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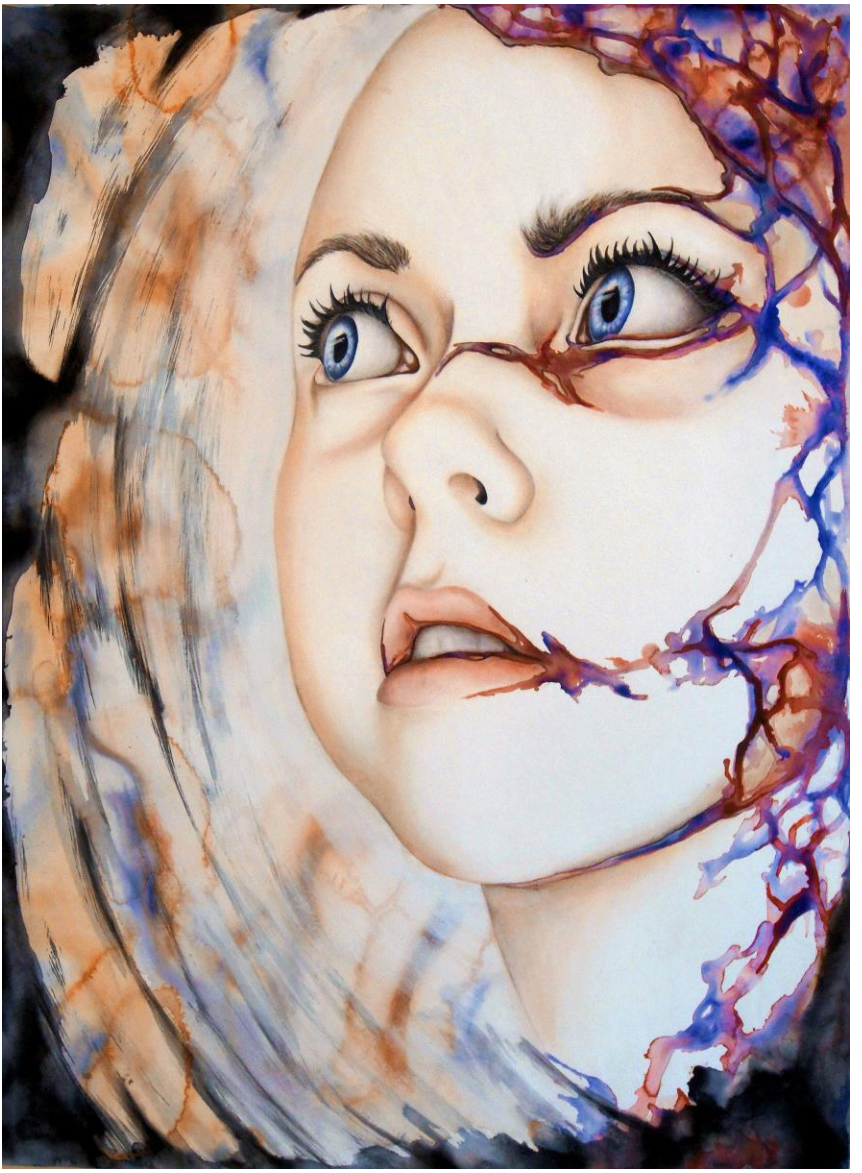

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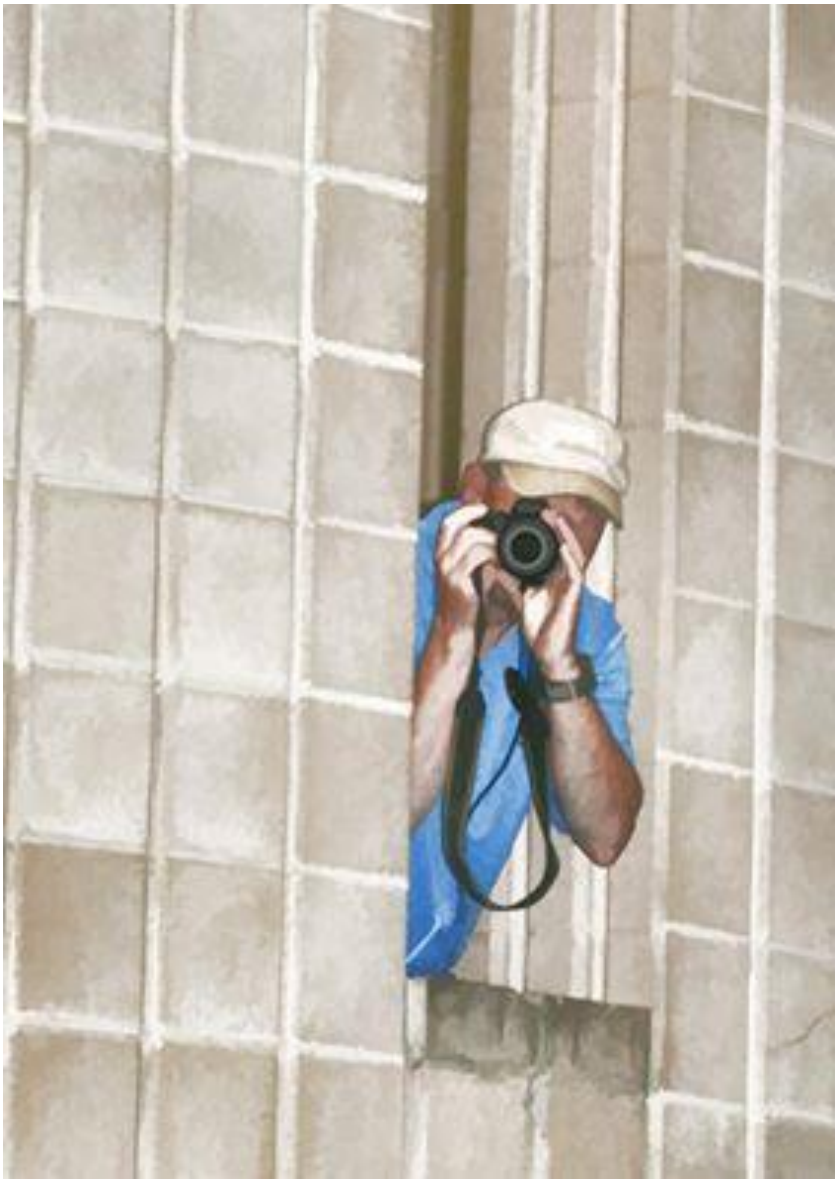

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Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU, KID –** Digital Photograph. 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 Huntsville Photographic Society. She and her husband travel the Southeast documenting the beauty and history of the area one snapshot at a time. **dlmelittle@msn.com**

Back Cover: **THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF AMMUNITION** – 22" x 30" mixed media. Jessica Young earned a BFA at University of Montevallo and an MFA at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Using the human figure, her work explores themes of personal identity, social interaction, confinement and space.**jyoung6@forum.montevallo.edu**

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BUZZY

Katherine Lien Chariott

Your uncle Buzzy looked just like your grandfather. And he thought like him, and acted like him, too. Your uncle Buzzy was just like your grandfather. I am quiet when my father tells me this, quiet because I don't know what to say. Heavy lidded, loose featured, my father is tired, and he is talking. I turn from him, look down and away, before turning back. I don't understand what he's trying to tell me. These many hours, my father has been talking about his own father, and after maneuvering around him, after glancing off his surface a hundred times, he has settled on something concrete: *Your uncle Buzzy was just like your grandfather*. My father looks at me now, meaningfully, to see if I have caught his meaning, and I nod. I take his hand and hold it softly, run my fingers back and forth over the coarse hairs on his knuckles. I'm tired, he says at last. I know, I say. Go to sleep, Dad. I'll wait right here. He closes his eyes and I think about what he has said and I think about his brother, try to remember him from childhood. But, eyes closed, all I see is Buzzy's grave: grey headstone and freshly-turned dirt, flowers thrown over the casket. I try to see his face, or remember his voice, move beyond this silent image, grave of a Buzzy, but all I see, all I feel, is granite. My hand stills over my father's, and I wonder if in his sleep he can feel the warmth of my life in his flesh, feel my cold sadness in his bones. I watch his chest slow-rise and fall. I watch his chest to see it rise and fall. *Buzzy*, I say. But the word does not lead to others, and the room is quiet again, more so than before I named him. I wonder why my father, so tired, heavy lidded, has spent these many hours rushing through so many words, each one costing him untold effort and pain, and how it is possible that all of those words, spoken with such feeling, can say so little. I hold tight my father's hand, and I think about his bones, crushed dues in the cup of my palms. I want to break through the silence, and break through the words, until the difference between us is gone. I imagine myself old, my own son grown and graying, like I am now, an early winter morning like this one, or summer evening, just after dusk. In fast fluid words I will tell him about my father, but my words will not be enough. I will leave him to wonder about a man, long dead, that he remembers as a headstone carved with questions. I look down at my hand holding my father's to see his skin, strange and pale and lined. I swallow sore stones and feel them rise pebbly in my chest and in my throat. I want to

kneel at the edge of this bed, to rest my head on my father's chest and weep; to let the tears burn from the back of my eyes, down my face, and onto his body. They would warm him. I hear my son whispering in the hall, his mother murmuring in response, and I hold myself strong. There will be time for crumbling, later. I imagine my wife, her soft arms strong, holding me when my father is gone. My father is dying in this bed where he slept with my mother, where I came as a boy after nightmares, pretending I wasn't afraid. My father is dying, and he knows it. He is dying, and it is now that he chooses to speak to me. Long years I have waited and I am patient and I listen closely, but I hear him without understanding. In this quiet between words, I watch my father's chest slow-rise and fall, and I wonder if I know him. And in this weak, dim, dying morning, I ask myself, in time to his breathing, again and again, thinking that this is the answer to so many questions: *Buzzy, who are you?*

.....

Katherine Chariott's work has been published in literary magazines including Post Road, The Literary Review *and* Sonora Review. *She holds an MFA from Cornell and a PhD from UNLV, where she was a Schaeffer Fellow in fiction.*
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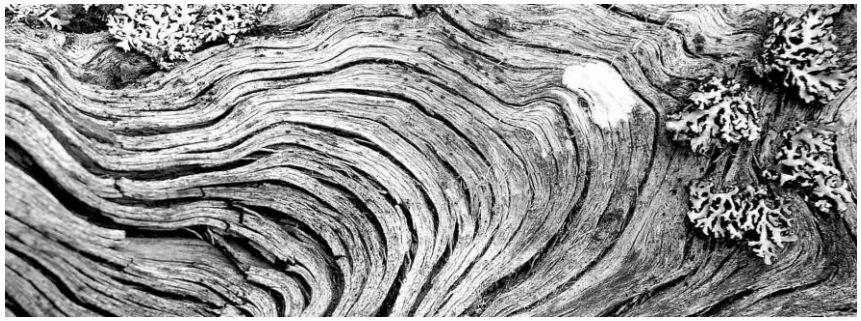

TREE TRUNK
Digital Photograph
Andrew Tyson

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

BROKEN DISHES

Jackie Walburn

The concrete front steps felt hot and bumpy through the thin cloth of my dress as Charlie and me sat there, bracing for the crashing, up-and-down sounds coming from inside our house.

I could feel the step's rocky imprints through the cotton of my faded red and white sailor dress – the beloved one Momma made with the polka dots and big collar. I'd put on the dress that morning, hoping that seeing me in my favorite dress would stop another fight between my two most-loved people.

It hadn't.

Instead, fear and heat radiated from the concrete into my confused four-year-old soul as we sat on the steps and waited, holding hands, me flinching with each new noise – thrown dishes and raised voices.

Our legs stretched out in front of us, Charlie's two and a half years longer and bigger. We looked out on the yard Daddy had mowed yesterday after he got off work from the steel mills, coming in sweating and smelling of metal and smoke, with his big boots, shiny hard hat and funny-looking eyeglasses.

I looked down my skinny legs to the sidewalk and considered our unused chalk hopscotch lines, the ones Charlie had drawn for me. I couldn't make myself jump, hop or skip. From inside we heard the loud see-saw voices of our parents. Shouted words we couldn't understand came from Momma, and then stern answers, less loud, from Daddy.

Another dish crashed, and a smile flashed across Charlie's brown butch-cut framed face. I already knew that loud, crashing, breaking things appealed to my brother. I didn't know then if all boys were like that.

"That was a big plate, I think," he said. "Bet there's a mess in there."

Charlie squeezed my hand but avoided my eyes, realizing even then that he wasn't old enough and eventually, strong enough, to protect little sister from the noise of broken dishes, raised voices or other things we didn't yet understand.

The front door opened and Daddy came out fast. He caught the door before he slammed it, stopped, tried a smile and asked, "Uh, y'all don't feel like playing?"

Inside, I heard Momma making loud crying, choking noises, and the sound of glass hitting the bottom of a trash can. I got up to go comfort her like she'd done for me so many times.

Daddy reached his big hand to my shoulder and hugged me to his hip. Charlie got up then and took Daddy's other side. "Better not go in. Best leave Momma alone right now."

Daddy looked out into the yard, at the chalk filled sidewalk, the freshly mowed grass, and his 1950 Chevrolet Fleetline parked in front. He took a deep breath, and I thought Daddy would cry too, something I'd never seen.

Instead, he guided us back to the steps and sat down between us. "Yeah babies. Maybe we better not go in right now. Some things got broken in there today."

.....

Jackie Romine Walburn *is a Birmingham native and career writer. She has worked as a reporter, editor and corporate communications manager. Jackie is currently seeking an agent and publisher for her first novel,* Mojo Jones and the Black Cat Bone*, and writes the blog* http://jackierwalburnwrites.blogspot.com*. Broken Dishes won third place in the Flash Fiction category in the Alabama Writers Conclave's 2014 literary competition.* **jackie.walburn@gmail.com**

"We shouldn't retire, not in our profession. There's no such thing. We want to drop dead onstage."

–Christopher Plummer

NOT FORGOTTEN
Nancy Milford
12"X16”
Oil on Canvas

Nancy Milford is a self -taught artist; much of her artwork is about the flora and fauna of Alabama. She has significant interests in preservation and conservation of all types, including architecture, wildlife habitat and wildlife.
gessner8905@yahoo.com

THREE O'CLOCK IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL

Richard Key

The local botanical garden was sponsoring a home garden tour in our city – fifteen dollars a head to go and gawk at someone's geraniums. It was past azalea season, though, and not much was in bloom. Even the camellias were unadorned. But, my wife and I were curious because several of the featured homes were in our neighborhood, and we're as nosy as they come.

Also, shade gardens were being highlighted. We have shade in our yard, in spades. Like gardening on the dark side of the moon. So, naturally, we wanted to see how other people handled lack of direct sunlight.

Most did pretty well, and we could see a lot of the same players – ferns, hostas, aspidistra, gardenias – showing up in several, the four horsemen of the shade apocalypse. Some of the gardens had more sun than others, at least at three in the afternoon. If we had the sunshine some of them have, we could throw our vitamin D capsules in the trash.

You could see the love in these gardens: the weeds that had been yanked out, the nurturing, the fussy grooming, even the braggadocio. It's like raising kids, really. One lady, Theresa, rescues plants from the side of the road, abandoned ferns, half-dead poinsettias, that sort of thing. She gets them back on their feet and adopts them into her garden. St. Theresa is what we call her now. She had lots of holly ferns, none of which showed the winter damage that ours did. Must be the warmth of her goodness.

We visited one really magnificent garden in back of someone's house. Part of the garden surrounded a swimming pool, but there was a shady corner underneath an expansive mulberry tree. Common objects had been artfully repurposed and recast as decorations and adornments. There were wind chimes, Christmas lights, you name it.

Amid the oohs and ahs of the visitors, however, we noticed empty yellow bottles of MiracleGro in the bottom of a garbage can. It all made sense now: performance enhancers. Barry Bonds. A-Rod. Lance Armstrong. You could see the signs. Blossoms the size of Marie Antoinette's head. Jasmine growing sixty feet up the side of a pine tree. The sort of thing you'd only see in nature next to an elephant graveyard. We looked at each other and braced ourselves for the endless denials, and a carefully worded speech by the commissioner of gardening.

One garden boasted 150 varieties of hydrangeas and 200 cultivars of hosta. Now, that's just showing off. Another gardener showed us her root beer plant and broke off a bit of leaf for us to smell. The actual name is *Hoja Santa (Piper auritum)* and does indeed smell like root beer. It's hard to imagine what survival advantage this imparts to the plant, unless it's banking on spreading through the broken off leaf bits, or being left alone by animals that prefer Coke and Dr. Pepper.

Of, course, the idea of a garden is to make it all look natural and easy, like everything came together in one happy coincidence to create this beautiful montage. Every gardener knows what it's really like, though: war every day. George Patton with a hoe. Encouraging the weak, defeating the invasive forces, changing strategies based on limited supplies of water and sunshine. Every garden is six months away from chaotic jungle, and every gardener knows it. On the other hand, every garden is about six months from paradise, and that's what keeps us buying all that great-looking stuff at the nursery.

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Richard Key was born in Jacksonville, FL, and grew up in Mississippi. He is now a practicing physician in Dothan, Alabama, and has been writing short stories and essays since 2008. Some of his pieces have appeared in Penman Review, The Broken Plate, *and* Alalit.com. **richard.key@pwdda.com**

SUBTRACTION

James A. Jordan

Turning off Abednego Rd. I am returned
to them who have ceased, to three hundred
final breaths in car seats, hospital rooms,
double beds, recliners, a church pew or two.
The dead teach us nothing but subtraction,
and yet I have walked these rows since I first
knew walking, communing with them, respecting
their negativeness. At the plot where my aunt
rests, I speak into wild onions all those things
I did not say that last night, hoping to subtract
from myself. "Speak if I have said something
to offend," I tell her, "Speak if I've said too much."
Wind blows through maple branches, and negative
crowns move over her unmoving granite face.

.....

James A. Jordan received his BA from Centre College, and is currently pursuing his MFA at the University of New Orleans. A two-time finalist for the Rash Prize, his previous work has appeared in the Aurorean, Broad River Review *and* San Pedro River Review. *He lives in New Orleans.* **jajordan1289@gmail.com**

POST MORTEM

Katie Boyer

It was mostly at night that Laura realized how alone they were. She would lean across the bed to kiss her new husband goodnight, smile to herself that the routine was like tucking in a child, and that would be it—she'd remember they had no parents. She'd be swept by a wave of panicked vulnerability, as if she were in the shower and suddenly recalled the front door was standing open. Usually the sensation made her want to cry. But it was clear that Mack, tender as he was, just couldn't understand why *his* mother's death should affect Laura this strongly, so she held her tears until she was alone.

Denise had been the nicest lady Laura ever met, young for sixty and not exactly wealthy, but generous. Available, kind. Laura remembered her busy in her kitchen or small vegetable garden, whipping up biscuits or making salad or pouring sweet tea before her guests could offer to help. She'd left them her townhouse.

But property wasn't the point. Her life was. And of course she loved Mack for himself – but the future she imagined for them had always included Denise. She was going to keep their children, once they had them. She and Laura were going to plan family dinners and cook them together. Denise had even actually said she wanted to be a replacement parent for Laura. She'd given her the sweetest note the night before their wedding, half a year ago. "I'd like to be as much your mother as Mack's," the line had read. Then two months later they were at her funeral.

One Saturday a few weeks later (it seemed much longer), Mack had finally convinced her it was time to box the clothes in Denise's walk-in closet.

"I'm just not sentimental, I guess," Mack said as he dropped an armful of blouses, hangers and all, into a box.

"It's not about being sentimental," Laura answered. "It's about treasuring something of hers."

Mack shrugged. "We've got the photo albums and the china. The rest of this is just stuff."

Laura could see his point, but her own heart didn't work that way – it craved tangible things, memorials to be touched. Her father had left while she was a toddler; she had only a single picture of him, and the lighting

was bad, but she'd kept it in her nightstand until her mother found it and took it away. Then in high school one of her mother's boyfriends had given her a first hit of heroin, and, after a few noisy months, she'd turned Laura out with only the clothes she was wearing and her school backpack. Still Laura had crept back into the house while her mother was sleeping to take one of her nightgowns. Denise had cried when Laura told her the story.

Now Laura tried not to watch as Mack filled another box with his haphazard packing. She folded each of Denise's scarves carefully.

Downstairs, he loaded the boxes into Laura's car.

"You sure you got all this on your own, babe?" Mack said.

"Sure, it's fine," she said, kissing his cheek. "The thrift store people will help me unload."

At the end of the street, she paused and checked the rearview to be sure Mack had gone inside. Then, instead of heading toward the thrift store, Laura turned right. Only a few streets away, off a back alley, was a self-storage place. Laura punched in the code to open the gate, drove carefully along the narrow space between buildings. Outside the unit door, she pulled a tiny key from the pocket of her jeans, hung the open lock on the metal latch so she could find it easily. After only a week, the routine and the room were already familiar.

She reached inside to turn the dial of the light and heard its tick and buzz, counting down to the return of darkness. In spite of the narrow walls, she had everything set up like a tiny apartment: Denise's writing desk, a twin bed and chest of drawers, a mirror, some cookbooks, a houndstooth throw and elephant-shaped Crimson Tide cookie jar. All the things that most reminded her of Denise and that Mack hadn't wanted to keep now that they were moving into her townhouse.

Laura put the box on the desk and sat on the bed. When she and Mack first started dating, Denise had called her for lunch. At first, her friendliness had made Laura uneasy. She worried either Denise was jealous of her time with Mack, or she wanted Laura to spy on her son. As it turned out, things were much simpler than that. Denise had always wanted a daughter.

One by one, Laura brought in the boxes from the car and unpacked them. About half the clothes fit in the chest of drawers. For the rest, Laura set up two tension rods across the back of the unit as a kind of closet. She smiled as she realized she was grateful to Mack for leaving the hangers on.

Once the clothes were arranged, Laura took a last look around. Denise's things held some memory of her scent, but already a dry plywood mustiness was creeping in. Laura knew the moths and spiders and mildew would claim all of Denise's things eventually. That was all right. The point wasn't to keep them forever, but to let them go slowly, gradually, a molecule at a time even, just until she could get used to the idea that Denise was really gone.

.....

Trained as a journalist and employed as a teacher, Katie Boyer counts storytelling as one of her great passions. Her work has been published in Wingspan *and* The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. *She lives in Birmingham and teaches composition, creative writing, and world literature at Jefferson State Community College.* **cat.bird2@gmail.com**

"I'm still trying to grow up, bit by bit by bit. I kid you not. Even at the age of what it is I am, I'm still trying to grow up."

–Jim Reed

ON THE STRAND

Anne Colwell

She makes three dots on the paper napkin with a blue pen, connects them with two curved lines. She does it again. Each dot equidistant, like the stars in Orion's Belt. 3 3 3 The middle point of the three, Conor, her husband, with his arms curved touching Maeve and Sean, their children, or maybe the curved lines are all their arms intertwined, a hand on each shoulder. They are three now. She made them a three by leaving, by sitting here just inside the curved plate glass in the Pret A Manger on the Strand in London and not there, inside her yellow kitchen in Clontarf, in Ireland. Where she belongs. Where Conor, her mother, everyone says she belongs.

A red bus goes by and the color smears in the dusty raindrops that have just begun to pock the curved glass. The door opens and the iron smell of rain and car exhaust gusts in and Rosheen opens the cardboard box that holds the chicken sandwich and tries to quell the revolt in her stomach at the thought of biting into it. Beyond the window, a group of men and women pass wearing dark suits, grey fish in a grey tank. Two men stop at the corner. One pops open an umbrella and the other turns his palms and his face up to the wet, shakes off the offer to share.

A year ago, she couldn't have imagined this life. Just last July. They were an 8. She and Conor in the middle, one flesh, one space, Sean and Maeve on either side. They were an 8. Infinite, closed and complete. She puts down the sandwich and picks up the pen – 8 3 8 3 8 3. She writes *I felt like it might kill me* and looks at the sentence. So much weight on that center point, so much to balance and support.

Behind the counter, the two clerks, chatting in the lull between customers, burst into laughter. Rosheen follows the strange music of their accents without taking in the words.

The first few weeks she lived here in London with Joe, she'd felt weightless, exhilarated and terrified. When Conor asked, "Didn't she miss him, the kids?" she'd lied. "I do, of course." But she'd blown a hole through everything she knew or wanted, she'd opened her life wide, and for weeks, she missed nothing. She walked around the streets, wondering at their strange names – Marylebone, Piccadilly. Like the survivor of a terrible explosion, amazed that her feet were beneath her, astonished at the most ordinary.

Then, four days ago, scrolling through stock reports and drinking tea at Joe's dining room table, Rosheen missed Tabby, the yellow cat. If Rosheen had been at sitting at home in her kitchen, Tabby would have jumped into her lap and tried to lick the butter on her brown bread. It was a passing thought, a nothing. One sad smile in a long day. But the feeling had opened a closed door. Now everywhere she goes, she sees Maeve and Sean at every age they've been. She hears Conor's voice behind her or on the television. But she can't imagine walking back in, becoming 8 again.

Rosheen stands up, tosses the sandwich and the scribbled-on napkin at the door, walks to the corner and raises a hand against the afternoon sun muscling its way through the clouds. I am a 7, she thinks. Searching for something. My hand shading my eyes, looking toward the blinding horizon.

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Anne Colwell lives and writes in Milton, DE. She has published two books of poems: Believing Their Shadows *(Word Poetry, 2010) and* Mother's Maiden Name *(Word Poetry, 2013). She won the 2013 Emerging Artist in Fiction Award for her novel,* Holy Day. **colwell@udel.edu**

"I have a hard time recognizing that I'm 84. I'm in complete denial, which I think is extremely useful.

–Frederick Wiseman

SUNRISE WITH VULTURES

Jordan Sanderson

In drowned pines above
the johnboat, vultures
spread their wings, waiting
for the sun to swell

over the water and bloat
the day with its swelter.
We sculled along beneath
them, staring up, knocking

into one of the trees, but
they were immovable as
totems. When the light
tinged against their backs,

the wings swung like black
pearl gates, and the vultures
seemed to fall into sky, rising
like bald-headed angels.

.....

Jordan Sanderson's work has appeared in several journals, including Gigantic Sequins, The Oklahoma Review, Red Earth Review*, and* NANO Fiction*, and he is the author of two chapbooks,* Abattoir *(Slash Pine Press, 2014) and* The Formulas *(ELJ Publications, 2014). Jordan lives near the Gulf of Mexico.*
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POWER PLAY

Debra H. Goldstein

"We're an iron and steel city. Power, strength, and industrial growth are what our customers need to know we stand for." Tom Martin glanced around the board table as he snuffed out the stub of his cigar. As president and chair of the Power Company's board since 1920, he had given this speech about how what was good for the state was good for the Power Company and vice versa so many times over the past five years that he could predict the reaction of almost every man in the room.

The two company men to his right nodded their heads like the lemmings they were; while Benji, his secretary seated to his left, focused on getting every word correctly recorded in Benji's miniscule script. The only wild card was the well-dressed man sitting near the far end of the table.

Martin and William T. Warren, architect of the company's new headquarters, had had a few head-to-head run-ins over the design and construction of the art deco building, but Martin wasn't worried Warren's presentation during today's board meeting would sway any votes about the building's final decorative details. The only thing Martin planned to allow to be voted on was the building's signage.

Although Warren was more physically imposing than he was, Martin had learned long ago that size, strength and charisma were immaterial if one didn't control the purse strings. To be safe, he'd put Warren's report at the end of the agenda. He knew by the time the meeting dragged on, he could easily convince the board members to table for further study any motion prompted by Warren's remarks.

"I see a large sign spelling out our name in full on the front of the building," Martin said, holding his hands about two feet apart to demonstrate the height of the lettering. "Maybe in red or outlined in red to underscore our power."

"Um," the architect cleared his throat. All eyes turned to him as he reached for the glass of water in front of him and slowly took a sip. After swallowing it with equal speed, he looked up and said, "Sorry, something got caught in my throat."

"Well, we're glad you're alright. Wouldn't want to lose our favorite architect before we finish our building." Martin laughed. "Now, as I was saying, our name needs to stand as a declaration of the company's belief in the economic growth that will be forthcoming for our state and our company. Our identity…."

"Actually," Warren interrupted, "I think that's the wrong tactic to take. You need something subtle, that doesn't change over time, to make your building stand out. Something that prompts people to talk among themselves."

Martin pressed his fingers together so they all pointed upward. "I appreciate your thoughts, but hopefully your art-deco design will make the building a positive topic of discussion. We need our name in big letters to constantly reinforce to the public that the Power Company takes their lives and trust very seriously."

"That speaks to your mission and your business practices, but it doesn't have the magic to rally the troops." Warren stood up and walked across the room to the rendition of the building sitting on an easel behind Martin. He smiled as he looked from the picture toward Martin, who because of how Warren positioned himself was forced to turn backwards in his chair and look up at him. "This is a building. A fine one, I might add; but, no matter how much I love this building, it merely is brick and mortar. It has no heart."

"Perhaps you should have added one to your design," Martin said, rising to stand by Warren. "After all, part of the job we paid you for was to make this a thriving or should I say thumping landmark building." He put his hand over his heart.

Warren ignored the theatrics. "That's what I'm trying to do. A red sign like you suggested isn't going to unite people in support of your building or your mission. Logos come and go over the years."

"So, what do you suggest?" Martin pointed to the prominent point of the building's apex where he had proposed placing the signage.

"A work of art. Art is the one thing that has the power to ignite, delight and unite people. Placing a statute at that spot on the building will identify your headquarters as having a heart and soul."

Warren returned to his chair with the eyes of the lemmings following him. Their attention whipped back to Martin when he said, "That seems a little dramatic."

"Perhaps, but sir," Warren paused to pull a sketch from a folder in front of him. He passed it to the man next to him. "I've seen a piece by a New York sculptor, Edward Field Sanford, Jr., that I think would combine power and the arts to represent our state's triumphant electrical progress."

Warren waited for Martin, who now held the sketch, to have time to study it before adding, "Sanford calls his work 'Divinity of Light.'" Discarding the sketch on the table, Martin drummed his manicured fingers on it while he stared at Warren. He let silence fill the room.

"In drafting the plans for this building," Warren said, rushing his words. "I tried to incorporate the theories of strength and economic development you've been emphasizing in our meetings as well as in your public speeches and interviews. I also read and adopted some writings by your predecessor, President Mitchell. He made a lot of the same points as you, but he also talked about education and culture."

Without turning back toward the easel, Martin waved his hand at the picture behind his shoulder. "Don't you think this building with its art deco look already incorporates enough geometrics and bold lines to, as you said, 'ignite and delight' with culture?"

"No, sir. I don't. The physical structure of this building represents the modern thinking President Mitchell and you advocated for our city and state. Adding a magnificent piece of art like the one you're looking at would deliver the Power Company's corporate message and would express its humanity."

"Humanity? How do we weigh humanity?" Martin asked.

"At about four thousand pounds, I think" interjected the lemming who had examined Sanford's sketch before passing it to Martin. A look from Tom Martin froze the lemming into silence in mid-snicker.

Martin picked up the sketch of the statue and stared at it again. "Perhaps humanity is not the right word to use to characterize a corporation, but we definitely want to be known as a good corporate citizen. If our state and company are to move forward in tandem, we need to engage the public in dialogues and activities that reach beyond pure business lines. Do I hear a motion to add Ms. Divinity; no, let's call her Ms. Electra, as the finishing touch on our new headquarters building?"

The motion was made so quickly that to keep his minutes accurate, Benji needed to ask for clarification before the vote because the lemmings' voices overlapped as they hurried to make and second the motion. Once the motion passed without opposition, Martin lit up another cigar. He took a long puff before turning and blowing a smoke ring toward Warren. "Now, for your presentation to the board today."

"I've already made it."

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Debra H. Goldstein's debut novel, Maze in Blue, *received a 2012 IPPY Award. Her second book,* Should Have Played Poker*, acquired by Five Star Publishing, will be published in late 2015. She also has received numerous awards for her short stories and non-fiction essays. She lives in Birmingham, AL.*
DHG@DebraHGoldstein.com

"The problem with people who have no vices is that generally you can be pretty sure they're going to have some pretty annoying virtues."

–Elizabeth Taylor

POEMS OF AUTUMN # 4

Virginia Gilbert

What is love? Here on Monte Sano
the variegated leaves are falling.
We look for fossils. They are
so easy to come by, lying
on the surface next to the road.
Half way up the mountainside
by the hiking trails, slabs of thin rock
slice their shadows over the river.
At the top, the gates to the observatory
are open. We drive into the dark secrets
of the deep woods to find the meaning
of stars. Somewhere there is war, not in
the telescope of our sights, not in
the blue sky, but down below our vision
in lands far from us, put into our pockets
like the dead things we picked up only minutes
ago, almost forgotten now as we look out
onto the terrain. There are rockets in our horizon,
museum pieces aimed at the heavens.
At this altitude, even the city looks far from us.
Love is the kicking of leaves under our feet.
Love is the crisp air on the back of our necks.
Love is the stranger who shows us around
the derelict buildings. Love is not forgetting
the things of this earth.

…….

Virginia Gilbert writes poetry and haiku from her home in Madison, AL. She graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Ph.D. program in creative writing/English. Her publications include New Voices in American Poetry, Prairie Schooner, North American Review*, and* Poem. *She has received a National Endowment for the arts grant, a Hackney Award and a 2006 Alumni Achievement Award from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her books include* That Other Brightness, The Earth Above *and* Greatest Hits. **vgpoet@knology.net**

TWO HAIKUS ABOUT FOG

Virginia Gilbert

This gray day of snow
fogs the afternoon car lights
into clear stillness

This morning, fog over
the mountain. Night doesn't
fall; it rises from troubled earth.

GOLF COURSE IN FOG

Tom Gordon
Digital Photograph

Tom Gordon is retired as a state reporter for The Birmingham News, where he worked for 22 years. He holds degrees in political science and journalism and has spent time in Europe and West Africa. **tomgordon99@gmail.com**

A GIFT OF TIME NOT SQUANDERED

Jim Reed

"An extra hour of time. What would I do if I were handed an extra hour of time, to do with as I pleased?"

This thought suddenly arcs out of nowhere and, like a Cupid arrow, plants itself into his racing and fertile mind. He prepares to go to bed Saturday night and dutifully resets the nearby clock so that eleven o'clock becomes ten o'clock. He is suddenly excited by this pressing idea that he's being gifted, that an hour of his life has been handed back to him. He feels like Ebenezer Scrooge, waiting for the next revelation to be forced upon him, a revelation about Life and Meaning and Purpose…

What if the first ghost to appear is Sadie Logan, his late, revered Second Grade teacher, who gave him the best school year of his life? What if she appears just to observe him while he struggles with his decision? What if she grades him on what he intends to do with his precious extra hour?

Will he come up with a new theory of particle physics? Will he be inspired to write a new and lasting thought about the meaning of life, such as "Tomorrow is the day after the first day of the rest of your life."? Will he fill the time carefully thanking all the people he's never thanked, the people like Sadie who nudged him along in positive directions throughout the decades?

Will he decide to spend sixty minutes being unrelentingly kind and thoughtful?

He is filled with anticipation and ideas and outrageously pious thoughts.

He knows he is about to do something great.

Instead, he spends the spare hour lying abed on Sunday morning, contemplating stuff like this.

But he knows that, wherever and whenever Sadie is, she still believes in him.

And that is enough of an epiphany to make him feel the hour is not completely squandered

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Jim Reed is editor of Birmingham Arts Journal and curator/owner of Reed Books/The Museum of Fond Memories in Birmingham, AL. **www.jimreedbooks.com**

ATTIC

Bill Brown

Every house grows an attic,
not the brains, but an outpost
for stray bats and family treasures,
boxed and forgotten, awaiting
strangers to sift: a pocket knife
that honed walking sticks,
a key ring that ruled a father's life;
wedding dress asleep
in a Macy's box scented
with moth balls, a string
of worry beads, worn
and bored from lack of use.
Outside the roof, Spring
tips maples red, finch
feathers gold. The attic
hears a jay sing *new – new –*
and something like God asks
the sun to set later and close
with mauve, a royal hue.
But attic dreams a boy's
picture with sandbox
and railroad cap, a girl

at a piano playing

Rhapsody in Blue,

a woman in a 50's skirt,

a sailor: World War Two.

At night, the attic awaits

the barred owl's question:

who – who, as a couple

falls asleep with a fan,

two cats at their feet.

The future lolls with moon

around earth as earth lolls

around a star. The attic,

rich with stories, asks

the bats to come back soon.

.....

Bill Brown is the author of five collections of poems, three chapbooks and a textbook. His new collection, Elemental *(3: A Taos Press) is forthcoming in 2014. The recipient of many fellowships, Brown was awarded the Writer of the Year 2011 by the Tennessee Writers Alliance. His work appears in* Asheville Poetry Review, Atlanta Review, Southern Humanities Review, Potomac Review, Prairie Schooner, North American Review, Southern Poetry Review, Tar River Poetry, Smartish Pace, Rattle, West Branch, Borderlands, The Literary Review, *and* Connecticut Review*, among others.*

galleries and sidewalk cafes close by. I felt that this woman's existence should be documented; many of us could find ourselves in her situation, depending on a number of circumstances." *Christopher Woods*

a book of stage monologues for actors, HEART SPEAK. His photographs can be seen in his gallery: ***http://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/***

CROSSING THE LINE

William Miller

In the country,
near the state line,
we had our reunions.

Our fathers, uncles,
ate off paper plates,
joked and laughed
about the night
to come.

They'd soon cross
the "line," cross it
and drink in
roadhouses
that never closed.

We watched them
from the tall grass
where we played,
from the low branches
of a white oak tree.

The women never
said a word, just
cleaned off the tables,
filled the rusty drum.

And the men left,
one car, then two,
dust and gravel
flying to the county road …

We drank, too,
when we got older,
stayed out all night
or longer.

But we came home
to doors locked
from the inside,
blinds pulled down.

The women we married
were not their
mother's daughters
but women
who knew the law.

They got half of everything
and disappeared
with that, left us
to cold stoves
and hangovers
like bad dreams.

And there were
no more reunions,
no family held
together by fried
chicken and denial;
we'd crossed the line.

.....

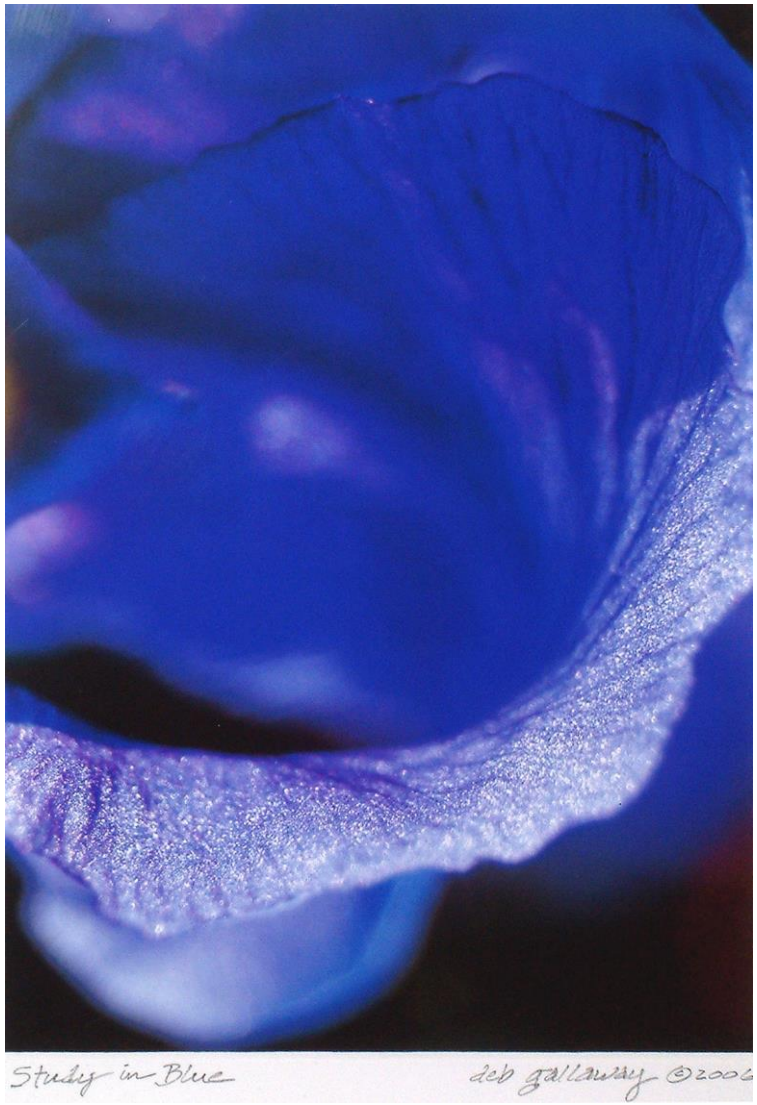
William Miller is a Birmingham native and a 1977 graduate of the Alabama School of Fine Arts. His poems have been published in over two-hundred journals, including Prairie Schooner, Shenandoah, The Southern Review *and* The African-American Review. **cmiller601@cox.net**

JERSEY BOYS--NOT THE MUSICAL

Frank Franklin

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I can't remember the last time I made it to confession. Get comfortable in your seat as this may take a while. You're new here and haven't met me since we are CE Catholics -– you know, the type who only come on Christmas and Easter. Ain't you from one of them Asian places? Well any way, I did it for the family. I've been through a lot. Big Tony and me, we've been together 51 years – he's an okay guy. He's the best I could do now with this (as she touches her fat and full figure), especially since they took my breast seven years ago. I told them docs that I would rather die than lose one of the mamas but Big Tony and my boy Thomas insisted I get it done. My arm still's really not right (as she rubs her right arm with her left hand). Now when I was young the mamas and my culo (buttocks) got mucho looks. No touches though, to them macho men, you could look but you couldn't touch and no tastes till you bought the whole package. Now Tony is okay but a bit cucuzza. The Americans don't know that it's squash. It's an affectionate word for a stupid somebody. He bought back then but didn't really know what was in the package. If you know what I mean, cucuzza, he should've read the label. That is, if I came with a label mine would say 'one tough bitch.' He's found out that I got three gears; glad, sad, mad – you got to catch me at the right time and clutch me right.

"Tony was a provider. His grocery store in our Italian neighborhood was okay. Our people kept coming even after the supermarket opened. With selling the numbers on the side and some bets on the ponies at Monmouth track, he could get us a nice house here in Orange, you know, Jersey. Back in the day, Orange had our people – mostly from the Paese in Italy. Hey you foreigners don't know – Paese is the small village in Italia that most of our neighbors came from. Orange didn't have those mullis like East Orange or them Jews like in South Orange. The Americans don't know that mullis are the blacks – short for the mulignan – eggplant. We were with our people in our neighborhood – we were tight – we kept them out – it's not the same now – but back then it was good. "Tony wanted boys, I wanted girls, but as God granted it, we got one girl and twin boys. Rose, my first, was easy though she ripped me some. I still leak a little. Rose went over to school at Our Lady. *(continued on page 30)*



STUDY IN BLUE

Deb Gallaway

Digital Photography

Deb Gallaway is a fine art photographer who lives in Vestavia Hills, AL, and shares her love of art with husband Craig, also an artist, and their three sons.

I went there through the 8th grade and then worked with my papa at the candy store till me and Tony got married. Big Tony and me knew each other way back from grade school and my papa and his papa had stores on the same block. My papa had the sweets and his papa had the meats.

"Me and my little girl, Rose, we were close. She got that spinal meningitis when she was eight years old. The doctor didn't catch it in time. I told Doc Lanzi that she was sick but he said it would pass. She passed before it passed. That dumb bastard. It hurt bad – I was crushed – you know, Rose was my girl. I was pissed.

"I could have cut Lanzi's balls off but he needed some more pain and something that hurt his back pocket. I knew he was playing with Tori, that Mulli nurse he had. Tori was a looker and his wife, Gina, was dumb to it all. Plus she got big after the babies. Gina – she's blind in one eye can't see out the other. Gina's mama, Concetta, and me went to Our Lady together many years ago. Even though she moved to South Jersey, we still talk. I called Concetta and just happened to drop how I saw Tori and Giacomo at Rossi's, that fancy new Italian restaurant in South Orange. It's the one that the Jews love so much. Gina must've heard because within a month Giacomo's living in a condo alone near St. Mary's Hospital. Gina got the big house and the cars and the kids. That bastard got the message. I don't know if Concetta told him that Lucy – that's me – told Gina about Tori. But all for the better. He won't screw up again like he did with my Rose.

"Two and a half years after I had Rose, the twins came along. It was a tough pregnancy. They cut my belly, you know the cesarean. The boys were not identical. Little Tony came out first; then Thomas. Tony was always bigger, built like his father. You know even though they weren't identical I dressed them the same. It was cheaper. Their middle name was BOGO. It was a joke but it really was like that. Sometimes though they was double trouble, fighting all the time.

"I tried to keep it together but it was tough. I was down, really sad, but never told Tony. He would never understand anyway. After Rose what I did with the doc made me feel better. Wops, we do revenge better than we do sadness. Little Tony was big and built like big Tony. He was a talker like me. We got real close, particularly after Rose. Tony loved to laugh and cut up even when he was young. His laughter helped me get over Rose. Thomas was serious. I don't where he came from. Tony was not book smart as Thomas but he's clever. Tony could get things done. He always knew the

people to talk to. He knew how to connect with those people. He was like me, not like Thomas who had his head in the clouds.

"Thomas was always a good boy. The nuns at Our Lady loved Thomas. Sister Angelica said he should be a priest. He thought about that all the way through high school at Jesuit. Then, he met Beth when he was a junior. That rod in his underwear pointed him away from the priesthood. Thomas didn't know nothing about sex. Neither does Big Tony. Big Tony's like a mechanical bull that overheats. Thomas was always popular with the teachers. Little Tony was more popular with the kids. The teachers had more problems with Little Tony. Little Tony didn't like rules. I understand that since rules don't make much sense. They're there to control the stupid people. Tony was popular with his classmates. He was always their leader. He loved to laugh and cut up. For a Christmas treat in 5th grade, Little Tony made chocolate pudding and shaped it into piles like dog do. He put the piles on coconut colored with green food dye to make it look like grass. He brought it to the Christmas party at school. Sister Angelica didn't think it was funny. Tony thought was hilarious. Thomas was embarrassed. Also, no one wanted the white cupcakes with red and green sprinkles on the white icing that he made. It was Christmassy, snowy, and cutesy sweet but kinda' dumb from such a smart boy.

"In high school, Little Tony started a singing group the Sinatones. His group got to sing at a lot churches around North Jersey. They started performing at some clubs down there in Newark and over in Jersey City and Hoboken. You know Hoboken is where Frank Sinatra was from. Now the only famous wop there is the Cake Boss. Kinda' dumb, like Thomas' cupcakes. Sinatra was the real boss and in with the boys. Little Tony's group was really popular with them older Italian ladies who loved Frank Sinatra. I guess you know he was having some trouble there at the club as he was tired all the time. To get up for a performance, he would use some uppers and then he couldn't sleep as he was so jazzed up, so he used some downers. Then he started in a snorting that stuff, you know, Candy Cane whatever. It was getting expensive and he wasn't making no money to speak of.

"Tony started out in business at the community college. It was all he can get into since the teachers didn't really say much good about them. Also the head priest at Jesuit didn't like him. Thomas on the other hand. He was really book smart. Those teachers loved him. He was the teacher's pet. And he was always good to the priests. He was the main altar boy. And he

volunteered all the time to tutor young kids. Even worked with young colored kids down in Newark. Thomas, he went to Princeton, you know the fancy school with that ivy near Trenton. Big deal about the ivy. Birds poop in it big time.

"Tony was starting to get tied up to those drugs and he didn't have the money for them. He would steal some stuff, but you know, not bad. Stuff that nobody was gonna to really miss. It wasn't like it hurt anybody. People got too much stuff and they buy too much junk. But then Tony thought I guess he thought – maybe he didn't think – that if he could sell those drugs, it would be better. Then he could get more of them. Then he wouldn't have to steal. It sure made sense. It was better to sell like a businessman than to have to be a thief. Got himself a nice girl. She had two children already. She was built nice like my mamas and culo when I was young. You know those Italian girls fill out with age, particularly after a few kids. I don't know what it is but Thomas tried to explain it to me once about hormones. I don't know hormones from whore moans – funny ain't it. I couldn't follow what he said but I don't really care. Fat is fat, who cares why. It's just fat and age. It just happens.

"Thomas, he played some sports down there at Princeton but his real sport was squash. I didn't know what squash was. Well, I mean what's squash, the vegetable that Big Tony sells. I couldn't imagine that there'd some game you would play with them squash – cucuzza. What's squash – bocce with a crooked ball – cucuzza. But anyway he was going to tournaments and made a lot of friends and got to meet some nice fancy people – the kind that live there in Short Hills. They didn't know Orange. He never really introduced me to any of his friends. He never brought anyone by the neighborhood or brought them to Sunday dinner.

"He decided to go to law school. He went there to that Harvard place up north. We went to see him one time and he took us out to a nice Italian restaurant in the North End, you know, the Italian neighborhood. It was good but it wasn't as good as my sauce. He met a nice girl named Martha. She was the sister of one of his classmates there are Princeton. They live up in Manhattan. He did good; he has two kids; he has nice cars and a nice apartment near Central Park. He takes care of me and Tony. He sends us to Florida every winter and even took us to Italy once. He came with us and he showed us all the sites; it was really nice. You been to St. Peter's, ain't you? You know where Il Papa lives. Martha and the kids couldn't come. They

were at some horseback camp. He studied Italian in school but don't speak the dialect and don't know the slang. Little Tony knows those funny Italian words and phrases I like.

"Thomas never got along with Tony Junior – they fought a lot as children for attention from Big Tony and me. I was just so sad after Rose that I really couldn't show them much. It's a good thing my aunt took care of them. Tony, that is Little Tony, you know we called him little Tony but he's like six-three, 250, big in the shoulders but also he has a big belly like his dad. Like his dad, he loves my food. I love that he loves my food. We gotta have you over to Sunday dinner when you settle in.

"We heard – you know you hear things – that Tony was doing some tough stuff – we never really knew. He was always nice to us. He married that girl with the kids and had three of his own with her. He would always come with the whole family every Sunday for dinner. The kids love my sauce, you know my gravy and were always so nice, well-mannered and respectful to me. It was really nice like in the old days; the family all together for Sunday meal. Tony liked to eat and I liked to cook. Tony he didn't go to church. But his wife and all five kids would be there at 9 o'clock mass every Sunday. Thomas didn't go to our church. He went to one of those Episcopalian churches up in New York City. I didn't really understand what was special about that Episcopal Church except that's where Martha likes to go. Her people went there too. Them Episcopalians are more formal than the Catholic Church is now – it's like the church used to be – I don't get it. Tony's boys and girls, they all did their first communion and the confirmation at Our Lady, just like me and Big Tony did and the kids did. Thomas, the altar boy and wanna-be-priest hanging with the Episcopalians – WTF, as the kids say.

"It was a story in the newspaper about Tony and how some friends and him killed somebody. We don't know what to think – yet Tony was a big boy and he did get into fights a lot. But nobody ever got hurt bad. Tony was a good boy, had a good heart, loved his family. His family loved the church. He paid for the new altar at Our Lady. He got big Tony that Cadillac car he always wanted. After that story in the newspaper, Tony disappeared. His wife and the five kids still came to every Sunday dinner after church.

"We never heard from Tony. There were rumors that maybe he'd been wacked. But his wife never seemed sad and we knew they were close – funny stuff. Stories kept coming out and people kept telling stories that

Tony was, you know, in the mob and that he got into a lot of trouble with the numbers, gambling, drugs and the whores. I didn't care that much about what I heard. If you want whores, then get them; it's your problem. It's just business. If you want drugs, then get them; it's your problem. It's just business. If want to play the ponies, just play them, it's your problem. It's just business. It's all good business. It don't hurts nobody and it goes way back. It's such good business that people seem to like to fight over who does the business. That's the trouble.

"Well, me and Big Tony, we're getting old and big Tony now he's sick with the diabetes and the high blood pressure. He had one of them heart stoppages. He had one of them balloons since the doc said the wall of his vessels were all roughed up. Guess it's a rough life that roughs up your vessels. He's losing it in the squash and taking so many pills he can't even count that high anymore. We're 75 now and it's been 15 years since Tony disappeared. Nobody – at least nobody we know – seems to know where he is. Thomas after law school clerked with some big judge in New York and then went to the State Attorney General's office. Then he went with the New York City District Attorney into that office. He must be making good money; he has a summer place on Long Island. It's not at the Jersey Shore like our people. He likes to ski, he belongs to some fancy squash club – still don't know what they do there. Martha's family has a lot of money. Thomas lives really nice. Especially for a guy working for the Feds. Guess Martha's got money as her family is that old WASP money. You know them White Anglo Saxon Protestants got more sting and venom that the wasps in our yard.

"Thomas wanted to be big time politician; he wanted to make a name for himself. He didn't like what Tony was doing or at least what they said Tony was doing. He told me once on the phone that if Tony wasn't his brother, he woulda been the district attorney. Another time, he said he wanted to run for the City Council there in Manhattan. But he said people would never elect someone whose twin brother was a crook. I didn't say nothing. Thomas was a good boy and Tony was a good boy – they were just different. Thomas would call every week. He wouldn't visit except on Christmas and Easter. Then he never really stayed for holiday dinner, he might bring Martha, might bring his children, might not. He gave us gifts but he never stayed long enough for Sunday dinner or for a holiday meal. He

didn't want to run into Tony and Tony's family – embarrassed about his brother – my ass.

"Thomas was a smart boy. He figured that there must be some way that Tony was getting messages and money to his wife. He knew Little Tony's friends from school. He talked with them at the Jesuit High School reunion. He got the Feds to start to do some fancy checking up on Tony's friends and who came to visit and who called. They checked where Tony's wife got her money. We didn't know none of this. That stuff came out in the newspaper later when they caught Little Tony in a little town in Sicilia. The New York Post paper had a story. It was that it was Thomas with his friends from the Feds who figured out where Tony was. The Feds got the lead from Thomas about the time Little Tony contacted his wife when she got the breast biopsy for that mass. You know them masses can be bad. They ain't like the mass you do.

"I guess I never knew Thomas. I couldn't understand how he did this to his brother. His brother – no less his twin – together from the womb on out – sad it's just sad – just like after Rose. Made me mad. Somebody's gotta pay when you hurt the family, even worse – when you hurt your brother. I was beside myself – I didn't know what to do. I just didn't understand Thomas. Just made me mad. Just like Doc Lanzi, I had to do it.

Tony's in jail. The Feds are saying all kinds of things about him. He'll never see his family again. His family are good people; they come every Sunday; his kids with no dad at home; his wife were no man; it's not right. Thomas was always queer. I didn't get why he bothered with those little colored kids in Newark. Why with them; you know them coloreds. Our neighborhood needed him. He was always close to the priest. It seemed to me too close but I never said nothing. They were rumors that Thomas liked those little boys. One of the kids in the neighborhood told me once that Thomas touched him.

"Them reporters from the Post came to see me to talk about the boys. I told them they were good boys. This one reporter, Carmine. He's Maria Palmieri's grandkid from the neighborhood. He kept calling me. I told him about the boy who said that Thomas had gotten too friendly with him. There were other things I heard about Father John and Thomas and some little altar boys. I don't know nothing about that queer stuff. I told Carmine that I didn't know nothing but he kept looking. He found some other friends who said the same thing about Thomas.

"I should never said nothing but I couldn't help myself. The Feds checked Thomas's computer and they found all kinds of pictures of little boys. Many of them are grown men now. Some talked to the TV station about Thomas doing stuff to them in the church. Thomas went to jail. Martha has divorced him. She refused to stand by him – no loyalty to family. Tony's wife stood by her man. Thomas got what he deserved for hurting his brother and hurting those little boys. That stuff scars little boys. Some of the guys Tony did, they got what they deserved. Let them big boys in prison teach Thomas what happens when you squeal on your brother and you play with little boys. I could feel sad but I don't – I am over being mad. Me and Big Tony will be gone when Little Tony and Thomas get out of prison. God knows and will judge me. I did what I had to do for the family."

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Frank Franklin MD PhD is a retired pediatric gastroenterologist and nutritionist who practiced at Children's Hospital. He is Professor Emeritus of Public Health at UAB. He is Italian American, from Orange, NJ, and proud of his heritage. He thanks his family and colorful members of his community in New Jersey for this fictional account of family loyalty. He lives in Birmingham, AL.
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"You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose."

–Dr. Seuss

VIRGINIA, 1963

Victoria Elizabeth Ruwi

Big old house, lots of room for your family,
(could use some paint), got a large yard, and lights.
Roof don't leak, stairs squeak some, there's two stories:
Busy street divides neighborhoods, blacks from whites.

Across Second Street, Sheila waves me over
for jump rope, a dolly party, chitlins
and greens. I wait, go when the traffic lulls,
squeeze her brown hand, play we'll-always-be-friends.

Atop our brick barbecue, I wave, yell
Red Rover, Red Rover, send Sheila right over,
for hotdogs and tea parties. Her face sours.
I don't, but she knows, she can't come over.

.....

Victoria Elizabeth Ruwi is an Army veteran, a cancer survivor, and a teacher. Her most recent publications have been in the South Carolina Review, Colere, Thema*, and* Clockhouse Review. **eyewhispers@aol.com**

someday *someday*

Terence Degnan

will evaporate on the tongue
of the extinct

someday the poems will have dried
in the dusty minds of their translators

someday the curls of parchment
in the bellies of bottles

will have drowned
in the Salton Sea

and the corn mazes
will have lost their marbles

someday the ink
will return to its vein of clay

and King David's lineage
will no longer be invited

to the pot luck
at church

all the sacred chords
of all the king's compositions

will have fallen like apples
from their perches in the tabloid tree

someday the symphonies
will sell for wholesale at the Record Barn

someday the hunted
will be stripped of their instincts

and fish will offer themselves as manna
housed in a barrel of sea
the stones of the philosophers
will be littered with butter knives

someday the term for *tomorrow*
will have blipped

from its soft refuge
in history

. . . . . .

Terence Degnan is the Poetry Editor at Sock Monkey Press. His second book of poems, Still Something Rattles, *is slotted for publication in October. Terence hosts the monthly storytelling series, How to Build a Fire, in South Slope, BK. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife and daughter.* **tdleroy@gmail.com**

THE CLOCK AT MUSEE D'ORSAY
Linda Stephan
Digital Photograph

Linda Stephan is a native of Birmingham, AL. Paris is her other favorite city. In addition to her black and white photography endeavors, Linda is a free-lance writer, amateur painter, and adjunct professor of Art History at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. **lnewby@aol.com**

PRE-TEEN DANCE PARTY

Beth McKim

"Jeff and Jim, Do you like to dance?" asked my seven-year old sister, Meg. That was the second time in two weeks I had heard those words. The first was when my cousin Kathy and I invited these boys, in the hallway of First Baptist Church where dancing wasn't allowed, to dance with us on television. Since Kathy and I were the look-alike daughters of mothers who were sisters, we thought it would be fun to invite identical twins to be our partners for my tenth birthday party.

We were a little surprised they said yes to our request since we thought they were the cutest boys we knew, and also because they were going steady with our two best friends, Jane and Ann. Evidently, they were up for the adventure if our mothers could call theirs to confirm.

And now, off we went up Red Mountain in Birmingham to the TV station in my mom's car, with my baby brother, sister Meg, and a birthday cake in tow. Our destination was the live show, Pre-Teen Dance Party. On every weekday except Thursday, it was called Teen Time Dance Party and teenagers from all over Birmingham and the surrounding areas showed up to do the latest rock and roll dances. Since this was during the American Bandstand era, television studio dancing was all the rage.

We were glued to the screen on Saturdays to watch Dick Clark present the top music on the pop charts, but more importantly to watch the cool Philadelphia dancers show off their latest moves. Teen Time Dance Party filled that role during the week but we had lower expectations since we knew they were only from Birmingham. Kathy and I also believed we were expert dancers because we had the advantage of watching the teenagers do the Shag at the Hangout, a beach pavilion in Panama City, Florida, the site of our summer family vacations.

That day, on the way to my TV dance party, Meg became overly excited and announced to Jeff and Jim that she loved them both. Both boys blushed like beets, and looked worried that Kathy and I might tell them that next. Upon our arrival, a receptionist took us into the studio that looked big and fancy when we watched from home. It was actually fairly small and super plain except for a temporary banner that had been hung with the words Pre - Teen Dance Party. The director instructed us to sit at the card tables with folding chairs, positioned around the dance floor, when we weren't dancing and, of course Mom and my siblings had to wait with other family members off camera.

Kathy and I never actually found out which boy was Jeff and which was Jim, but figured it didn't matter. When the music started we planned to just grab them and dance along with the other ten to thirteen-year-olds who had shown up to make their debuts. The DJ/host came by to greet us and told us to look like we were having fun and not misbehave, especially when slow dancing. We didn't quite know what he meant since we were just ten. He also warned us not to wave at the cameras when they were filming us.

When the music started, songs like *Finger Poppin' Time, by* Hank Ballard,
Quarter to Three by Gary U.S. Bonds, and *The Twist* by Chubby Checker, Kathy and I jumped with excitement to get going. We each tried to grab a twin to start rocking and rolling, only to learn that one of them didn't like, or didn't know how to dance after all. Since we didn't know any of the other kids on the show, we just took turns with Jeff (or Jim?) while the non-dancer twin sat on the folding chairs, watching. Looking back, we figured he had stage fright.

So, the afternoon belonged to the three of us who did love to bop. I still remember the warm feeling of the lights and the cameras moving in for close-ups. Kathy and I smiled, happy that we had thought to wear our twirliest dresses. We spun around trying to get as much screen time as we could. In our minds that day we were either the Bandstand kids from Philadelphia or at least the crowd we watched on Teen Time Dance Party.

At the end of the blissfully rocking hour, Mom cut the chocolate-with-white-icing birthday cake and we shared it with the other kids we didn't really know, the cameramen, and even the MC. This brought us back down to earth. But, for one short hour, we were rock-and-roll stars of the small screen and felt just like teenagers.

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Although she lives in Texas now, Beth McKim has great memories of growing up in Birmingham and enjoys writing about her experiences. Beth's work has appeared in the Birmingham Arts Journal, Front Porch Review, Mayo Review, Shine Magazine, *and other literary publications.* bethmckim@me.com

PULLING OUT A WHITE WORLD

David Ishaya Osu

I am
inside a mirror
right now – preparing
to go blind: a
black hill behind me,
rising and
falling; three trees, dancing in their orbits
beneath my feet;

a pipit touching
her lovers, somewhere
in the church choir corner;
I can also see
a woman
on a still horse
in the sky, moulding and
pulling out a white world
for me
to write about
perhaps, after my eyes
have been burnt
by this silver
mist that doesn't want
to leave

…….

David Ishaya Osu is a Nigerian poet whose works have appeared in publications including The New Black Magazine, Saturday Sun, African Writer, Gobbet Magazine, Elohi Gadugi Journal, The Kalahari Review, Ann Arbor Review, Sentinel Annual Literature Anthology (SALA 2012), Poetic Diversity, SOFTBLOW Poetry Journal, Helicon Magazine, Hedgerow, Undertow Tanka Review, Watershed Review, *and elsewhere. David is currently polishing his debut poetry book*.

THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR'S SECRET

Stephen Edmondson

We bury our kin in style in the foothills of the deep South. After a poor life with not much more than hardtack and heartfelt religion to sustain us, we like to go out in style. Where I came from, it was unheard of not to have a proper funeral. It was something that had to be done. So when Aunt Maybeth Meriwether died, she was to have the funeral she so depended on. We could have gotten by with less and no one would have known. But a Southern son does his duty to kin, as he expects to be done for him.

Aunt Maybeth had wanted to be buried in the country cemetery beside her beloved old church. We called the local funeral home to finalize the deal, setting a time and telling of the burial place and other details that in the South are discussed only in private with the Funeral Director.

My wife, the granddaughter of Aunt Maybeth, asked our own minister to conduct a small funeral, as was due. She had very few contemporaries left, so we expected only a handful of relatives to attend.

The funeral was to be at three p.m., and we had sent our flowers down the day before. We left home early in order to be first there, to greet any friends or relatives. We arrived early afternoon. Out on the edge of town, the funeral home was a low brick and block building that looked the part. Somber, lots of parking for really popular funerals, and easy to find for the curious, the bereaved.

We parked in the now-vacant lot and went to the front door. We knocked and waited. We pressed buttons and waited. We tapped on the glass and waited. No sound anywhere. I walked around to the rear. I could see the obligatory Cadillac hearse inside, and a 10-year-old Buick sedan outside. It didn't seem enough. I went back to the front and knocked some more.

What if the funeral director had forgotten today's miniscule mortuary service and failed to show up? Was Aunt Maybeth inside somewhere, waiting for us to preside over her send-off? What would happen if we didn't do our duty?

I knocked some more, louder, more decisively. This can't be. Reverend Bates, with his blue right glass eye just a bit out of alignment, looked somewhat between bemused and worried.

I could just see an article in the little weekly newspaper, "Aunt Maybeth Meriwether passes in Coal Hill. No one shows for funeral at Rock Creek." Her soul would never rest, and as an assured consequence, neither would mine.

Just about then as I had this thought, there was a rustling inside. We thought we heard a gruff voice.

"I'm coming. I'm coming. Just hold on."

So we held on. Presently the door opened, and there stood a disheveled man of perhaps 37. He was oh, six feet and overweight. His armless undershirt was pulled around what we refer to here as a pulpwooder's beer belly. He had a hairy chest and a 30-hour beard stubble on his angular face. Limp black hair hung over his forehead, almost obscuring bloodshot dull eyes and a slob's slack mouth. He had on worn denim pants, and on his feet were soiled white socks. I thought to myself, surely this place can afford better help than this.

"Whaddaya want?"

We explained who we were and why we were there. He nodded us in.

"Have a seat in here. You're early. I'll go call the Director and tell him you're here."

And then he padded off. We were very early. I wandered about, looking in vain to turn on the air conditioning. I glanced in the direction of the departed doorman, still concerned about what to expect. Southern funeral directors almost always are masters of their calling. Had we found the exception?

We waited, and an ancient relative, accompanied by a local minister, a mousy little man with balding head and steel-rimmed glasses, showed up. It appeared our funeral party was complete.

Had the Funeral Director indeed been notified of our presence? Was he driving in from somewhere? We hadn't heard any other car arrive on the graveled yard.

Then, something was getting better. The air conditioning began to flow, bringing forth with it the cool floral aroma of the new flowers, and imparting the feeling of indeed being in a funeral home. Soft music began, recorded organ church music of the sad type, "I'm Dreaming of an Unclouded Day," and then a haunting bag-piped version of "Amazing Grace." We were being brought around, put in the state of mind for a funeral. The lights seemed to dim, and we got quiet. We realized, someone is in charge after all.

We now knew: the Director is here.

Momentarily, a dignified gentleman walked around the corner from the hall we hadn't been down. He was tall and dark, and immaculate in a black tuxedo. Patent leather shoes were shining in the pink-tinged light of the plastic stained glass. His pleated white shirt was crisp. His athletic build belied his years, as he acted young, but appeared older. He looked fresh from the barber shop, clean shaven and with neat dark hair swept back across his head. His glasses, slightly silver-tinted, shaded sad, somber, caring eyes. He stopped in front of us, and bowed so slightly. He looked safely familiar, the mannerisms of a funeral director making him an accepted part of the picture. He looked at us as if we shared some dark and tragic secret. "I am Brooks Lee Singleton, at your service. I am your Funeral Director. Please accept my sincere condolences at your tragic loss of Aunt Maybeth. I know how you must be suffering at this moment."

If I hadn't been enjoying this old Southern custom so much, I might have chuckled. As it was, I bowed in near genuine sorrow, not to break the carefully chorused scene.

Brooks Lee Singleton was good at his job.

He took the hand of my mother-in-law ever so gently and guided her to a seat in the small chapel. Then the same for my wife and the rest of us. He stepped aside with Preacher Bates for a moment of discussion about the process of the funeral. Each act was so caring, so sincere, so smooth.

The casket was rolled out, the flowers moved around, and the little service progressed. He was at hand at every moment, a caring touch, a soft kind word, a sad expression at the proper moment to match the preacher's words.

Every act followed in natural progression, smooth as dark molasses on a hot buttered biscuit on a crisp October morn. Before we knew it, we were being led to the door, to follow the hearse to the nearby country graveyard.

With Aunt Maybeth safely in the ground, we were eased away, not to have to witness the red dirt tumbling on top of the pine box covering the gray, felt-covered casket. The preacher had said his final prayer and was in need of getting home in time for dinner and the evening news. I pressed a twenty-dollar bill in his palm on the goodbye handshake, for his efforts of the day.

There still stood the Funeral Director, perfect black patent leather shoes smudged a bit with the red grave dirt, yet otherwise immaculate. He was somber, caring, appropriate for a late afternoon burial. We knew he wouldn't leave until he was satisfied of the last detail. He pulled a flower from an arrangement by the grave, and with it in hand, gently led us back to the parking lot.

"Perhaps you'd like to press this rose in your Bible, to remember."

Such a sweet thought to my mother-in-law. She gratefully took it, distracted a moment from the scene behind her, of her mother being covered by the red clay of the old church yard. I smiled in admiration of his finesse. He walked us to our car, and assured us of his care, never having mentioned a thought about the insurance or payment, or any such crass thing, knowing to leave the moment serene. As we drove away, I looked back. The fall day was fading into dusk, past sundown. The little white church was framed by old oaks and dark shadows. The Funeral Director stood there, tall and alone, as a last sentinel for Aunt Maybeth. I remember his parting words, low and almost to no one.

"I ask your forgiveness for – for the behavior of the oaf that answered the door. I am so sorry he left you waiting." He cut an eye to me only for a fleeting moment. My sweet mother-in-law smiled tearfully in appreciation. I smiled also, mostly inside, secure in the thought that I was probably the only one to know, and to keep, and to appreciate the Director's secret.

Brooks Lee Singleton was good at his job.

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Steve Edmondson of Homewood, AL, writes about characters in his life, past and present, who represent values that may be slipping away. The handshake contract, a promise that endures, lending a hand to the lesser, those people who took time to be kind. These written thoughts are for his next generation. His stories have previously been published in Birmingham Arts Journal.
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Silk Ribbon Roses

Gail Gekhen

From "The Legacy" by Marge Piercy

Nothing you do will ever be enough.
Generations of women
try to patch
the rips and tears
in their mothers' lives,
wanting them
to dream again
to replace faded memories
with new fabric,
adding colors and textures

Like generations of women
I tried to embroider silk ribbon roses
over my mother's frayed threads,
creating guilt and self-doubt
and no wholeness for either of us.
Now I caution my daughter
against what generations of women
continue to do:

No need for alterations.

Be quiet in your life

knowing I understand mine.

I am at peace with my decisions.

For after all my darling,

there's nothing you can do.

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Gail Gekhen is a member of Alabama Writer's Forum and Alabama State Poetry Society. Her poetry has appeared in Literary Mobile, Whoever Remembers Us: Anthology of Alabama Poets, Alabama Sampler *and* Potpourri Literary Journal. *She has won many ASPS awards for poetry and five Hackney Literary Awards.* **ggehlken@yahoo.com**

"They come for you in the morning in a limousine; they take you to the studio; they stick a pretty girl in your arms; sometimes they earn something off you and give you some of the profits. They call that a profession? - come on!"

–Marcello Mastroianni