she was ushered out from the presence of the illustrious bird-voiced LiWoon, who, I was to learn, said few words and commanded her staff through mere glances or a slight shifting of her facial muscles in what seemed an imperceptible manner to a stupid child like me.

Thus my story began as a dream in a dusty village on the western frontier in a forgotten province, where the tlock-tlock of the wooden bells on the yokes of the water buffalo regulated the rhythm of life until the metal pinging of the railroad spikes presaged the ear-splitting whistle of the steam locomotive that shattered that world and allowed a dim-witted girl the one chance of escape she would ever have; and having no better sense than to allow herself to be compelled by the hunger within her to move with unbound feet with the flow of the onlookers, and remaining unseen due to the presence of so many who saw not the unimportant ones such as she, clambered up the luggage piled on the platform and scurried into a car from which the aroma of saffron and sweet meats wafted and awaited.

LiWoon did not miss the girl's presence for several days and, when realizing her absence, thought only "That vermin mother has stolen Oolamai from me" and with a sideways glance commanded her undersecretary to make a report of the matter to the village Council. By the time the Council investigated, the clickclacking of the train had proceeded far away from the village where it was never recorded as having been, a phantasmal train that laid track before while it pulled up track behind so that no one knew where it was going or where it had been and the shriek of its whistle was consumed by the vacuum of its passing.

.....

Birmingham attorney Jim Ferguson writes poems and prose by night and practices life and law by day. He remembers living in a pre-digital world and wonders what pre-era we are now experiencing. jef@spain-gillon.com

"Never does a man portray his own character more vividly than in his manner of portraying another's."

—Jean Paul Richter

ROCKY THE THREE-LEGGED DOG

Paul Howard

Lying on my side, then my back and finally my other side, the sun emanating through the front windows warming my medium long black and gray fur. The intensity of the sun tells me it's probably June; the month when Ray and the other boys get out of school beginning our summer vacation. My morning naps will be shorter during the summer months because we will run and play in the yard, chase balls, Frisbees and explore the woods down by the creek.

This morning was the last of the school year. As usual, I walked Ray to the bus stop in the morning while marking every mailbox and fire hydrant along the way to make sure the neighborhood dogs knew it was my territory.

At the bus stop I let the other boys and girls rub my head and tummy until the big yellow monstrosity coughed and sputtered up the street to pick up the kids. I dutifully barked as they drove away letting the children know I was protecting them from the loud, smelly, yellow monster that took the kids to the last day of school.

I wandered back home, bored, staying on the grass as the road was rough and uncomfortable on my foot pads and toe nails which were too long at this point. I marked a few mailboxes twice and wandered up close to Rosie's front window, so we could bark back and forth. Rosie wasn't allowed out without a leash, so we visited through the front window for a few minutes. Rosie was the queen of the neighborhood dogs; a full-blooded and full-throated, cream-colored Pomeranian. Her humans rarely let her outside, but I still had a crush on her hoping some day she might escape, and we could run away. Even though my pedigree is "mutt," a real frou-frou dog like Rosie is not out of the question for a guy with my personality and bad-boy looks.

I thought nothing of running into the street to greet the yellow monster even though Ray admonished me not to do so. I had no fear of the bus or cars or anything on the street. I barked at them with impunity and they never answered back. What was there to be afraid of? They were just big and loud and smelly. Some of my canine friends would simply chase the metal monstrosities away.

The kids were in full celebration mode with the end of the school year and so was I. We all had a very good year.

As the days got longer and the summer weather was more hot and humid, our day trips on the bikes tended to revolve around the creek and took us farther away from home.

The morning was glorious so Ray and one of his buddies packed their back packs with water, sandwiches, chips, dog treats, and an apple or two for the long bike ride along the creek to the train trestle which was miles away. It took us until almost noon to make the entire trip. We always explored the creek as we traveled, always hoping to discover critters in the water and along the bank.

When we found deeper water, the boys would take off their shoes and socks and we would all frolic in the cool creek water. There were minnows, crawfish, and tadpoles in the standing water.

On one of our earlier trips we were searching the deeper water under rocks and I found the business end of the largest crawfish we had ever seen. Ray heard me yelp from around the bend; the monster critter had a huge claw and was hanging on to my nose. It took Ray a few minutes to pry him loose, and he scurried away before we could trap him. None of the other boys believed our tale about the monster crawfish even though my snout was tender and visibly swollen for a week.

It was mid-morning before we made it to the part of the creek that passed under the train trestle. We parked the bikes off the road down by the creek where there was a wide expanse of sand and boulders making for a perfect to hide their bikes and for our picnic lunch. We were directly under the trestle allowing us to appreciate the entire expanse from beginning to end as well as the enormous height above the creek.

Just about the time we finished lunch under the trestle the weather went crazy. Thunder, lightning, and heavy rain lasted for a full hour. All we could do was climb up to the forest next to the tracks and hunker-down until it stopped raining.

When the rain stopped I led the boys through the miasma of the dark woods back to the train tracks. Just as we exited the woods a train we had not heard or seen in the dense fog roared down the tracks and was on us before the boys could get back to the edge of the woods. Both were frightened, the train seemed louder than usual and I lunged at the train before it could hurt Ray.

I don't remember things for a couple of days when I finally woke up with Ray staring at me. He looked so concerned I gave him a big lick. When I tried to get up something was terribly wrong, and I tipped over. It took a minute to realize the train had eaten one of my rear legs.

I learned to run and play again, and I kept my appointment to meet the bus every day except I got more head rubs than I used to get. Nobody seemed to care that I was the slowest dog in the neighborhood.

You know what? Rosie finally got out one day and we licked and smelled and made puppies much to the chagrin of her owner. All seven puppies looked like me and had four legs each!

.....

*Paul S. Howard, MD, is a Birmingham plastic surgeon. An avid reader, book collector, and medical historian, his published books are PERCEPTION AS REALITY and EVIL ENVY. **PaulHowardMD.com***

“Unfortunately, you are in a hurry, in a hurry, no doubt, to go and do things which you would much better leave undone. People are always in a hurry and leave the moment when they ought to be arriving.”

—Marcel Proust



THE AVENUE

Digital Photograph Composite
Liz Little

Liz Self Little is a self-taught photographer, media specialist, and an editor for a local paper. Born beneath Vulcan and brought up in Norwood, Little graduated from Phillips High School. She is a member of the Shades Valley Camera Club where she won Rookie of the Year, first place for Artistic Prints, and other awards for her photography.

*Liz and her husband David (also a photographer) travel the southeast documenting the beauty and history of the area one snapshot at a time. Her photos can be seen on the shadesvalleycameraclub.com website.
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TERMINAL

Andrew Plattner

Spring, 1982. I stand at the bus stop on one-way Monmouth Street, a tepid cup of White Castle coffee in my hand. A Nixon-era Pontiac station wagon careens over a lane and halts along the curb in front of me. The driver's side window rolls down and there is the face of my mother under her Joey Heatherton hair.

Sonny. What are you doing in town? She notices the suitcase at my feet. I wanted to see Valerie.

Her face seems gentle. Oh honey, she's moved on. I could've told you that. The guy in the Chrysler stuck behind her lays on his horn. My mother's left arm dangles out the window, a cigarette hangs between her fingers. The Chrysler guy pulls around her, gives an additional honk. Some people. I can give you a lift.

I'm going to the Greyhound station.

So, get in. She sets her eyes on the rear view. It's dusk, past rush hour. I think it's pretty impressive she knew it was me. I wind up in the passenger seat, the suitcase pressing against my knees. She pulls ahead, then accelerates. She's going at the speed limit, which I'm glad for. You don't call your mother when you come to town? She stubs out the cig, rolls up the window.

I didn't want to be talked out of something.

When have I ever. She sniffs. Have you eaten?

I hold up the coffee cup. A couple of cheeseburgers.

Before a long bus ride?

I can handle it. After that, we ride in silence through one traffic light then another. But I think the ones up here taste better. I notice my mother is wearing a salmon-colored sweater, her nails are done. My father isn't in the picture, I don't need to ask about that. I'm worried I've ruined her evening.

I see Valerie at the clubs once in a while. She says hello. She called me by my first name once, like we were friends, but I didn't like that, and she could tell. The Greyhound logo is on a sign that's atop a two-story building that's two blocks away. She is digging at the purse stuck by her hip; she takes out a pocketbook, holds it over.

I stick it back in the purse. Tennessee's OK. We slow for a caution light.

I left town for a guy or two. Way back when. She seems distant, but she is my mother and I know she is thinking of me. I'm not sorry at all I did. She shrugs, seems knowledgeable. She doesn't look at me again until we've pulled

past the taxi stand at the bus station, to the stretch of curb for drop-offs. I wonder if I ought to give her a kiss, but she is wearing some make-up. I guess she knows what I'm thinking because she leans over, kisses my cheek. Then she thumbs away what must have been a smudge of lipstick there. Love ya, kid.

I stand at the curb, cup of coffee in my hand as she drives off. 0.

Later, in the middle of the night, I awaken and look up to the front of the bus to the driver, whose dark, seated shape makes me think of a watermelon seed. He keeps both hands on the big-as-pizza-pie steering wheel. If he sees his own son or daughter standing by the side of the road, a suitcase at their feet, will he suddenly pull over, even if it isn't a scheduled stop? Yes, I am confident the answer is yes. I close my eyes. I think about Valerie. Just then, I feel like laughing about something.

What were you thinking, calling her by her first name like that?

.....

Andy Plattner's "Terminal" was awarded the Faulkner Society's gold medal novella for 2016. He has also published stories in The Southern Review, New World Writing and Sewanee Review. He lives in Atlanta and teaches fiction writing at Kennesaw State and Emory universities. aplattne@kennesaw.edu



THIS

Franchot Ballinger

So this is emptiness.

So this is the awakened heart.

Wood Thrush song, then a moment's cease.

Wind now and again in the pines.

.....

Franchot Ballinger taught English at the University of Cincinnati for 37 years. He now volunteers with the Cincinnati Nature Center and as a spiritual care volunteer with Hospice of Cincinnati. hanshan12@gmail.com

BOOMERANG

Stacey Michelle

I'm in a Norah Jones word cage
sipping Jamaica Me Crazy coffee
on Highland Avenue.
If I lose my mind
Do I gain a melody
Can I write my own lines
Listening to theirs
Trees tower so high above
We stagger, ants on a hill of red
Thirsty for water not soiled with
Left over fast food cups & plastic bags
Embracing my spit's dance
Once again over the weekend
We partied alone
And now we party together
I've forgotten what constitutes a party
But for me it doesn't have to happen
Every day of the week
As long as I often feel the ocean and sand
Or rocks from the trail under my feet
You're in the kitchen with bags of cheese
And oil and butter and salt and pepper
And you taste like heaven and I don't know

How or why I think I know that
But loving you has taken me to a softer place
Where I lean toward the sunlight but also
Between the lines almost give myself away
When I don't want or need to
Out of the feel of this sort of lightness
That I both loathe and love
The dance will bring me back
The song will bring me back
Where you boomerang
With our brightness

Stacey Michelle writes in Birmingham, AL. She has lived on the Pacific and Gulf coasts. In addition to writing prose and poetry, she has an affinity for music and pencil art.
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“I figured her to be a trust-fund woman because of the way she flaunted her endowments.”

—Jim Reed

O BRAVEST OF BRAVE NEW WORLDS OR THE VIRTUAL MIRROR-COMPUTER-TEXTING-GAZE OF THE LONG-LOST SOULS

Jim Reed

Are you really there, and am I actually present here?

It's taken me years to almost adjust to the fact that when somebody seems to be in my presence, they often are not.

I walk into a fast-food restaurant and it comes my turn to order from the menu. The fast-food woman smiles at me, wide-eyed and focused on me...but not really, since I realize that she is staring at a computer screen that is at eye level, she's reading off her questions, and she hasn't once seen my face—nor will she.

The computer is me, to her.

I enter the living room to greet and chat with a grandchild, but she only screams in protest when I innocently turn the TV off in order to visit with her. I thought I was doing us both a favor by reducing distractions so that we can actually visit with one another.

She sees only the screen and wouldn't know it if I were wearing a monkey on my head.

I'm being interviewed on a Cable TV show by an interviewer who never once looks at me, since she's staring at herself in the monitor and adjusting her hair and angle the whole time.

After recording a number of my stories for broadcast on a Tuscaloosa radio station, I attempt to exchange pleasantries with the station manager, but I suddenly notice that he's staring at his computer and clicking away the entire time he talks with me—he is responding to my comments with generic quips but doesn't know what I am saying. I slink away and he doesn't notice.

The game-play kid looks at his lap as he visits with me, his thumb moving the images around, never once looking at my face.

A texting teen stares enraptured at phone in hand and laughs at what she sees and what she transmits while almost listening to me but never knowing when our conversation has ceased.

The hospital orderly with pods in both ears looks at me but does not hear my question because the music he hears is the thing. I walk away uninformed.

The hospital nurse talks as she enters and reads from the laptop before her, never seeing me but appropriately answering my questions.

The man whose home I'm visiting watches his enormous television screen as we chat. He doesn't see me at all.

I am the interloper, the real flesh and bone person who is no longer needed in these people's lives.

In order to have them see me, I will have to become an entity submerged in their virtual world.

I see their flesh, they see my electronic self.

O brave new world.

Uh, were you saying something

.....

Jim Reed is author, editor, and curator in Birmingham, AL. He has just completed his thirteenth book and will likely publish it someday.

www.redclaydiary.com

“You can lead a leopard to water...but you can't make him change his spots in the middle of the stream.”

—Jim Pate

Jim Pate dabbles in writing, is a retired librarian and teaches English as a second language. A Birminghamian, he is a world-class Scrabble player and loves boomerangs and Caribbean steel drums. jppate42@gmail.com

PANTOUM FOR AN AMERICAN SOUTHERN LADY WHO ENJOYS TEA TIME

Joy Godsey

I baked the biscuits yesterday.
From oven they came fluffy and light.
It was no special occasion, just an ordinary midday
And I'm not sure why I did that, in hindsight.

The biscuits came from the oven fluffy and light.
I smeared a pair with butter and honey.
I'm not sure why I did that, in hindsight,
I wouldn't typically indulge for love or money.

I slathered the biscuits with butter and honey,
I brewed a small pot of Tetley's tea.
This afternoon indulgence seemed rather funny;
It was wholly abnormal for a person like me.

Again, next day I brewed a cuppa hot tea
And on the day-old biscuits instead of ham,
(Which was quite abnormal for a person like me),
I spread the pastry with clotted cream and jam.

I spread the pastry with clotted cream and jam.
I suppose that's normal living in Birmingham.
It was no special occasion, just an ordinary midday
I baked the biscuits in Alabama yesterday.

.....

Joy Godsey is owner of Godsey Communications, a consulting firm doing business in Birmingham, AL for more than 30 years. In addition to writing poetry, Joy enjoys kayaking, fly-fishing, and gardening. Her poetry has appeared in past issues of Birmingham Arts Journal, two anthologies, and has won awards from the Alabama State Poetry Society. jgodsey@me.com

THE RIVER

Luma Lumière

Every evening, when the sun sets behind the distant hills and turns the sky orange, I get a strange headache and the impulse to walk towards the forest. The forest makes a circle around my village and protects us, but it has been off limits for as long as we've been here. Our village is in a clearing in the middle of a large forest. We have lived there since the dawn of time and have been protected by the forest, or perhaps trapped by it. In return for protection, we must not venture too far. In fact, the villagers cannot will themselves to walk a few meters past The Edge. The Edge is that border between the shadowy forest and our village and is considered dangerous by our elders.

Those who have ventured into the forest confirm that the deeper they go, the colder they feel and the harder it is to move their limbs. Some villagers have pushed their way about 10 meters into the forest, just far enough that they started walking into the cool shade under the trees. But not me, I can always walk in easily. In fact, I feel faster there and can see more things than others. My mother and I once peeked inside from The Edge when I was five, and she claimed she saw ghosts of villagers who had gotten trapped inside the forest. I only saw fruit on the floor, deliciously ripe fruits and turnips, more filling and nutritious than the berries that compose our diet. So, I ran in.

My mother gave the most ear-piercing scream I could imagine. The sound of my mother's cry made my skin crawl and my neck twitch. My mother's wrath was nothing to be played around with, not even for a turnip, so I turned around and went home. As I grew, I needed more of the forest, and the village felt like a cage. Despite my mother's pleas, every evening I walk into the forest and the dull headache that nags me daily starts slipping away. The shade of the forest lets my eyes rest and I feel parts of my face I have forgotten. How far I walk each day doesn't matter. Inside the forest I have many things to do.

Sometimes I hunt for turnips, a practical thing to do and a sure way to get my mother to forget where I was. Other times I study the trunks of the trees and wonder if I can climb them. The trees are giant, and so much taller than me. Their trunks wider than two of me, and their lowest branches too high up for me to climb. *Someday, somehow, I'll figure out how to get up there with you*, I've said to the trees. But most times I just sit in the cold shade on the forest floor and listen.

At a certain point, you get so far from The Edge you stop seeing it. The light from the clearing disappears and if you panic, you lose your way. However, if you sit in the same place and let your eyes rest, you can always see a faint light coming from where The Edge is.

Some time ago, I walked so far in, I saw two Edges. One in front of me, and one behind me. *Had I not rested my eyes enough?* With enough rest my eyes could make out The Edge in the darkness. I rested and meditated, but no matter how much I tried I saw the same...two Edges. The Edge behind me was the clearing, I was sure of it. I always keep The Edge behind me. I check multiple times during a walk, and it never fails. I can always turn around and walk home.

So, what was this Second Edge about? Another clearing? My clearing's light was tiny by comparison, this one went as far as I could see. A walk to the Second Edge would surely take a long time, so I quickly turned around and ran back home. My mother was infuriated, I had been gone for a day. *But that night I vowed to make it to the Second Edge, someday, somehow.*

And so, the day to go for the Second Edge came. I kissed my mother and my father good bye and left an extra turnip for my little brother. I started running through the darkness and continued my journey as fast as I could. I made it to where I could see the Second Edge relatively quickly. But that wasn't even the beginning. I still had a few days of running ahead of me. I ran, ate turnips, rested, and did my best. And I did it.

After days of running through the dark forest I made it to the Second Edge. As I approached it I saw it was endless. *What kind of giant village was this?* The Second Edge started to curve behind me and I felt I wasn't walking into a clearing but leaving the forest altogether. I rested my eyes once I reached the Second Edge, the brightness took some getting used to. I closed my eyes and listened. I heard rushing water. I felt a cool, wet breeze on my face stronger than any breeze in the clearing. I opened my eyes and saw water: water from left to right, as far as I could see.

And here I am, staring at this endless river, knowing it has always been here and always will be, knowing everything and nothing about it. I am not the river, but this river is me.

I take it all in, before turning around and rushing back home. I need to tell my mother what there is beyond the forest. I turn around for one last look at the river and feel that cool breeze.

I know I'll be crossing that river someday, and I'll see what is beyond it, someday somehow.

.....

Luma Lumière is a writer, poet, and artist making Birmingham her new home. She wrote and drew an autobiographical webcomic during college and her Spanish/English poetry has been part of the Seattle's Poetry on Buses program. lumalumiere@outlook.com

BOUGAINVILLEAS

Micaela Walley

They call out from the sides
of buildings, from the edges
of this life, to me. I can't
respond without hanging myself,
walking foot in front of foot
along the fence of the brick balcony.
Like demons, they thrive on heat
and submission.

I crawl out of windows for them,
let the bees sting my bare neck
as I lean in. I'll always lean in,
letting their petals lick my cheeks.
I can taste the honey nectar they've
made just for me if I get closer.
Head first, I dive into the bushes,
letting go.

They wrap their vines around
my legs, pull me deep into
the shrubs, and I don't fight
back. I don't say a word. I
swim among the purple flowers,
my final breath sweet with
scent, as they pull me down
to drown.

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Micaela Walley is a senior at the University of South Alabama majoring in Creative Writing. She is the current editor of Oracle Fine Arts Review and a former intern at Negative Capability Press. mwalley129@gmail.com

SANDWICH!

Henry Levkoff

A child's scream assaults my ears from a proximity too close to ignore.

I am sitting on the other side of my daughter's closed bedroom door, well past her bedtime. And mine.

I am made to know that the scream is not one of pain. "I am so angry I could knock over a blackboard!" And then a wooden crash, presumably a blackboard.

In my mind, I add in the additional sound effects of machine gun fire, warheads exploding and a screaming horde of terrified citizens. It is 10:30 p.m. Two hours past ninety-night.

Putting a child to bed is very difficult, particularly once the child can leave her bed under her own locomotion. Rachel is five years old, and so she has long since left the age of sure confinement. But after two hours, most children, even Rachel, become resigned to their fate. Then comes an onslaught of child-curses.

"Alright, sandwich! I'll get in the sandwich bed!" Sandwich, I have come to realize, means son-of-a-bitch in child swearing lingo. If you think about it, son-of-a-bitch or its Southern cousin sumbitch, sounds like sandwich. Perfectly logical. I begin to wonder if I have eaten dinner.

"Weinerdogdoodoohead!"

I want to respond in kind, but I am the adult. And there is no response for weinerdogdoodoohead.

I sit outside her room, a sentry at the ready. I am now prepared for any insult or foul utterance that she has absorbed from living with mommy and daddy to be used against me. But I must remain calm, I tell myself. Anger against my five-year old adversary would only stir things up, prolong my vigil near her door. I would not see my bed tonight unless my wife sent me pictures of it.

I have time, sitting out here in a place I like to call Crankytown, to consider my circumstances. I am much like a U.N. peacekeeping soldier. I have been dispatched to some hostile, third world environment with absolutely no weapon to enforce my position. I am a non-spanking soldier, and thus unarmed and unprotected.

"Carrothead!" Please. I can tell she is getting sleepy. Carrothead is lame, even for her (she certainly didn't get that kind of talk from me). And her

cursing was not accompanied by any banging or falling sound effects. I am winning.

It is 11:45 pm. I am so tired. I cannot concentrate. My mind flits from thought to thought much like Tarzan makes his way through the jungle, leaping from vine to vine. I am nearing the last vine.

I wonder, for example, why parents teach their children to talk at all. We fathers and mothers spend a great amount of time during our child's first few years teaching him or her an enormous vocabulary, only to spend the rest of our lives trying to get said child to shut up.

Oh, well, Rachel has finally gotten quiet. Quiet. She is such a great kid, she really, really is. Funny, "personality-plus" as my mother used to say. Rachel is a joy, bless her heart.

And anyway, I reason, even if parents were to withhold speech from their little children, the kids would eventually just get it from school.

.....

Henry Levkoff is a writer and a poet. He studied under James Dickey at the University of South Carolina. Henry is former associate creative director with Luckie Advertising but says being a father to his two girls was the best job he ever had. He lives in Birmingham, AL with his wife, Sylvia Swann. henrylevkoff@gmail.com

“Live every day like it’s your last, and one day you’ll be right.”

—Woody Allen



THAT DRESS SHE WORE

Ramey Channell

9" x 12"

Colored Pencil on Paper

Ramey Channell began drawing, painting, creating folk art and crafts, as well as writing poetry and fiction, in her early teens. She works in oils, pastels, colored pencil, and mixed media, drawing inspiration from the rich and unique environment and heritage of her childhood. Her artist statement: "I want people to have a deep and pleasurable response to my work: a response of the mind and heart."

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THE LADY IN THE LAVENDER BLOUSE

Nina E. Woody

"We can't leave her, Matthew!" I pleaded. "We have to stay with her!"

My words were completely unnecessary; they were spoken out of frantic concern. No moral or ethical person would abandon another human being in trouble. Indeed, the pale and trembling woman my boyfriend and I knelt by that July morning was very ill, and, except for the indifferent man nearby, we appeared to be her only hope.

It had started out quiet that second day of our vacation in Warsaw, Poland, having no idea that we would be chosen as guardian angels, perhaps even saving a life. We had set out on foot early to visit a WWII museum. We didn't mind the long walk for the weather was pleasant, although a little humid.

When we arrived at the museum shortly after its opening time, we were dismayed to see that its entrance gate was locked and the museum's forbidding brick building behind it was silent. It was closed that day! We would have to try again tomorrow.

Disappointed, we decided to head back to the hotel, taking a different, meandering route back. We eventually came upon a quiet neighborhood of apartments and eateries. The dramatic scene took place there, at a charming coffee bar whose name I recall was Café Italiano. With bistro-style metal tables and chairs set up outside, it was an inviting spot for patrons to enjoy coffee and conversation during Warsaw's short summer season.

Only two customers were present, located some distance apart from each other—an unshaven man with curly black hair leisurely smoking a cigarette and sipping coffee, and our protagonist. She was sitting cross-wise in her chair, facing away from us with her left arm draped over the chair's back. Other than the four of us, no one else was around.

As we passed by, the woman slowly and as gracefully as a ballerina, bent backwards with her arms outstretched over her head until she formed a complete upside-down U.

"What is that lady doing?" I asked.

"It looks like she's doing a yoga stretch," Matthew joked.

But we both stopped short, as if we were suddenly nailed to the sidewalk. While I envied her flexibility, it dawned on us that something was terribly wrong. From our vantage point, we could see that the eyes in her upside-down face were open, but "there was nobody home."

At the same time, the curly-haired man looked up from his newspaper, his eyes traveling from our surprised faces to the woman's unnatural pose. He yelled at her in Polish, which I assume meant, "Hey! Are you ok?"

No, she was definitely not ok, as Matthew and I found when we hurried up to her. With a quick glance, I noted that she appeared to be in her late 50s. She wore a white linen pantsuit and an elegant lavender blouse which had pulled up to reveal a flat, tanned stomach. She wore several gold and diamond rings on her soft, smooth hands. She was evidently a wealthy and even glamorous woman, certainly not homeless or down on her luck.

All of a sudden, her face contorted, and her hands balled into fists. Her body shook as she started to convulse. I was truly frightened; I believed she was dying right in front of our eyes!

"We have to get her upright," Matthew said urgently. The man reluctantly came over, weaving between the other tables. Together they carefully lifted the woman up from her back-bend. She gasped loudly; she had not been breathing. Her head lolled forward like a rag doll. The men, laboring under dead weight, carried her to a more comfortable chair, while I followed with her shoes and purse.

We carefully took off her jacket to make her more comfortable. She was sweating profusely, her silk blouse clinging to her skin. She started to come to, mumbling. I brushed damp grey-blonde hair from her face, trying to decipher unfamiliar words.

"What is she saying?" I asked the man, who by that time had returned to his table nearby and lit another cigarette.

He shrugged. "Don't know," he said with a thick accent. "It not Polish." Her eyes fluttered open and soft green eyes fixed on me.

"Water," she whispered. I ran into the café where a young girl presided behind a counter. Despite my agitated gestures and entreaties to call an ambulance, the girl looked at me in confusion. I finally grabbed a small glass bottle of water, flinging money on the counter.

Even though the lady was now conscious and able to sip some water, we could not leave her! We had to stay with her until help came—whenever that would be. But up and down the street, there was no one else.

While we wondered what to do next, the man nearby jabbered on his cell phone, waving his cigarette. He's being useful, I thought sarcastically. He ended his phone call and looked pointedly at us. "Ambulance coming. Five minutes. OK. Bye."

We watched him with a mixture of bewilderment and gratitude as he hurriedly gathered his belongings and took off down the street.

To our relief, the yellow ambulance with its screeching siren soon barreled up. The café girl came out, her mouth forming a big O at the sight of the woman and the EMT's. The EMT's barked questions at the woman, first in Polish, then in German. Matthew and I shook our heads at their questions to us. No, we don't know who she is. The EMT's pointed at her shoes, directing her to put them on.

As I watched her being led away, clinging to the two EMT's with her head bowed and feet shuffling on the pavement, I knew I would never find out what became of the lady in the lavender blouse. But I knew with certainty that we were exactly where we were supposed to be that morning. We turned away reluctantly and continued our walk in thoughtful silence.

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Nina E. Woody is a software engineer in Huntsville, AL. In her spare time, she enjoys traveling the world, collecting experiences instead of souvenirs. This tale is one of many. Currently, she is working on a book based on her father's WWII service in Europe. ndonath@knology.net



ZOE DOODLE

Zoe Radford

Black Sharpie on White 24# Bright White Paper

Zoe Radford is a sophomore in college and living in Athens, GA, majoring in graphic design. She has been drawing since birth and believes anyone can be an artist; all that is needed is practicing most days. radfordzoe6@gmail.com

A DAD'S ANGST

Andrew Toler

A career that continually reminds me
Of the fragility of life

In spite of it
I've raised three into adults
Their quick wits make me laugh
They now
 Tell their own stories
 Share their own thoughts
 In their own words
We celebrate a growing mutuality of kinship

But at the end of the day
When my sons get in their cars
To drive any distance long or short

The reminders descend as nightfall
And like Harriet Tubman
I strain
For the distant howl
Of the bloodhound

.....

Andrew Toler is a former pediatric hospital chaplain. He lives in his home state of Arkansas where he helps families navigate end-of-life decisions associated with organ, tissue, and eye donation. When not working, he can be found at his cabin in the Boston Mountains in Arkansas with his sons and horses. actoler@sbcglobal.net

THE TOOL BOX

Roger Barbee

When Jake Little's father died, his few possessions were divided among his eight children since his wife Louise had died some years before. His small house was sold, and what little money that brought was shared equally between his children as were the few possessions. Jake's father was a joiner, and all the children decided that Samuel, the one son who had inherited the father's skill with wood, should have all his tools. Jake Little had no skill or interest in woodworking, but he had admired and loved his father. He wanted his father's tool box. His father, like all skilled workmen of his era, had made the toolbox, and it was not only of practical use but was, in Jake's eyes, a work of art. Jake took no furniture but chose the tool box with heavy metal handles on each side, a sturdy lock on the front; its aged, yellow heart-pine wood shone with years of use. It was more than a tool box to Jake, and he put it in his study. Over many years, the box became a treasure chest for Jake, one he kept locked and brimming with items he cherished. No one, not even his wife Molly, was allowed to see the contents of the box. That is until Jake Little's death after a life full of children, grandchildren, work, charitable giving, and all of it shared with his love, Molly, who had died only months before Jake.

Jake and Molly had two children and, as befalls many children, they faced the task of cleaning out their parents' house after sixty-two years of marriage. Both children had homes of their own, and neither wanted the house of Jake and Molly. However, the realtor told them that they needed to clean it out before it could be put on the market, so they had been slowly forging ahead, battling the tide of accumulated stuff gathered over so many years. Sometimes they would work together sorting the things to keep, to sell, to donate, and to send to the county landfill. Because of family and work obligations, they could not always manage to be together, but they trusted each other to do a good and fair job of sorting, so the work progressed. After about three months of this daunting and sometimes emotional duty, the house was cleared of all the possessions of Jake and Molly, but for one that sat in Jake's study. One day, some weeks before, while working in Jake's study, his daughter had found a single key in the center drawer of Jake's desk. A loop of leather had been tied through the hole, and she put it in her purse, reminding herself to tell her brother about her find. So it was that on their last day in the home where their parents had forged a marriage and reared the two of them, they walked silently through the rooms remembering things that mattered to them alone. Finally, one said,

“Well, let's go see what Dad kept in that old tool box. His secrets will finally be exposed.” The tone was an attempt at humor, but both children were leery of what they might find in the box. After all, Jake had kept it locked and had forbidden anyone from seeing its contents.

They sat on the floor and the brother slid the box toward them, and his sister handed him the key. He looked up at her and almost said something, then he inserted the key in the lock and turned it. Removing the lock, he placed it on the floor and raised the lid which still had a fine patina. He and his sister leaned over the edge, looking into the box of long-kept secrets. Neither spoke, but the gasp of the sister was audible in their father's quiet study. Reaching into the box, she removed a piece of cloth and said to her brother,

“Oh, look, it's my Brownie badges that I earned in elementary school.”

Laying the brown sash across her lap, she reached into the box removing a report card. “Look,” she said to her brother, “It's your report card from first grade”

While her brother studied his report card, she reached into the box, removing a feathered rock with glued-on black buttons for eyes. She gasped before tearfully uttering, “God, I made this in summer camp once. It was supposed to be a frog, and I gave it to him as a present. He's kept it all these years.”

Slowly and with deep reverence, the brother and sister went through the old tool box removing each item. They did not divide all the things into a sister pile or a brother pile, but a father pile. It was a history of their gifts to their father and gifts their children had given him: crayon drawings; art made from Popsicle sticks; finger paintings on dried and curled paper; Christmas ornaments made in elementary school; report cards from school and Sunday school; souvenirs from family trips; some items, like the green papier-maché blob, that could not be identified; and on and on. The old tool box brimmed with things Jake Little had been given by his children and grandchildren. It was a trove of memories. Finally, the richly hued box sat empty, and the brother and sister faced each other as the sun set in the fall calm.

Looking at his sister's tear-stained face, the brother asked, “What'll we do now?”

His sister sat for a moment, then began placing items back into the box. “Why, we accept Dad's last gift, and we keep it the way he had it arranged. You take it home to your house and keep it like it is. I'll see it when I want to. Is that okay?”

Helping his sister, he said, “Yeah, Dad would like that. His last of many gifts to us kept the way he wrapped it.”

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Roger Barbee is a retired educator who lives in the Shenandoah Valley.

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WHITE HOUSE VINYL HAVEN

Digital Photograph
Christopher Woods

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

WAITING

Noel Conneely

We are waiting for the circus tent
to blossom like a giant geranium
in the quiet evening and for infinity
to be a bit more flexible.

We want the clown to come clean
as the applause abates
and the elephant skips his way
into the circle of dreams.

We want to hear the car thief
screech out of his handbrake turn
up the wrong side of the road
as the crows scatter before him.

We are waiting for the river
to run dry and the fresh fish
to walk up the drive, plates in hand
their slit bellies clean.

We want the sun's ray to arch
and the curve to straighten out
as the circus tent takes off
and heaven to be where we are.

.....

Noel Conneely of Dublin, Ireland, has published poems in Poetry Ireland, Cimarron Review, Willow Review, Coe Review, Chelsea, Yellow Medicine Review and other publications in Ireland and the United States. noelcon@hotmail.com

THE FISH TRAP

David Strickland

There is a remote tract of gravel and mud on the Sipsey River that bears a name known to only a few. As the Sipsey flows southward near Buhl and then into Greene County, it flows over the faint remains of what was once known as "The Trap."

The Alabama August sun transforms the Sipsey's turbulent winter floodwaters into lazy swirling pools connected by swift shallow stretches. In a secluded narrow curve, if one looks closely one can see the remnants of a few wooden stakes that were driven deep into the gravel bottom. The fish trap was built nearly a century ago and was maintained by several members of the nearby Jena community. The structure consisted of two rows of sharpened wooden stakes that extended the width of the narrow stream. The lower row of stakes once had sharpened points that protruded about a foot above the river's surface when the river dropped to its normal summer level. These stakes were placed so they pointed upstream and they were butted side by side forming a wall across the river. Upstream from this row, about eight or ten feet, there was another series of stakes driven deep into the gravel with their sharpened points tilted downstream.

Any fish, eel or turtles that swam downstream would wash between and over the sharpened points of the upper row. The swift current had a swirling effect in front of the lower stakes and prevented the trapped fish from an easy escape. My father said that periodically several neighbors would hitch a mule to a wooden wagon and take pitchforks down a narrow trail to the river's edge. They would wade across the gravel bottom and plunge the sharp prongs into the schools of trapped fish and toss them onto the wagon. After traveling out of the swamp with their catch they would divide the river's oblation.

The construction of this once impressive structure was the result of a close-knit community that pooled its talents and resources. It helped provide table fare for many who resided in the rural community at a time in its history that mirrored the difficulties experienced across the nation. Long ago conversations with some who knew its history said it was built just before the "Great Depression." Its builders are relegated to history and the area is now difficult to reach. Each winter the Sipsey floods and its fast-flowing waters slowly erase the last remnants of the ingenious trap's construction. Soon its existence will only be known in story.

I have seen drawings and read descriptions of similar fish traps by early explorers as they surveyed South and Central America and traveled through the early, unsettled U.S. I have no doubt its construction was influenced by

what the early inhabitants saw in use among the native Indians when they settled this area. This trap is very near to an area that was the shared hunting grounds for three different Indian tribes, before their exodus on the Trail of Tears.

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David Strickland is married, a grandparent, retired, a bookworm, an outdoorsman, and a storyteller. sipsey001@aol.com



UNWORLDLY FRUIT

Digital Photograph
Atraxura

Atraxura is a photographer, artist and poet, for whom art is a weapon to defend her deep love of melancholia, introspection and solitude. Her current work explores the affinity between the dead and the dreaming and the idea that there is more to existence than merely the obvious physical and social aspects we often call "reality." She lives in rural Alabama. atrasyvania@gmail.com

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