

# Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 8 Issue 4



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# Birmingham Arts Journal

## Table of Contents

WHAT IT IS LIKE	Harry Moore	1
EMPTY PAGE	Maria Coble	2
SMALL CRIMES	Dustin Junkert	3
MAN. THE ROMANTIC.	Ben Thompson	4
BARON LIVED IN FRANCE	Laurie A. Skelton	6
AN IDAHO RAINBOW	Margaret Hutton	9
ORGANIZING MY STUFF	Eric Johnson	10
I AM NOT A LETTUCE!	Allen Johnson Jr.	13
COUNTING CARS	Devin Murphy	14
MORNING GLORY	Kalya Plaia	16
IN THIS LIGHT	Nathan Gower	17
IT'S NOT OUR CUSTOM	Philip LaMoreaux Sr.	18
THE INSTITUT DE BEAUTE' ON MARZALKOWSKA STREET	Irene Latham	21
TALLAHATCHIE	Richelle Putnam	22
DRIVE-THRU EASTER DRAMA	Mark Steudel	23
BLUE SHOWER	Lana Fuller	24-25
STRANGE WEATHER	Allen Berry	26
ROBE	Kathleen Lynch	27
SONNET IN BLUE	Joshua Michael Stewart	28
NATURAL LAW	Jerri Beck	29
AT A CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL	Tom Gordon	30
ICE SKATER	Betty Spence	31
WANING SUMMER	Paula Friedman	32
SUSHI – NO. 1	Kathy Lumsden	33
ON REGRET AND QUANTUM PHYSICS	Jacob Martin	34
THINGS I ALREADY KNOW	Sarah Allen	36
TEACHING BEHIND BARS	Allen Mendenhall	37
UNAWARE TEMPTATION WAITS	Marcia Mouron	40
THE 82,000 MPH MUSE	Jim Reed	47

Front Cover: **WATERLILIES AT GIVERNY**, Watercolor on Paper - 12" x 17"

*Tom Dameron is a true Renaissance Man: pharmacist by day, Sousaphone player with The Legendary Pineapple Skippers by night, and fine art painter when he can find time. [tomdameron.com](http://tomdameron.com)*

Back Cover: **THE STRANGERS ARE TURNING**, Mixed Media

*Jesse Lindsay is a freelance artist, currently living in Portland, Oregon, after hitch hiking around the states for about 6 years, stopping in various cities and selling art to tattoo shops, galleries and anywhere else that worked at the time. Much of his work in the public sphere includes book illustrations, film projects and collaborations with various musicians and galleries around the world as well as a collected personal works project, which is to be released soon. [www.jesselindsay.com](http://www.jesselindsay.com) [sinslave@gmail.com](mailto:sinslave@gmail.com)*

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## WHAT IT IS LIKE

Harry Moore

Naming things, I notice  
bluejays' shrill metallic cry  
in loblollies and maples. Junebugs  
swarm above the grass where cocky  
robins hop and turn their heads.

*Ball* is not the round object  
I toss to my grandson but a  
zip-file link in my head, something  
*like* the object he gloves  
and throws back to me  
with a curveball spin: echo  
or mirror, homemade index  
to the universe. My grandson  
says he wants a drink.

We cannot say what anything is,  
only what it is like, a sound  
or letters like a sound. The young woman  
walking the Weimaraner and Lab  
steps smartly; her spandex hip  
strikes just a curve of heart.

When Adam thought "I," fiction  
stirred to life, the exact slope  
of the garden in dying light. Everything  
was what he said it was.

Two eyes for depth, opposite ears  
for stereo, two feet for balance  
as I plod the park. Thumb and finger  
on the ball, the way we grasp the world.

We must believe  
that all is what we call it,  
a clean catch, while cicadas  
ratchet loudly in the trees.

.....  
*Harry Moore grew up on a farm in East Central Alabama, near Tallassee. He received degrees in English from Auburn University, Rice University, and Middle Tennessee State University and taught writing and literature in Alabama community colleges for four decades, retiring in 2009. He lives in Decatur with his wife, Cassandra. His poems have appeared extensively. hmoore944@aol.com*  
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### **EMPTY PAGE**

Maria Coble

The best poems  
are wordless,  
transient,

Feelings too fragile  
for paper  
Too breakable

even for words.

.....  
*Maria Lofgren Coble, mother of three, is an Athens State University student and a future high school English teacher. Her work appears in Idol Musings and Idol Meanderings. MariaCoble@gmail.com*  
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## SMALL CRIMES

Dustin Junkert

Lying in the sun holding a book in the shadow of someone's mailbox—  
I don't care whose—I must shuffle forward every few minutes.

I am trespassing.  
But when is a person not trespassing in this world?

A white bird catches my attention with its shadow,  
changes speed significantly without moving at all—a breeze.  
The grass shifts uncomfortably under my weight.

Moments pass and there is no evidence  
that the past cringes at becoming  
philosophically unstable.

The moment is over, slipping beyond the possibility of possibility and so  
on.

.....

*Dustin is a musician, writer, barista, and small-time gardener living in Portland, Oregon. He and a friend recently started up a small literary journal of their own called Cartographer: A Literary Review. Dustin recently published in the New York Times, The Journal, South Carolina Review, and Georgetown Review. [djunkert@gmail.com](mailto:djunkert@gmail.com)*

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"A human is both a mystery looking for  
a mind and a mind looking for a  
mystery."

-- Joel Fry

## MAN. THE ROMANTIC.

Ben Thompson

His arsenal of tools hung in a constant state of readiness within the walls of the shed. Every blade as sharp and clean as the day it was bought. The lawnmower fired up on the first pull. There was no need to check the fuel tank. He knew it was full because he always topped it off when he finished.

Sweat had already begun to bubble to the surface beneath the cropped hair upon his head. He wanted it to be hot. He wanted it to be difficult. This was why he had waited till 11:30 on an August Alabama day to mow the yard.

Catching a glimpse of his shirtless body reflecting back in the gloss of his black Honda he stopped. He pretended to look through the window into the interior while he stood in wonder at the dark shadows underlining his pecs. "I don't need to work out," he thought, "I'm doing just fine." He ignored the dark smiling band running from hip to hip beneath his round belly.

Pushing the mower down the edge of the driveway the sweat made it down to his waistband. His skin glistened beneath the thin black veil of curly body hair. He knew that behind every curtain and slat of every blind the neighbors' wives were watching with an envious desire. "How did she get him?"

Tracing the vein that ran up from his wrist, he looked at his lily-white biceps imitating one another. With a little luck the sun will blur the border of his farmer's tan. He used to be tan all over. They used to go to the beach. Kids ruined everything.

Behind the drawn curtains of his own home he knew at least one of them was crying. He was grateful the grass had grown so quickly. The monotone scream of the motor was the closest thing to silence he had heard in three years.

The man dug in his toes to push against the resistance of the terrain. After he had a few rows done, he started to feel the rhythm. His body had been given its instructions and it no longer needed supervising.

Free from work, his mind hit the ground running. He started dreaming of the alternate universes that existed on the other side of every one of his past decisions. The effects that were never given a cause. He

liked to think about the little ones, secret ones, moments that clung to the inside of his memory not unlike an overlooked tick.

They were small moments of opportunity that may or may not have ever even existed. An exchanged glance, a shared elevator, a shared coffee shop. Opportunities for another life and each represented by an unsuspecting woman. He saw himself living out epic romances within dimly lit daydream montages. Picking up from the moment they had shared, each panned across hours or days before he moved on to the next story line with another woman. He never stayed long. He knew what happened if he stuck around.

He thought back to when his wife was beautiful. Back before their two babies had stretched or shrunk what had been her most perfect parts. When youth was on her side and they had yet to make the switch to the reality that rebukes it. Jumping in the car on a Friday to go anywhere they desired. Lying on the beach for hours and only leaving for fear of starvation. Sharing a plate of grease at a late night Waffle House and laughing at those who were a few drinks drunker. Staying in bed on Saturdays. Making love on Saturdays. Making love on Sundays. Making love.

He used to believe that he could never make it a week without doing it. At that moment he realized that it had been four. It was not for lack of trying. He had dropped the usual hints. He had even poked her with it a few times. That used to work every time. Maybe he needed a new recipe.

His final pass was the edge of the sidewalk. He let go of the handle allowing the motor to spin to a stop. He still had to mow the back and he had some weed eating to do. He pushed the mower alongside the Honda towards the back yard. Again he stopped to look at himself. It only took a few seconds before his mind was made up, "this should do it." Leaving the mower in the driveway he walked through the garage and opened the door.

"I hope the kids are asleep," he thought. Then sucked in his belly and tip-toed inside.

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*Ben Thompson writes in Birmingham, Alabama. [benthompson11@yahoo.com](mailto:benthompson11@yahoo.com)*

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## BARON LIVED IN FRANCE

Laurie A. Skelton

Baron lived in France, which is a longfar way from here. She was small-ish and sweet, stick-legged and lovely. But none of that is ever important—not even in fairy tales. What *is* important, however, is that one afternoon she found a book. A book that had been left on the chair of her café table.

The thing was in English (which Baron had never been very good at reading), and had the look of an old library book. The cover was worn and laminated, sun-damaged and dirty. But, the book managed to be pretty anyhow, and Baron soon fell in love with it. In love enough to open it.

The paper smelled sweetly of must and dust, and each page was a desert of sparse words—fourteen lines and fourteen lines and fourteen lines. And a plethora of Roman numerals. And an ancient watercolour picture.

Baron read words like “brown” or “soul,” but skipped over words like “surmise” or “argosies”—with mild frustration—until she came quietly to the back cover. By then, her coffee was cold. She might have understood one hundred words or less, but every syllable had managed to sound pretty anyhow.

The back of the book held a small card with stamps of dates (Nov 3 '68) and names of borrowers (Julia Womack). The final pages had been scribbled on by a child (red ink). There was a bar code. There was a bit of dried glue. There was an address.

Plain as day, stamped in red:  
102 Parkdale Road  
Dulac, AL.

Her fingers fell over the words as she sipped her cold coffee for the first time that afternoon. An American address, most certainly; but where was the place? Baron did not know. There was too little information for her.

She imagined, suddenly, bringing the book to the airport and saying as she pointed to the address, “I would like to book a flight to here, please.” The woman behind the counter would nod. She would whip out

an atlas one meter wide and flip through the large pages as she mumbled, “Now let’s see, here.” This would go on and on, and Baron would grow anxious as the seconds ticked away and the pages rustled.

But at long last, the woman would say, “Ah ha!” and jab at the atlas with her index finger. She would quickly tap at the keys of her little computer, and print out a long ticket from a machine. Paper would crinkle as Baron exchanged money for ticket.

She would sit in the airport terminal, and stare at her ticket for an hour. She would grow bored, and kick at her small bag with the toe of her shoe. She would flip through the library book. And then her flight would board.

Baron would fly over the Atlantic, eat peanuts, and drink seltzer water. She would try to fall asleep next to a sweaty fat man who had passed out with his headphones blaring something like music—but to no avail. She would arrive in America desperately tired, hungry, and language-less without a clue as to where she should go.

There would be an information center, a kiosk, in the middle of the airport; and she would approach the desk determinedly. Baron would ask in her best English, “I would like to go here, please?” And the man behind the desk would nod. He would pick up a phone, speak rapidly, and point kindly to two enormous glass doors.

Outside, a bright yellow cab would wait patiently. Baron would sit down, and point to the address once again. The driver would nod, pull away from the curb, and accelerate. They would meander through city slums, and pull onto an interstate. Baron’s eyes would drink in the foreignness: the ugly fast food signs, the giant cars, and so much concrete.

Half an hour later, the cab would exit. They would drive through a silent suburbia of drug stores and supermarkets and little brick houses. A church, a cemetery, a furniture store. And a library.

The cabby would stop, and Baron would be shocked at the fare. But she would have enough money—just barely. Her bag would hang over her shoulder as the taxi pulled away in a cloud of thematic dust, and Baron would stare at the library.

The building would be made of tinted green glass and steel. Built in an oddly Frank Lloyd Wright style, it wouldn’t quite fit in with the surrounding neighborhood. She would tilt her head to the right, and hold

the book up to her nose. She would smell the sweet musty scent one last time. She would walk forward.

Inside, Baron would hand the book to the librarian, and say something like, "I am returning this." But Baron wouldn't know quite how to say the phrase. It would sound more like, "I give it back." The librarian would smile, take the book, and scan the barcode.

But something would be wrong, and the librarian would frown. She would say something Baron wouldn't understand, and point at the book. The librarian would shake her head, and hand the book back to the small French girl. Baron would shake her head, and point to the address; but the librarian would only repeat those unintelligible words and slide the book back across the counter.

After several more minutes, Baron would finally hear the words, "We sold that book a long time ago." The librarian would say, "Now, it is yours." And Baron would understand.

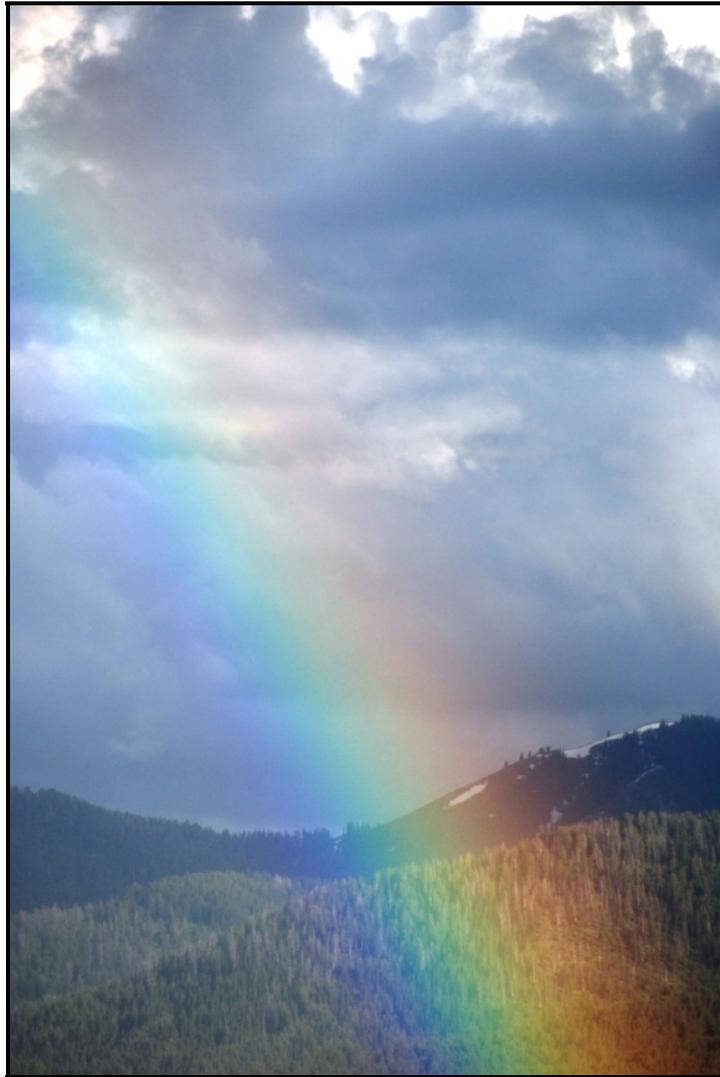
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*Laurie Skelton is a native Alabamian who grew up in Center Point's most haunted house. She earned her bachelor's degree in English, French and Liberal Arts from the University of Alabama. Currently, she is pursuing a Master's degree in Gifted Education. She wants to be a novelist. laurieskelton@gmail.com*

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"Some people say the garbage is half full. Some say it's half empty. I say it's completely empty."

-- Grimmy  
(Mother Goose & Grimm),  
after turning garbage can over



## **AN IDAHO RAINBOW**

Margaret Hutton

*Margaret Hutton, a graduate of Alabama School of Fine Arts and Radford University, lives in Victor, Idaho, works in Jackson, Wyoming, and takes pictures of her environs.*

## ORGANIZING MY STUFF

Eric Johnson

One evening, my wife, Tonja, came home from an exhaustive work day, to find me organizing my camping and fishing equipment. Generally, she has always considered me to be “lacking” when it comes to basic organizational skills.

Pointing back toward the door, she asked, “Why is there a dog lying in your hammock on the porch?”

“Porter’s keeping an eye on it for me until I can file it away,” I said, pulling the curtain back to peek at him. “Awww, look, he’s meditating.”

Tonja walked to the kitchen table to set her purse and keys down. She folded her arms, and scanned the room carefully.

“What are you doing?” she asked suspiciously.

Knowing how impressed she had to be with my sense of initiative, I beamed at her, held my arms out to each side, palms up, and said, “I’m organizing my stuff.”

Stepping over the two fly-tying boxes and skirting the half-filled camping mattress, I tried to make my way to her. I found myself boxed in with no other direct route, so I carefully climbed over the back of the couch, knocking over only one fly rod, before I finally reached her.

Taking her hands into mine, and looking deeply into her eyes, I said, “I know that in the past I have neglected to put my things away in an orderly fashion, so I’ve decided to put everything away properly just for you. It’s because I love you that I go through this much trouble.”

Interrupting the moment, Porter flopped open the dog door and weaved his way through the room, past the boxes, to the refrigerator. He grabbed a grape soda and a straw. Quickly, he made his way back to the porch to continue keeping an eye on the illusive hammock.

“What’s that?” Tonja asked, nodding at a length of rope draped over the coffee maker.

“That’s my grandfather’s rope that he used to keep in the back of his truck. It’s a classic,” I said confidently.

She cocked a thumb toward the television, “And that?”

“Camp stove with optional fondue attachment,” I said, looking back at her with an innocent smile.

Her mouth had started to droop at the corners and I knew that she was about to start crying because she was so happy.

I walked around the tent that I had set up in the hall, flattening myself against the wall to do so.

“Had to air this one out,” I said absently and stepped into the bathroom.

Tonja looked around the house, obviously taking in the gravity of my love for her. I was hoping she would notice that because of my complete dedication to this project, I had even gone as far as to move the couch out onto the back porch so there would be plenty of room for me to lay out and categorize my sleeping bags.

“Ah, here it is,” I said, stepping back out into the hall. “I figure I’ll hang this on the wall right across from our bed.”

I presented her with a life-sized cardboard cut-out of Elvis. It was Elvis in his Vegas years.

As I peeked out from around the white jewel-studded likeness, I noticed something peculiar: Tonja was smoking. I don’t mean she had a cigar or a pipe, it was more like she was surrounded by a cloudy aura.

Cocking my head, and staring at her in disbelief, I vaguely remember thinking, *“It’s just the light being filtered through the dust from when I beat my camp blankets clean, that’s all.”*

Porter stuck his head through the doggie door and froze. His mouth clamped shut and his ears became erect. He mouthed the words: “You’re in danger; run, dude, run!” Then he looked at me and shook his head slowly, backing out the way he came while allowing the door-flap to close soundlessly.

The ride back from the hospital was uneventful, and as I watched the passing landscape through my good eye, I had time to consider where I went wrong. I was pleased to see, as Tonja pulled the pickup truck into the driveway, that she had finished what I started the week before. All my things were in a large blue container in the front yard. The container had “For pick-up call 555-9365” stenciled on the side.

*“Obviously she has purchased this large steel container to keep my belongings safe and secure,”* I thought, as she helped me out of the bed of the truck.

“Somebody will be by in a few days to pick this stuff up,” she said, handing me my crutches.

*“How lucky am I?”* I thought, *“Not only did she organize my stuff, she’s going to store it as well.”*

As she was helping me up the steps, I turned and looked back. Elvis was peering over the top of the container and I waved and thought, *“When this swelling goes down, we will hang you up, baby.”*

.....

*Eric Johnson was born in 1969 in Adamsville, Alabama. He writes about his family and friends and growing up in central Alabama. Eric has been published in local papers and nationally in a collection of award winning humor shorts entitled “Laugh Your Shorts Off” as well as several e-zines. [eric@rejohnsoniron.com](mailto:eric@rejohnsoniron.com)*

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“They understand but little who  
understand only what can be explained.”

-- Marie Ebner Eschenbach

## I AM NOT A LETTUCE!

Allen Johnson Jr.

As we age, old injuries catch up with us.

Recently, I started seeing double. It turned out to be something called left-nerve palsy from a head injury that caused bruising of left optic nerve. The good news items are: 1. It wasn't a brain tumor and 2. It is correctable by adding prism to the left lens of my glasses.

To confirm my condition, my eye doc asked me if I had had a head injury recently. I had.

I had stepped on a grape in the produce section of the supermarket and fallen backwards hitting my head a pretty good lick on the floor. A manager called 911 and, soon, there were two fire department medics in the produce department trying to determine if I was a lettuce.

"What day is today?" One asked me.

"Tuesday." I responded, correctly. The medic turned to his partner.

"Is that right?" He asked him, proving that he was a cabbage.

Weirdly, I slipped twice more on grapes in the same produce section, but was better prepared and didn't fall. I reported this sequence of events to George Volland, a friend of mine with a literary bent, and he came back quickly with one of the better quips I have come across:

"The Wrath of Grapes!" He said.

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*A native of Alabama, Allen Johnson Jr. writes on Mercer Island in the state of Washington. [allen3@allenjohnsonjr.com](mailto:allen3@allenjohnsonjr.com)*

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## COUNTING CARS

Devin Murphy

The order in which things happened seems so important to me now, as they've changed with time. First there was all the yelling that filled the whole house and pushed me to the porch. The traffic was always heavy on our corner, with Colvin and Hurdle Avenue being large thoroughfares of the city. I remember counting the cars. I was six, so I tried to count the cars—starting over each time something smashed in the house behind me. The cars sounded like yelling, their horns like my mother, and the brakes and engines like the low base of my father, arching his body in discomfort and pain.

It was the yelling, hot like steam on my back that pushed me off the steps, onto the sidewalk, and blindly away from my house. I got around the block and my heart jumped at the street corner, at strangers and traffic, and how thoroughly the neon lights of the corner store stood out against everything else. The light did not spell words or draw pictures but formed large transfixing discs that hummed. I stared at them without moving for what felt like ages, until I heard my father running toward me. He picked me up and the beating in his chest and solid arms felt as engulfing as the light.

My father guessed right, and started walking up the street toward the Dairy Queen they'd sometimes take us kids to. I didn't cross the street by myself, and turned toward the corner store where he found me. My mother got in her car and drove toward Delaware Park. They knew I loved to look at the giraffes in the zoo that you could see from the road. She had a small Volkswagen Rabbit. It was white. I'd sit behind her when she drove and hug the back of her seat and talk into her ear. It seemed like a big car when I was young. There was plenty of space for me then. But it was a matter of space with that car. That night the space I had sat in was crushed inward from behind by a Dodge truck that pushed the back bumper up into the engine block. It doubled my mother over the steering wheel, which is what broke her sternum and ribcage, letting one of her own ribs puncture her pulmonary artery.

When my father brought me home we sat on the porch. He sat next to me with his arm around me. My mom would see us there on a drive by when she didn't find me at the park. I was so young then I just presumed it was my father's yelling that scared her away too. I didn't know she went looking for me. Neither of us knew she had been rear-ended less than a

mile down the road yet. We sat watching the intersection. I tried counting the cars. I'd lose track and count again.

I can't remember much else about that night. After over an hour on the porch with my father, my sister came home and was told to watch me. The rest of the night I watched television with her until I went to bed. I'm sure I slept soundly too. I'm sure I slept through my dad pacing the downstairs of the house we rented, wondering if his wife would come back, wondering what it was he had yelled and screamed at her until they split up to look for me. I'm sure I slept through the phone call that told him to come and identify her. I'm sure I woke up the next morning and immediately went looking for my mother the way I always did. And I'm sure I thought he had chased her away when I couldn't find her.

Twelve years later when my older sister subtly let it slip that my mother had been caught not being faithful, I arched my back in pain when it sunk in that my father had every right to howl like anyone who'd been betrayed. Until that moment, I had the moral make up of my family all wrong. That moment, my sister's comments sunk in and scrambled the facts, until I realized it never crossed my mind that she had provoked him and had coming whatever fury he could muster and let settle into her lap like a guard dog; that it was not him that drove my mother out those doors. That the anger I'd had with him for so long was misplaced; that his last words to her must have haunted him, and how at some level, we must have both needed to search for some order of events among those words that seemed so hot upon my back, that I took that first step, that step off my porch when I could not bear anymore, and ran so far that my family, the way I knew it, could never catch up.

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*Devin Murphy writes in Buffalo Grove, Illinois. Devin recently won Glimmer Train's Short Story Contest for New Writers, their Best Start Contest, and is a finalist for their most recent Fiction Open. Murphy has earned other awards from The Atlantic Monthly's 2010 Student Writing Contest, The Missouri Review, The Greensboro Review, The MacGuffin, PANK, and Many Mountains Moving. [murphydt232@yahoo.com](mailto:murphydt232@yahoo.com)*

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## **Morning Glory**

Acrylic on Canvas  
16" x 12"

*Katya Plaia, a Ukrainian born Spain Park High School student, developed her love and talent in art as a young child. She is primarily self-taught but takes classes to enhance her skills, learn, and enjoy different art forms and opportunities.*

## IN THIS LIGHT

Nathan Gower

Tonight, when darkness  
covers our side of the world,  
I see you standing in the cold  
light of the open refrigerator, your  
nightgown brushing swollen toes  
as you pull ham and salomi onto the  
Formica countertop, thick, grisly  
slices of meat that feed you  
in a way that I can't, that  
I never have.

And I remember yesterday's bright  
sun, seeing you for the first time  
walking down Sand Lane, me  
on the blistering roof peeling back  
shingles, you walking  
calmly past,  
never lifting your gaze from a  
paperback that I would never read, the sunlight  
dancing in waves around your  
hard body like it knew it could only get  
so close.

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*Nathan Gower holds a Masters of Fine Arts in Writing from Spalding University and currently serves as an Assistant Professor of English at Campbellsville University in Louisville, Kentucky. A writer of fiction, poetry, and critical essays, his work has appeared in various literary and academic journals, most recently The Baltimore Review, The Atrium, Paradigm, and elsewhere. He lives with his wife and two daughters in Charlestown, Indiana. nathangower84@gmail.com*

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## IT'S NOT OUR CUSTOM

Philip LaMoreaux Sr.

In the early 1950's, when I began work through our State Department and later directly with government of Egypt, it was my pleasure in my spare time to visit The Mousky, a very old shopping district of Cairo. I expect that when Mary and Joseph with young son, Jesus, made their trek to Cairo to get away from Herod, they shopped in this old business district.

The area is still narrow streets, the sides of which one can almost touch with outstretched hands.

Along these streets, one can buy anything: jewelry, old coins, handicraft, old brass, and worse. The streets are dusty and dirty with much refuse, straw and animal odors. Camels, donkeys, and goats still ply their way along these streets. I knew The Mousky like the fingers on my hand and had, as friends, a number of merchants, doing business in their little cubby-hole stores. Often, I had tea or Turkish coffee with them and sometimes went to nearby restaurants, where the smell of fried foods and seasonings was heavy in the air, to have shish kabobs or some other exotic food.

Awad Hasson, the brass merchant, and his brother were particular favorites and I bought tons of brass from them and shipped it back to friends in Tuscaloosa. This was during early days when the brass for sale was heavy, ornate, and beautifully inscribed. You can't buy brass like that anymore.

Awad Hasson's favorite source of artcraft was from the Fhayumn, an ancient area of old plantations that were owned and operated first by citizens of the time of the Pharaohs. They had brass lamps, trays, effigies, carriage lights, and lamplights. Awad had a heavy brass globular light with many colored glass inserts made for my wife, Bunnie, as a house gift upon our moving into the Indian Hills area of Tuscaloosa in 1961. It remains in our hallway along with a pair of similar lights in the stairway.

Awad Hasson would often take me to lunch in a small restaurant inside the market. Sometimes his brother would accompany us. Awad and his brother are gone now, as is his shop.

Another favorite merchant of mine was Gamal Gohmal, who sold only amber. His shop, not much larger than a big closet, was tucked away on a narrow side street in The Mousky. I passed it regularly during my assignment to Cairo. He was always out front with a smile on his face beckoning for me to stop in and see his wares. Gamal always had a cup of highly spiced tea or coffee waiting for me on each return to Cairo over 20 years.

Many of Bunnie's amber beads came from Gamal's shop. He had one set of beads that were special. They were green amber with vegetation from the sea embedded within. They were a lovely string, but expensive, and each time upon my arrival, he would bring out his box of beads and we would commence bargaining for them, but not until we had our cup of tea.

On my last trip to Egypt, in the late 1990s, I stayed at my favorite hotel, The President, in Zamalek. I made my traditional beeline to Gamal's shop, intending to buy the green amber beads regardless of price. The beads had leaves and insects entrapped. They were a geologist's treasure and a woman's delight, a conversation piece. A bit of geologic evidence of past life along the Baltic Sea, a treasure.

I arrived at Gamal's shop early as I wanted to be his first customer, which is the time to make a deal in The Mousky, as the Arab merchant takes great pride in selling the first customer of the day.

Gamal was not there and in his place his son was sorting all the little white boxes of amber being packed for shipment. Gamal had died a few days before. It was a sad day for both of us.

I explained to the son about his father's and my relationship. I asked him about the green amber beads, of which he knew not. He was closing the store.

Gamal had been buried on the cemetery slope near the citadel. A very barren area of grave marker stones and small crude stone masoleums, no grass, no trees, no vegetation, and often no markers where generation

after generation of the dead had been interred. The cemetery was on a large plot of land sloping away from the citadel--a famous landmark of domes, walks and columns, a landmark that remains from the period of the Crusades and Salah El Addin (Saladin of storybook fame).

I asked the son if I could give or arrange to have flowers placed on the grave. He did not understand my purpose and refused. "It is not our custom."

Gamal had died and I had lost a very dear friend, and there would be no flowers on his grave!

.....

*The late Phillip LaMoreaux was a respected geologist and world traveller. Bunnie and his family continue his consulting business in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.*

.....

“While there is a chance of the world getting through its troubles, I hold that a reasonable man has to behave as though he were sure of it. If at the end your cheerfulness is not justified, at any rate you will have been cheerful.”

-- H.G. Wells

**THE INSTITUT DE BEAUTE'  
ON MARZALKOWSKA STREET  
Warsaw, Poland, 1943**

Irene Latham

We are no different, Mrs. Walter  
says to Mrs. Rozenblum's back  
as she uses a cotton ball to paint  
the dull black locks with bleach.

Then she sweeps the hair away  
from Mrs. Rozenblum's forehead,  
pulls the hairbrush hard against  
the scalp to banish any kinks.

Wear grey, she says, which means,  
do not draw attention to yourself.  
Wear a cross around your neck  
at all times. The smallest detail

has the power to betray. Put away  
the eyeglasses, the scarf. In case  
the police stop you. Learn the Lord's  
Prayer and keep your eyes up.

Shop for pork. They will not suspect  
if you can prepare Polish dishes.  
Tell your husband to order bumber  
and remind him to remove his hat.

Remember, it's called a church. Then  
Mrs. Walter puts down the hairbrush,  
looks Mrs. Rozenblum straight in her eyes.  
We will suffer, she says. We are the same.

.....

*Irene Latham is a successful poet and novelist, writing in Birmingham, Alabama.  
She is poetry editor of the Birmingham Arts Journal. Her latest novel, Don't Feed  
the Boy, will be published by Macmillan in 2012. irene@irenelatham.com*

## TALLAHATCHIE

Richelle Putnam

Tippah to Leflore, three Mississippi voices,  
Yalobusha, Yazoo, and you, move through  
red clay hills, piney woods and clover  
where cattle graze in sultry southern heat.

Springtime trims you in pink lousewort,  
yellow stargrass and blue celestial lilies.  
Come summer, Queen Anne's Lace  
and king cotton clothe your borders  
in summer snow.

Long before white man drove his fists  
into your chest, you, Rock of Waters,  
quenched the thirst of Chickasaws  
and Choctaws, filled their bellies  
with bream and buffalo fish, guided  
canoes up and down your winding spine.

Once thought shallow and insignificant, you  
proved all wrong, rising up to wash away  
what man tried to destroy. How many bodies  
did bigotry force you to hide? How many tears  
did you cry for the black boy wrapped in  
barbed wire and cotton gin fan, hurled  
into your mouth to swallow like fishing line?

For you, Mattie Delaney belted out the blues,  
the Staple Singers sang Freedom Highway,  
and even Billie Joe forsook his lover on  
Cry Baby Bridge to be cradled in your arms.  
To this day, no one knows why.

Only you, Tallahatchie, settle the stories  
within your bosom, through blood-stained  
terrain, loss or gain, mindless of shame.  
Prodigal son, run, run, run, seep  
into rich black soil, tickle the toes  
of magnolias, maples, pines, and oaks.

We'll ride your currents, listening.

.....  
*Richelle Putnam is a Mississippi Arts Commission Artist/Teacher and Mississippi Humanities speaker. She is the Special Features Director for Southern Writers Magazine and an editor for MuseItUp Publishing, a Canadian ebook publisher. Her work has been published extensively. [www.richelputnam.net](http://www.richelputnam.net)*  
.....

**DRIVE-THRU EASTER DRAMA**  
(from an advertisement for a local church event)  
Mark Steudel

Excuse me but I ordered a Messiah and you  
gave me a Savior and I had to wait for  
like three days it just wasn't  
what I expected and it wasn't, I'm afraid,  
very convenient can I see whoever's  
in charge I need to speak  
with someone I just don't feel  
I should have to pay for this

.....  
*Mark Steudel currently works in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He has been writing poetry for some time and has been published in Quercus Review, the Chaffey Review, and Bird's Eye reView. [mark.steudel@gmail.com](mailto:mark.steudel@gmail.com)*  
.....



**BLUE SHOWER**

Lana Fuller

*Photographer Lana Fuller works in graphic design as well as fine art photography. She owns Fuller-Photo-Image with her husband Kevin. They live in Pelham, Alabama.*

## STRANGE WEATHER

Allen Berry

It once rained toads over Scotland,  
snakes over Memphis, TN.

Two hotels in Washington once  
collided during a flash flood.

A woman in Sylacauga, Alabama  
was struck by a meteor,

granted it caught her on the bounce.

So is it too much to ask,  
on a lonely stormy night,

for lightning to strike twice?

.....

*Allen Berry lived, worked and wrote in Huntsville, Alabama for 16 years. While there he was a member of the Huntsville Land Trust, formed a diverse writing group called the Out Loud Poets, and the Limestone Dust Poetry Festival. He left Huntsville in 2010, to pursue a Ph.D. in Creative Writing at the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi.*

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## ROBE

Kathleen Lynch

Stick to the right wall at all times.  
Get ready for this pretty picture:  
one of those cringing down mornings  
slow and gelling and hesitant.  
Pour in some color—cerise,  
honey-monk gold, saffron—  
everything locked in the sun's eye.  
Roll and pitch and string it up.  
Hold on for dear life, here comes  
the father. In his big blue robe.  
Under the weather. Don't be afraid,  
little May Queen. You're not alone.  
There's a dog in every room.  
And one at the door  
to guard the marriage.  
Two in the yard to eat the dead.

.....

*Kathleen Lynch is the author of Hinge (Black Zinnias National Poetry Prize), and chapbooks How to Build an Owl (Select Poet Series prize, Small Poetry Press), No Spring Chicken (White Eagle Coffee Store Press Prize), Alterations of Rising (Small Poetry Press Select Poet Series). Her newest MS, OLD MATH, is "making the rounds." [www.kathleenlynch.com](http://www.kathleenlynch.com)*

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## SONNET IN BLUE

Joshua Michael Stewart

Our love's an old vinyl record spinning at  $33\frac{1}{3}$ .  
We cut our love with a battered guitar and a beer-soaked microphone.  
Our love's an old vinyl record warped by the sun.  
Our love skips during the best part of the song.

We used our love as a Frisbee when we were bored.  
We grew sick of our love, playing it on the hi-fi.  
Our love's full of blue notes and as tense as a seventh chord,  
but there were times when even the bad notes landed right,

and there's a syncopation that'll make you sweat and smile.  
Our love's obsolete, went the way of the Commodore 64.  
Our love's priced for a quarter at your grandmother's yard sale.  
We'll never wax again—not looking for a reunion tour.

I pull our love from its yellowed sleeve when no one's around.  
I place the needle in its groove just to hear how it sounds.

.....

*Joshua Michael Stewart's work has been published in Massachusetts Review, Euphony, Rattle, Cold Mountain Review, William and Mary Review, Pedestal Magazine, Evansville Review and Blueline. Finishing Line Press will publish his next chapbook, Sink Your Teeth into the Light, in 2012. He lives in Ware, Massachusetts. [www.joshuamichaelstewart.yolasite.com](http://www.joshuamichaelstewart.yolasite.com)*

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## NATURAL LAW

Jerri Beck

For you, invisible particles flow  
in waves within the solid planes  
of rock and bone. Your calculations shift  
the center of my universe. How easily you  
embrace or defy the gravity of earth  
that pulls me constantly back to clay. I push  
words across a frozen page, can neither  
describe nor explain a snowflake or the sun.

Reading Joyce, I say, "a quark from Mr. Mark."  
You smile and talk of subatomic particles.  
Until your words coursed through the air,  
I thought only dreams and demons  
moved in invisible ways.  
When you speak of waves,  
I picture the ocean  
and the image of moonlight carried to shore.

With machines bigger than this room,  
you can estimate the rainbow  
patterns of the newest galaxy  
or the structure of what might be  
invisible but faster than light.  
I do not understand.  
Everything here is solid  
and hard as the bones I feel  
within my chest.  
But when I watch your face  
bend to the glass, by God, I know  
the currents in those stones.

.....

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

**AT A CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL** *November 22, 1963*

Tom Gordon

It's raining outside.  
We are easing  
into Mr. Eiseley's English class  
And Shakespeare's take  
on Caesar, Brutus and betrayal.  
Some of us wonder  
why a chiming clock is in the play.

We tilt our heads  
From our texts toward the intercom  
as it crackles with the voices  
of two men, radio guys, in mid-yap-flap:  
- *The shooting took place within minutes*  
  *after the presidential party arrived in Dallas* –  
- *The president was taken to Parkland Hospital* –  
- *We are awaiting further word*  
  *on his condition* -

What?

One of the radio men says he was in a bar  
– a place called O'Brien's, maybe? – when he heard.  
In front of me, John Schlegel laughs.

Sudden silence,  
soundproofing us  
from everything but thought.  
Then one of the radio guys says,  
“Ladies and Gentlemen,  
John F. Kennedy,  
the president of the United States, is dead.  
Let us pray.”

A musical interlude follows,  
a stringed sigh lasting no longer than  
the time it takes a smoke trail  
from one of my father's  
ashtray-smothered cigarettes  
to curl skyward,  
and vanish.

.....

*Tom Gordon is a state 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. He has reported from Iraq and West Africa, and his poetry has also appeared in Aura. He lives in Birmingham, Alabama. [tgordon@bhamnews.com](mailto:tgordon@bhamnews.com)*

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## **ICE SKATER**

Betty Spence

*Always be like water*  
resounding in his ears,  
fluid moves give a river  
as breakable as bone  
back its ebb and flow.

Silver-booted blades  
scratch winter tracings  
as fabulous as fishes caught  
on alder limbs dropped into  
holes in Walden's Pond

iced-over with magic panes.

.....

*Betty Spence writes in Mobile, Alabama. [wordsmitty@bellsouth.net](mailto:wordsmitty@bellsouth.net)*

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## WANING SUMMER

Paula Friedman

Remember when summer spelled giddy reprieve—  
the valley's white heat relieved  
by rivers, lakes, the inexhaustible sea,  
and the precise point at which it appeared  
to meet the wide sky's edge, the horizon distant  
enough to quell your fear of endings.

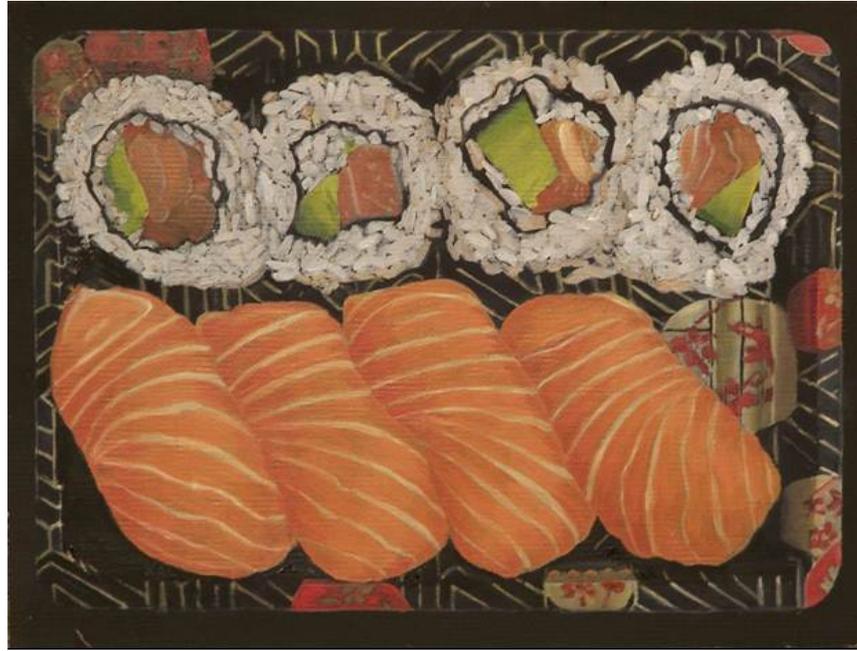
How did you arrive at this moment, the trail  
behind littered with lost or discarded loves,  
inhospitable houses, vacancies, and your own  
willful inhospitalities? Even your children  
no longer belong here; they are breathing  
in their own difficult seasons.

During these waning summer nights  
you attempt to remember, calculate, over  
and again, what gifts you have bestowed upon them,  
what injuries. Listen: mathematics can only  
fail you. There is no sum to these parts,  
nor are you ready for oblivion.

.....

*Paula Friedman lives in the bay area of Oakland, California, and teaches writing and literature at St. Mary's College and California College of the Arts. Her poems have appeared in Prairie Schooner, Michigan Quarterly Review, The Columbia Journal of Arts and Literature and several other national literary journals.*

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### **SUSHI – NO. 1**

Kathy Lumsden  
Oil on Canvas  
5" x 7"

*Kathy Lumsden is a self-taught artist who has been painting exclusively in oils since 2004. She finds painting a wonderful, creative outlet and stress reliever after working a hectic 12 hour shift as an RN in the intensive care unit at Brookwood Medical Center. She is a resident of Pelham, Alabama, and a member of the Birmingham Art Association. KathyLumsden.com kathyLumsden@yahoo.com*

## ON REGRET AND QUANTUM PHYSICS

Jacob Martin

A strange woman can shake up time how ice cracks  
sudden in fresh drinks,  
at once lawless. Cut  
atoms to her likeness shaped in futures;

scenes hazed in ideal,  
then imagined backward.

She walks right past. Banisters  
shake stairwells

or they don't shake, just the same. The grass still  
grows both ways, out of the field and into the field, and air  
travels lungs and the sky,  
capped on, changes color from time to time.

Traffic lights river traffic by leaves  
that break into pieces, break into gutters.

So if you can stop accusing  
yourself for just a minute—

this vista keeps changing  
its terms inside the window  
the same picture on it,  
day after day. Look, surely  
it's different now, someone's  
designs realized out there,  
while inside we were  
imagining at each other,  
faltering memorized knots  
like glue-fingered kids.

What I'm saying is saying everything backward  
won't make a warm shape you can hold.

Our hands grasp in arthritic rakes,  
dredge up old failures,  
cloud the spring water.

Still, a palm pressed to a palm opens conduits

and even though today seems plastic,  
it's about time we strip this kudzu off the brickwork.

Listen, its tendrils snap fresh green smell.

What I'm saying is picking the grit out  
won't lengthen the distance from injury.

So don't sweat it, when the skin heals over,  
we can string some beads through the pieces.

We can rub them and pray.

.....  
*Jacob Martin writes his poetry and fiction out of Crown Heights in Brooklyn, New York, where he lives with no cats and a roommate. His work has also appeared in LA Miscellany and Mad Poets' Review. He has a Bachelor of Arts in English from Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California, and is currently a Master of Fine Arts candidate at Sarah Lawrence College.*  
*[jacobmartin.writer@gmail.com](mailto:jacobmartin.writer@gmail.com)*

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“My Child Is A Honor Student”

-- Bumper sticker

“I'm Not Sure I Believe In Agnosticism”

-- Bumper sticker

## THINGS I ALREADY KNOW

Sarah Allen

I know donuts are bad for my waistline, and that last week I said I was going on a diet. I know I've been saying that for years.

I know you weren't trying to make us late to the show, that it wasn't entirely your fault the car wouldn't start, and I shouldn't have yelled. I know I'm too loud in public places, that I'm too exuberantly opinionated about Meryl Streep and Charles Dickens and everything and I know you don't mean to hurt my feelings when you tell me to shush.

I know these jeans are faded and that I was wearing this same bleach stained hoodie last time I saw you. I know Nordstrom is having a sale.

I do know that you don't like the Food Network, ice in your Coke or the cucumber perfume I wear when we go to my mother's. I watch the Food Network to bug you, and I know you know it.

I know why you hate the smell of cigarettes, which is why I'm thinking of you as I sit on the couch and smoke. It's night. The lamp across the street is burnt out and what I don't know is how it got that way or what kind of light bulbs the men in orange hats will use to fix it.

.....

*Sarah Allen is a 22 year old working on her first novel. She recently graduated as an English major from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. She has been published in a handful of literary magazines and blogs about her adventures and misadventures on the road to future publication.*

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## TEACHING BEHIND BARS

Allen Mendenhall

*Wardens say murderers make the best students. That's because, most of the time, murderers kill out of heat-of-passion. Their crimes aren't premeditated. Their minds aren't flawed or evil. But the habitual offenders— they're the ones to worry about. They can manipulate you. They're professionals, even behind bars. I'm not saying their minds are flawed or evil—merely capable of sustained and concerted deception.*

I'm a prison teacher. I teach literature. In prison, literature is currency. A book is a valuable unit of exchange. It's bought and sold, used as collateral, traded for sex. In the prison where I teach, many if not most prisoners are indigent. For money, they shine shoes, make beds, beat up (or beat down) prisoners for nominal fees.

The books and supplies I give my students are, like drugs or weapons, contraband. Some supplies—pens, for instance—become weapons. I contribute to the system of abuse by providing goods that prisoners fight over. I do so because in every class, without fail, I sense that I'm helping someone, because the pens and books usually generate thoughtful and creative essays or poems that the prisoners share with me.

I do so, in other words, because the students seem to learn and reflect when I visit them. Not all of them, but enough. At least one student, each class, appears to have a text-induced epiphany. I can tell because of what he says and how he says it, or because he thanks me so intensely, as if I might not come back next week.

If I can make epiphanies happen, I've succeeded.

The first day I taught in prison I was, as you might expect, anxious. I didn't think I would be. I wasn't anxious when I observed a prison class as part of my mandatory training—maybe because I wasn't alone then.

But I wouldn't be alone on the first day of class, either. Kyes Stevens, director of the Alabama Prison Arts and Education Project, was with me. She was to sit in on the first class, provide feedback, then release me from her gracious supervision.

Kyes drove me to the prison that day. When I stepped onto the gravel parking lot, I didn't want to look at the naked buildings. It wasn't that I felt paralyzed under the panoptic gaze of the guard towers, or

victimized by the penetrating stares from the other side of the chain-linked, barbed-wire fences. I looked down because my pockets felt empty. They were supposed to be carrying my driver's license.

I patted my front pockets, and then, realizing where I left my wallet—in the glove compartment of my Jeep. I pretended to check my back pockets to delay the moment when Kyes would realize my mistake.

It didn't take her long. "You forgot your wallet," she said. "Hang here. I'll talk to the chaplain. But you won't be able to get in. We'll have to drive back." I watched her shuffle into the prison office.

Feeling guilty, I looked down again—and noticed a dead frog on the ground. It hadn't been dead long because its sides were rounded and fleshy and its skin still moist. Its eyes seemed to register my presence even though neither they nor I moved. I half expected a warble to issue from its tubby belly and thick throat, but it lay still, a heart-shaped object on an unattended blanket of rock.

Suddenly Kyes returned. Relieved that my first class wouldn't be today, I was ready to apologize and get back into the car. But she was smiling. My relief turned to worry.

"We're good," she said. "Chaplain says you can come in. Just bring your ID next week."

"Good news," I lied.

We went in.

I got patted down, and the guard (*officer*; we're supposed to call the guards "officers") made a passing remark about a cavity search, perhaps to ease the tension.

Another officer shepherded us into the chapel where we were to wait until the prisoners emerged from lock-down. For some reason, three or four prisoners were with us. One of them, a heavy-set blond who couldn't have been more than 18—but who *must* have been more than 18 to be in there—asked me a series of questions, first about Republicans, then about the Middle East. He said he'd been in prison for two days. He said, "This place is scary as hell," and that he'd been hiding in the chapel as long as he could. Being new myself, I felt for him.

Lock-down is a form of punishment. It happens when prisoners are caught fighting, stealing, mouthing off, smoking dope. I'm not sure why the prisoners were on lock-down that day, but I soon learned that lock-

down was more normal than exceptional—at least on Thursdays around one o’clock, when I was supposed to teach.

Eventually an officer materialized and ushered Kyes and me into a classroom full of prisoners (*students*; we’re supposed to call them “students”). Apparently the course title, “Comedy and Literature,” drew a large crowd, but the expectant looks on several faces quickly gave way to disappointment because, I think, I was not what the students had hoped for: a young female graduate student. Worse, I wasn’t funny, and the class was about comedy.

I tried to explain what I meant by comedy as a genre, and a few students gave their neighbors looks that seemed to mean, “*This* is not what I signed up for.”

The heavy-set young blond from the chapel seemed to want to show off. He raised his hand and asked if I’d read this or that, then declared that he’d read *everything* on the syllabus. I knew something wasn’t right when a few students exchanged knowing glances. But I let the moment pass without comment.

Because of the lock-down, the first class was abbreviated. I felt as though I finished as soon as I began. Several students lined up to introduce themselves. One asked if I could bring him contact information for a screenwriting company because, he said, he was a professional screenwriter. Another told me about his published poetry and asked whether I wanted to see it. I reservedly said yes. (I never saw his poetry.) Another felt the need to tell me that he was innocent and didn’t belong “with these guys.” Three or four others simply said, “Thank you.”

Thirty-three students came that day. Eleven remained on the last day of class. I never saw the heavy-set blond again. Kyes said she knew I wouldn’t, that after his performance he would “get set straight.” That’s code for getting the hell kicked out of you.

My syllabus discussed comedy *as* literature, and also the role of comedy *in* literature. Comedy can mean many things; humor is only one aspect of the genre. My goal was for the students to learn about various expressions of comedy and how authors use comedy to comment on ethics or morality.



## UNAWARE TEMPTATION WAITS

Marcia Mouron  
24" x 30"

*Marcia Mouron lives in Birmingham, Alabama, with her cat, her bees and a yard full of trees. Nature inspires much of her art. [mamouron@bellsouth.net](mailto:mamouron@bellsouth.net)*

A course on comedy was not just for escape and relief, the syllabus explained, but for critical self-exploration. I hoped the students would develop a greater awareness of the relation of comedy to the human condition—one of those hopes that’s contrary to intuition and that humanities professors recite to justify their work. The human condition, I’m afraid, has become a tired defense for any enterprise that doesn’t generate, or rarely generates, financial profit.

Anyway, what *was* the human condition in here?

This was a place where human existence was supervised and controlled, guarded and mediated. It was cut off from the “outside” world and relegated to a strange, constant “inside.” What it meant to be inside, and how the inside was different from the outside, was something I never quite figured out, no matter how many notes I took or how many hours of reflection I went through during my drive home. I live in Atlanta. The prison is west of Montgomery, so my drives home were long.

If anything, I learned that the human condition isn’t the same from time to time or place to place, and that what it means to be human, in a space where humanity isn’t completely acknowledged, feels different from anything I knew. I was merely a temporary visitor with freedom of entry and exit. I wanted to be inside where “they” lived, to see the place that “they” couldn’t leave, to satisfy my own curiosities—even as I wanted to help them learn to better themselves.

I sometimes wonder whether the prisoners’ bored lives were a perverse source of pleasure for me. I appreciated my life, and the decisions I had made, more and more each class. For every good motive there is an ulterior one, and sometimes motives are sublimated. And even if I did good things by teaching in prison, even if my motives were, for lack of a better word, pure, I feel, in some ways, *guilty* for the smugness that I assumed when I left—and that I tried, unsuccessfully, to fight off. During the drives to and from prison, I asked myself why teaching there made me feel good about myself. Was it because I was doing something for others, or for me? Did it matter? What was the difference?

One day I distributed copies of J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, most of which I never saw again. I expected that. The book opens with sex, and sex recurs throughout. Sex, in a place where it’s forbidden, where it’s either coerced or a last resort, is a luxury worth hiding and fighting for. It’s in high demand and short supply. It’s *the* thing prisoners miss most.

I'm not sure what happened to those books, but I'm sure they were put to use, sold, fought over.

I don't give extra supplies. I provide students with what they need and nothing more, because if they get more, they'll harm others and themselves. And if *that* happens, the guards—officers—will begin to see the teachers as a problem. And if the teachers become problems, they disappear. Quickly.

I didn't want to disappear.

Murderers make the best students. They didn't want me to disappear, either.

Most university students take my course because literature is a requirement, a hurdle over which they must jump if they want to graduate. To get them to read, I threaten them with pop quizzes or bribe them with bonus points. I tell them I'm grading them. Most of them hate literature. They think they know what's important to learn, and it isn't poetry or philosophy or Great Books. They view literature as something like punishment.

But the prisoners, the people whose lives have *become* punishment, are willing to circulate petitions to have more literature classes and to stake their reputations on literature, which is, in a space of perpetual confinement, the opposite of punishment—the closest thing to sex that isn't sex itself.

My university students complete their writing assignments because they are mandatory and graded. I don't give my prison students writing assignments, but every week the prisoners give me a stack of essays they've written. They like writing, and reading. And they like Shakespeare. And they like me.

Why, I ask again, does teaching in prison make me feel good about myself? Is it because I'm doing something for others, or for me? Does it matter? What's the difference?

I'm a creature of habit. I establish routines and stick to them. Each week on my way to the prison, I stopped at Dairy Queen, an indulgence that struck me as inappropriate after one of my students told me that a visiting relative had brought him a Burger King hamburger—the first hamburger he'd eaten since being admitted 15 years ago.

Every week that first semester I arrived at the same time, parked in the same spot. Every week I looked down at the frog corpse, which

nobody had touched. It decayed a little more each time I studied it. It was like a piece of garbage that no one would throw away. I had a hard time imagining it ever lived.

One week I wasn't allowed inside. I waited for two hours in the front office before giving up and going home. The next week, I learned there had been a stabbing. Apparently, two prisoners got in a fight, one stabbed the other, the wounded one ducked into a dorm so his pals could stitch him up, and the guards walked in as the stitching was taking place. The prison went on lock-down.

When I saw my students the next week, they apologized. But it wasn't *their* fault. To my knowledge, no one in the class was involved in the fight. Nevertheless, I let them apologize because I was afraid of what they would say or do if I yielded authority. I couldn't let them know that *they* were in control.

Moments like this made me wonder what these men were like when I wasn't around. They couldn't be this polite and enthusiastic around other prisoners, could they? Were they special prisoners, the ones whose love for literature had cultivated moral sensitivity?

Perhaps it was a performance. The only people who didn't seem to perform in prison were the guards (officers). We didn't trust each other. To them, I was probably a bleeding heart liberal who thought he could change a bunch of hardened criminals. To me, they were a mob of jocks who made a display of their callousness and cruelty, saying things like, "Our job would be easier if we could kill them all off," or "Which dude are you gonna set straight today?" Never mind that the officers were victims of desensitization and may not have played sports at all. Perspective is a funny thing.

I'm sure the officers were fine men individually, but when they were together they traded crude jokes, mocked the prisoners, and laughed uproariously at either my or the prisoners' expense. One day an officer taunted me with questions about my "comfy" life in the "ivory tower," and about the pointlessness of literature. I sat there, silent, taking it all in, because I didn't know what else to do, and because, to a certain extent, I was used to it, what with my university students being so disdainful of literature. I even agreed with the officer on some points. I have reservations about the utility of literature, and I have a save-the-world-on-your-own-time mentality in the classroom.

The only bad thing that happened to me in prison was that a guard stole my leather keychain, which my sister had given me as a Christmas present. I wasn't upset because I lost the keychain. It was the principle of the matter. Taxpayers were supporting the officers to protect people like me, but the officers were *stealing* from me—doing what some prisoners had done to get here in the first place. This wasn't right, but it was routine. And routine is order.

The students were clearly disappointed about missing class because of the stabbing. They wanted to talk. They wanted new reading assignments.

Two weeks after the stabbing, they came to me with a proposal. Would I, they asked, take their petition supporting more prison classes and give it to Kyes?

They explained that the only opportunity for intellectual fulfillment was during my class. No other classes were offered, and the students wanted to read more than I could provide. One wanted to learn French, another to study western political philosophy, still another to translate something from Latin to English. They wanted me to see if Kyes could establish something like a school in prison.

Although I nodded enthusiastically, I realized that they were growing delusional the more they talked about what they wanted, that they were fantasizing about a knowledge exchange that could never happen.

They wanted school to come to them. Most of my university students wanted out of school. What made my prison students different? Was it time or banality? Was it that they had nothing else to do?

Perhaps. But when I think about the sincerity and intensity with which they approached literature, I shudder to think that my university students aren't as willing or appreciative. Then again, my university students, for all their snarky and selfish attitudes, weren't criminals or murderers. And I suppose that not all prison students were in my class for the "right" reasons. Some wanted to mix up the routine, I'm sure, and some wanted to avoid the violence and futility of prison life. My course gave them focus and meaning. If only my university students could realize this potential in texts.

I taught *Waiting for Godot* in my prison class. Afterward a balding white man, in prison for cocaine, pulled me aside and said, "Hey, man, I know this is a comedy course and all, but that play was a little too real for

the guys in here — because we actually know what it is to wait for Godot.”

And here I thought the play was absurd.

It all comes down to futility. If my class provided focus and meaning, what did it mean that I taught a text on meaninglessness? That’s a vulgar reading of the play, but try finding meaning in meaninglessness when you’re behind bars.

It’s easy to forget where you are when you teach in prison. The classroom itself is separate from the quotidian realities of prison life. It’s an artificial space. The prisoners attend my class to escape, but the classroom is, architecturally and geographically, right in the middle of the prison. No place besides my class is more central—physically, functionally and metaphorically—because without my class prisoners would feel confined beyond their tolerance level.

No matter how much I want my classes to be about intellectual fulfillment, self-improvement or aesthetic appreciation, they always serve another function: to keep prisoners from thinking about their confinement. If my class is escapist, what it escapes is not physical reality but habits of thinking. Is it problematic that my class both enables and perpetuates psychological torment at the same time that it provides temporary relief? If my class helps the system run, and run well, isn’t it strange that the class is putatively about *escape* from the system?

Routine is order.

When I pulled my Jeep into the parking lot for the last day of my first semester, something felt strange. At first I couldn’t figure out what. Then I realized that the lot had been paved. No more gravel. The ground was smooth and black and hot.

It was May now, and May in Alabama is like July in other states. You could see steam rising from the asphalt. I looked down where the frog was supposed to be. It wasn’t there. For 14 weeks it had been there, undisturbed. Now it was gone.

As I waited to be admitted, I thought back on the semester and all my victories and failures. I thought about one student who’d succeeded in getting his crossword puzzle accepted for publication in *The Los Angeles Times*, and about another whose short story had been published in a prominent literary magazine. Then I thought about the student whose poetry I had agreed to read but never actually read. That student quit

coming to class. I thought I must have offended or disappointed him because of my own fear and false sense of superiority. I tried, sitting there, to justify my arrogant behavior on the grounds that I was still here in prison, still doing something decent and right, still helping prisoners to learn. But putting yourself into a situation to do good is not the same as doing good.

We watched a film during the last class. I distributed certificates of completion, and after the film I gave my obligatory departure speech. Prison teachers are shuffled from facility to facility to avoid longstanding relationships with students. I knew I wouldn't be back in this prison and that I'd never see these students again, unless they got out one day and thought to look me up. I hadn't planned a speech. I never plan speeches.

"In the outside world," I said, "people don't watch as much news or read as many books as you do. I can't get my freshmen to read anything unless I give them pop quizzes. They complain when I assign something longer than four pages. And I teach at a nationally recognized institution." The speech was degenerating into something about me, not about them, but they didn't seem to mind. I think they understood that, all along, the class, for me, had been partially *about* me, even as it was about them, too.

The students listened intently as I told them how my university freshmen had bragged about not reading and had told me, more than once, that they thought poetry was pointless and that literature wasn't worth studying.

I couldn't tell if the prisoners were shocked or mad or sad. Maybe they were pained to learn that the outside world might not care about what they were doing in my classroom. Maybe they resented that others looked down on a thing—literature—that they had come to practice and love. Maybe they couldn't understand why anyone on the outside would neglect something so precious as knowledge or literature.

Or maybe they *could* understand, and that's what hurt the most: knowing they'd lost the freedom not to care.

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## THE 82,000 MPH MUSE

Jim Reed

What does a message in a bottle have in common with a spacecraft speeding along at 82,000 miles per hour?

Funny you should ask. Actually, it really would be funny if you asked, since I never expect anybody to make such an inquiry in my lifetime.

So, since I'm doing all the asking, I might as well do the answering, too.

My muse is a spaceship named Pioneer 10, and within this racing bit of machinery lies one tiny hope for our species—the hope that we will prevail (preferably in peace and prosperity) long enough to dive into deep space and retrieve this runaway child of Earth.

Way back in 1972 (or, as we geezers say, day before yesterday), a scientist named Carl Sagan, and his buddy, Frank Drake, learned that NASA was about to launch a missile to the stars, a missile that will be gone so long and going so fast, that it won't reach a giant sun called Aldebaran for about two million years. But it was going to make the trip, anyhow! That's the way visionary poets and scientists and hobbits think—two million years is nothing when you're about to embark on an adventure!

Anyhow, the scientists asked NASA whether they could place a message on the Pioneer 10 craft—you know, just in case somebody or something intercepts and boards the vessel during its great visit outside our Solar System. Wouldn't we want the interceptors to know who we are and where we are and whether we are crusaders or explorers?

NASA agreed, and three weeks later, a gold aluminum anodized plaque with a message was installed on the space ship, and away it went!

Forty years have passed, and Pioneer 10 is still travelling toward Aldebaran, even though it stopped sending us messages a few years back (even million-dollar batteries have shelf life).

I often think about Pioneer 10 and all that it means to me and my fellow earthlings, especially my fellow writers.

Placing a message in a bottle and casting it into unknown waters is the same as loading up a time capsule and burying it deep within a cornerstone, the same as wrapping a diary in a red clay clump and hiding it in an overgrowth of kudzu, the same as writing “Kilroy was here” on an urban wall, the same as pressing “enter” and sending a blast/blog/tweet/text/manuscript into parts unknown.

All us senders of messages just want to communicate that we were here, we once mattered, we were good to each other; we hope our readers will fare well and never forget the importance of messaging our lives to one another, never forget that the real people of the world are the little folks like us, the folks who don’t crave power, don’t want to harm, don’t wish to exploit...we’re just the people who matter, and we want to send hopeful messages to future generations and species who are searching for hope and meaning in their alien or alienated existences.

So, my muse, the small spacecraft/bottle called Pioneer 10, keeps sailing the interstellar seas. Someday, it will be intercepted and interpreted. The interceptors might be strange beings...or, I suspect, they might be *us*, the scientifically advanced us who found a way, one million years hence, to race into the vast distances and retrieve our beloved Rosetta Stone, our Grail, then re-read it and take heart in the fact that we once had great notions and powerful hope and unfettered love that we were willing to share through the eons with anyone open to the idea

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*Jim Reed writes from Birmingham, Alabama, where he curates the Museum of Fond Memories at Reed Books. <http://www.jimreedbooks.com>*

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