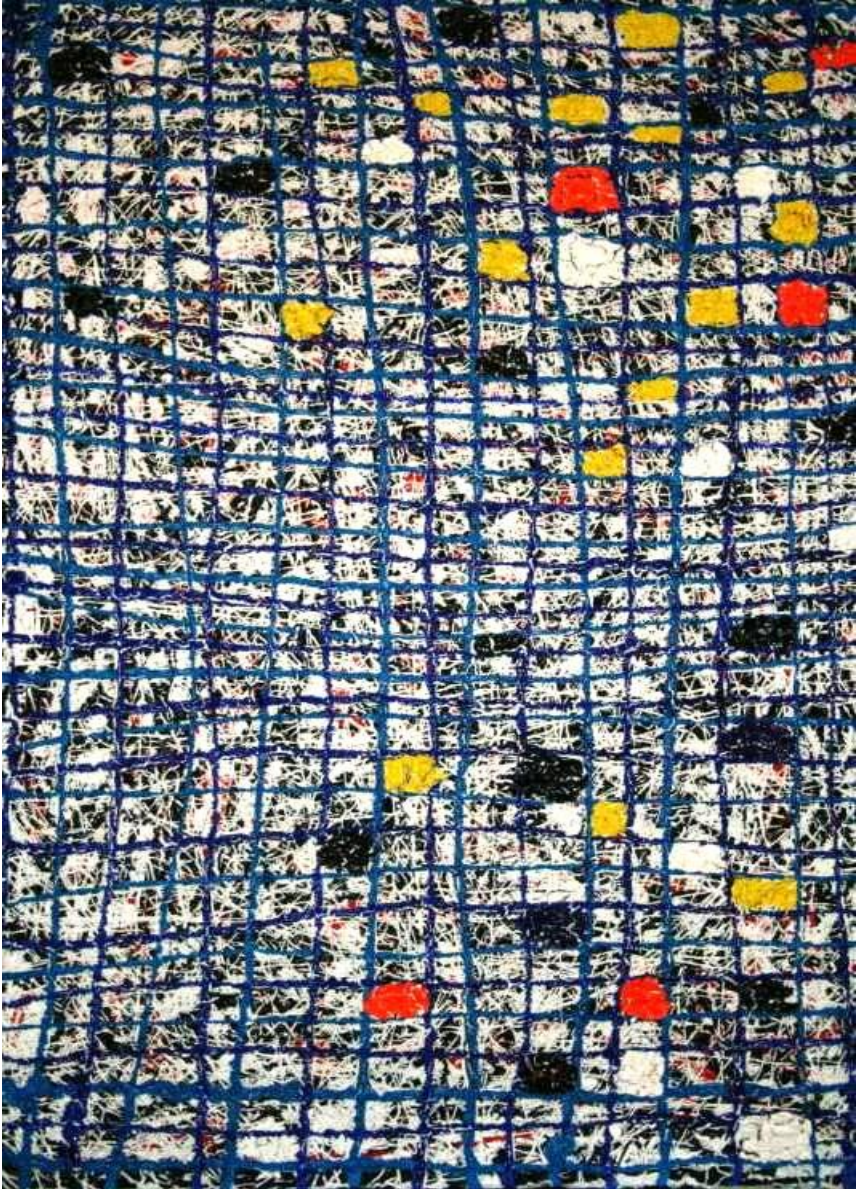


Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 13 Issue 4



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

\$5.00



Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **Escape #1** - Mixed Media on Canvas - 30"x40"

Kevin Whitman is a self-taught artist living and working from his home studio in Sylacauga, AL. Kevin_Whitman1@hotmail.com

Back Cover: **Columns in Shadow** – Digital Photography – Lisa Oestreich

Lisa Oestreich is a physician on staff at the University of Alabama in Birmingham Student Health Center. In her spare time, she pursues her passion of documenting light, form, and texture. lisaostreich@charter.net

Inaugural Andrew Glaze Poetry Prize

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

Winning poem from those published in Birmingham Arts Journal during 2016

Whale Watching Guy

Eileen Malone

See Page 2

“My first desire in a poem is to feel a sense of being lured back to it after first reading. I found myself wanting to read this poem a second time, and then a third. When this happens, it is exactly as if I have glimpsed a scene from a train window that captures my attention both by its beauty and by its strangeness. I want to explore it. As soon as I walk around in the poem a time or two, I begin to notice what has drawn me in. In the case of this poem, it was the language, foremost. I began to get an image of the guy through the sound of his language. Next, the tone of gentle encouragement to get to know this guy, just as you would a slightly foreboding landscape. The poet persuades us along the path of the poem, step by step, toward the whale watching guy. And last, I loved the duality of the assurances that he would not harm me, up against an underlying feeling that the poet is protesting too much—but I am drawn in anyway, like going into that dark room in a horror movie. This poem lives on many levels, as does a scene from a train window.”

—2016 Juror: Dana Wildsmith, Bethlehem, GA

*Dana Wildsmith is the author of a novel, *Jumping* (Inkbrush Press, 2016). Her memoir, *Back to Abnormal: Surviving with an Old Farm in the New South* (MotesBooks), won Finalist for 2010 Georgia Author of the Year. She is also the author of four collections of poetry: *One Good Hand*, (Iris Press, 2005), which was a SIBA Poetry Book of the Year nominee. In 2010, she was Artist-in-Residence for Grand Canyon National Park and will serve as Artist-in-Residence for Everglades National Park in October 2017.*

dswildsmith@earthlink.net

WHALE WATCHING GUY

Eileen Malone - 2015 Hackney Literary Awards: 3rd Place National Poetry

He's okay, sitting cliffside day after day, the whale
watching guy is harmless, though toothless, reeking
sting-stink of cat urine and onions, won't bother you
most of the time, except when he claps his hands
of dirty ragged fingernails as he yells and shouts

if you say hello he will answer, then the only thing
he will talk about is how once on a Wenersday
yes, it was a Wenersday, sun flashed and seawater
flushing he sighted a 'normous gray whale

she lifted her huge heaving belly, shuddered off
the blue Kool-Aid sea, lifted her head, looked
around, saw him looking at her, yes, he'll tell you
like nothing he'd ever imagined, he saw the all-seeing
eye of the mother of all whales looking back at him
loving him, understanding him

and it humbled him, made his teeth rock loosely in
their sore gums, almost made him cry out how much
he mattered, every time he thinks about her it belongs
him more to her

sometimes the ocean rumbles like freight trains backing
up and waves rise like whales are hiding in them and
they are, he knows they are, because he sees bits of shining
barnacled scarred flukes smashing through the surface

he knows what he sees, krill spilling from baleens
don't tell him he doesn't, he thinks it must be an effing
miracle how his world doesn't simply burst itself apart
on its own beauty, that's when he yells and shouts
claps his hands, yells and shouts, can't help it, no harm
done, he's okay, the rest of the time he won't bother you.

.....

*Eileen Malone's poetry has been published in more than 500 literary journals and anthologies, a significant number of which have earned awards including three Pushcart nominations. Her award-winning collection Letters with Taloned Claws was published by Poets Corner Press (Sacramento) and her book I Should Have Given Them Water was published by Ragged Sky Press (Princeton). **EibhilinMalone@aol.com***



A TALE OF TWO CITIES

36" X 24"

Pen and Ink on Paper

April Muschara Harris

*April Muschara Harris grew up in Central Alabama, attended Auburn University Montgomery and graduated with a degree in Fine Art. She is currently a professional graphic designer. April is an award-winning artist who works in acrylics, pen and ink, chalk, and pencil. **aprilmuschara@gmail.com***

YOU DON'T HAVE TO DIE WELL FOR ME #19

Darren Demaree

Nineteen minutes late & I say out loud that I wish we had bought the last pomegranates at the farmer's market, that I wish I had a mouth full of the sticky red seeds of the pomegranate right now, that I had a fruit Ohio was known for smeared across my lips. You wanted to get the pomegranates. I wanted to get home, so that I could watch the baseball game. You took a photograph of the pomegranates to post on Instagram, and I've set up my own account so I could stare at the photo until you come home.

.....

Darren C. Demaree's poems appear in South Dakota Review, Meridian, New Letters, Diagram, and Colorado Review. He is the author of five poetry collections, most recently The Nineteen Steps Between Us (2016, After the Pause). He is the managing editor of Best of the Net Anthology and lives and writes in Columbus, OH.

darrencdemaree@yahoo.com

“I have come to believe that the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth.”

—Umberto Eco

UNTITLED

Seth Cortland Tanner

not months or years

no

that would be

insufferable

but a stretch of days

lost in memory

or perhaps

a sudden revelation of false hope

the wish for cloud and rain

clear skies only adding

the weight of optimistic expectation

maybe

a chill soothes the air

an awakening

a moment

(imperceptible to the joyful or ambitious to the resentful or
satisfied)

a pregnant clarity

only for the melancholy

witnessing a heron's meditative stillness

yearning for the dove's everlasting devotion

buzzing with the bumblebee's enthralling defiance

marveling at the faith of the blissful monarch

a glimpse

into the sentience

of all that isn't human

.....

Seth Cortland Tanner lives, paints, snaps pictures, sleeps on the couch with his dogs, and often cooks excellent food in Talladega. He has applied for the Master of Arts in Counseling program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. bamaseth@gmail.com

SUNSHINE IN THE DELTA—*from the novel*

Erica Marisa Sandifer

Ain't no lady ever talked to me about life the way Mrs. Baker talked to me. Especially no white lady. I'm guessin' I was one of the lucky negro maids 'cuz not too many get close to they boss lady like that. Matter fact, them white ladies used to be hatin' the ground black maids walked on. I think they was just jealous. They know they couldn't clean like no black woman. Cook like no black woman. They was mad 'cuz they husband was watchin' the maids more than they be watchin' they old plain and pale lookin' asses. White women couldn't face that they was just pretty for no reason. I just thank God I had the looks and that I could cook and clean. I had never made love but I was pretty damn sure I was gone be good at it.

Beneath a Crescent Moon

She would often lie awake under an incandescent moon who one half revealed and one half anonymous hovered over the azure Atlantic. She was compliant with the mystery because she loved to conquer the labyrinth. Shrewdly, she imagined what the other half of him would be like. Bold. Bald. Silent. She imagined that he was content with his loneliness because he was whole, needing nothing or no one else. She longed for this serenity. So one day when the Sun submerged into the horizon just after the tide, the moon arrived to meet her. This time he was full, just as she imagined.

Concordia

The night's sky was as hollow as the beautiful cloak she covered her soul in on a daily basis. She needed protection. She was 27 with none of it figured out. There stood an ethereal being in the mirror staring back wanting to smile but too afraid of the night. The sun had fallen into the ocean two hours earlier than what she recognized. The darkness consumed her. She walked until there was light. There were women huddled together praying in a Hispanic neighborhood. Beautiful women, like her. She wished she could have just appreciated their beauty but she couldn't help it that her eyes were drawn to their ring fingers. There were four women and four empty ring fingers. Whenever she saw a beautiful woman she watched her hand until she noticed a ring and if there wasn't one there, she would wonder why. She looked down at her hand and saw the emptiness and wondered if people looked at her with the same admonition. She too began to pray.

The Wedding Hour

They say with great pleasure comes great pain, inevitably. She eyed him at his chest because if he looked in her eyes, he'd see the disdain, the misfortune, love that only he could ever feel so mightily. Would someone dare read between the lines, my love? Would you be mistaken for the hunter or the hunttee? In her world, you were either the hunter or being hunted. The most dangerous game. Hiding behind the lies the devil told her. Peeking away at the sunshine, afraid to let shutter open. But one could not blame her. She was in The Diabolical Delta, The Mississippi Delta, born and raised. Something eating away at her spine, but perfect love casts out all fear, they say. So the bible said because her mother groomed her well and made sure she was on time for church every Sunday, and some weekdays too.

Yellow dresses for the women in the barn. Milking cows and plucking chickens, the smell lingered inside her mind for an infinity. Footsteps in the dirt, strange sounds echoing in the night, that's what she remembers most. Could any man give her what her childhood gave? The comfort. The moon at her fingertips, the stars wrapped themselves in cursive to spell her name. How the great galaxy imbued upon her. But in all her frankness he was able to silence her soul. Offering a peace that only God could've given him to give to her.

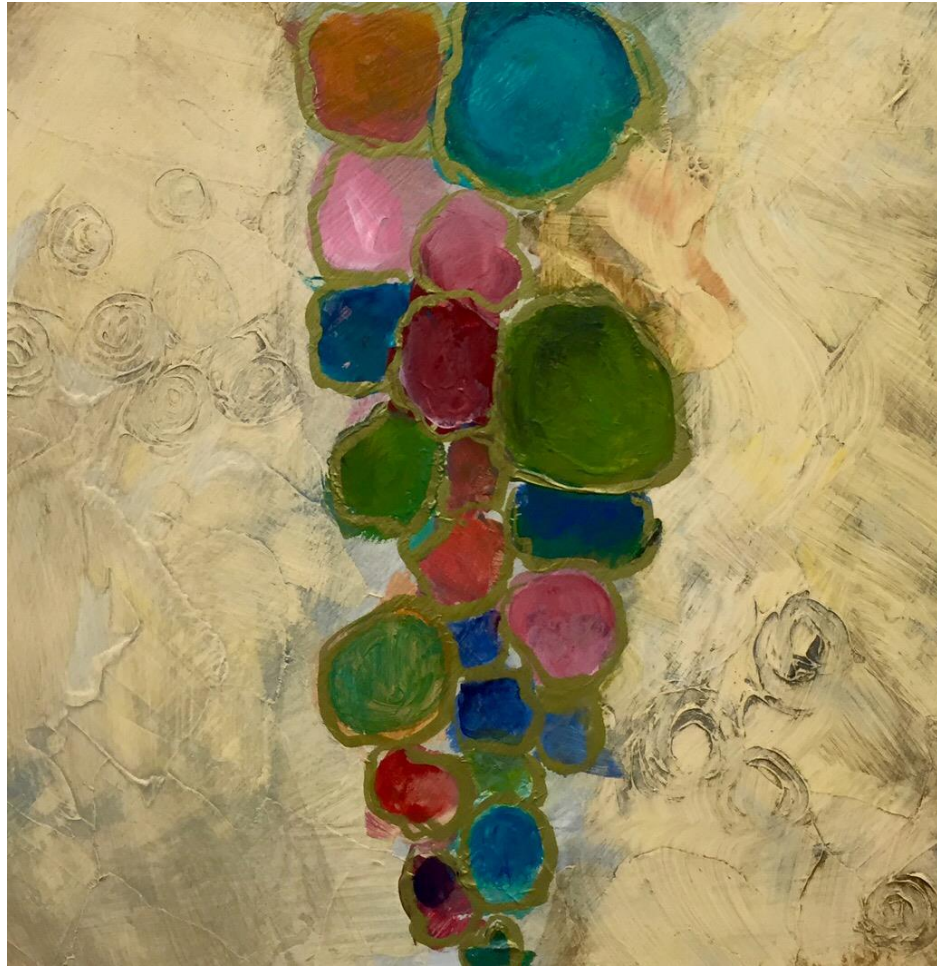
Cumuluous clouds written across her back, a gift that God had given. She was a bird flying south for winter. She couldn't seem to weather the storm. In the binding hours of her mind, she was lucid under moonlight. Naked. She had been stripped of her sadness. The palms of her hands did not sweat. Day was only an hour away. The smutty color of the sky was as opaque as the cornea inside of her third eye. She still could not see without her glasses. She had crawled and cried searching for them in the night, belligerent.

His skin smelled of cumin and cinnamon, the color of moist chocolate cake on a Sunday afternoon. He tasted of berries fermented under a warm Mississippi Sun. Love. He had latched to her soul for an infinity. She had begun to reconcile.

Her wedding day was only an hour away. Feet cold. He waited at an ivy alter. She ran to him. He had waited an eternity just for this day and so had she. They say perfect love casts out all fear. So the bible says.

.....

Erica Marisa Sandifer was raised in the Mississippi Delta and has a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing. ericasandifer6832@yahoo.com



WHIMSY

Cynthia Cox
Mixed Media
11" x 11"

Cynthia Cox creates art in pastel, acrylic, and oils. Her pieces are displayed at Artists Incorporated Gallery in Vestavia Hills. See more of her creations at www.cynthiacoxfineart@gmail.com

ERIE

Mark Jackett

He has fished this river, he has wailed this highway

In the time of his deprivation, ice was hoisted up to fifth-floor apartments

Coal was coughed down to basement bins

We all must explore the territory of our fathers

Sometimes we travel fast and safe

Sometimes we travel slow and reckless

Broken in heart and broken in mind,

he tried to make up the time

stolen by the rain

Clouds settle upon the ice-clogged river

Sun whispers to the stunted path

.....

Mark Jackett is a husband and father of two daughters, from Port Jefferson, NY. He teaches high school English in Smithtown, NY, where he infuses poetry into his students' lives on a regular basis. Upcoming publication includes Oberon Poetry Magazine. markjackett@yahoo.com

THE DINNER PARTY

Joy Godsey

Once during a job interview I was asked, 'If you could invite three people—living or dead, famous or not—to a dinner party at your house, who would you invite?' The question was unexpected and I was young and slow to answer, fearful that my chosen guests would be unimpressive or out of place. In the end, I blurted out three names and remember only one—Julia Childs. Having little faith in my own culinary prowess, I knew Julia could come to my rescue in the kitchen.

Since then, I have heard the dinner party question asked and answered many times. Here in the Bible Belt, Jesus Christ is a top pick (although He may have a difficult time recognizing some of today's Christians as such.) Feminists prefer Gloria Steinem or Bella Abzug. College football reigns in the South. Avid fans probably have to wait months, if not years, before Coach Bear Bryant's schedule is clear.

It follows that some hosts prefer to invite dear friends or family members who have passed on. It is easy to understand the rationale. We want access to the dearly departed. We want to know about the hereafter. We want to have a chance to say 'I love you,' 'I'm sorry' or 'I'll never forgive you for what you did to me (or didn't do for me).'

I have decided to give a dinner party. My three guests will be Sally, who is still alive, and her mother and sister, who are not. Due to a massive cerebral hemorrhage, Sally suffers from traumatic brain injury, which expresses itself in many, many tragic ways and some perhaps not so tragic.

Sally is a time traveler. It is difficult for a time traveler to know who has expired and who has not. Years and years have gone by since the demise of Sally's mother Hilma and her sister Celia. Yet occasionally Sally asks, "Don't you think we should call Mother and invite her to dinner?"

"Yes Sally, that's a good idea," I answer, "we will call her this afternoon."

"Can we invite Celia too?" Sally asked. "I haven't talked with her in a long time and I feel bad about not being in touch."

I answered, "Alright, Sally. We can do that."

Dinner party preparations began. I cleaned the house. Scanned recipe books. Shopped for groceries and prepared a delicious four-course meal. Sally and I dressed for dinner and waited for our guests to arrive.

Before long, Hilma and Celia knocked. Hugs and kisses were abundant. Hilma looked beautiful in her pearls, black frock, silk stockings with seams

and kid leather, black and white spectator heels. Her hair was perfectly set in waves—like three ocean rollers moving steadily toward her left ear. She was about 50 years old and talked about her job at the Internal Revenue Service.

Celia, the sister, was much younger. She wore indigo dungarees with the cuffs rolled up mid-thigh, topped by a cotton shirt tied at the waist, saddle oxfords and white bobby socks. Lively red lipstick and a flip hairstyle completed the teenage trends of the early 1950's zeitgeist.

It was obvious Hilma disapproved of Celia's ensemble. Heedless of her mother's disdain, Celia was unruffled. The little twinkle in her eye seemed to suggest she had better plans for later in the evening.

Cocktails and hors d'oeuvres were served. Everyone but yours truly chain-smoked cigarettes and I busied myself dumping piles of butts and ashes while Sally visited with her mom and sister.

The dinner was elegant, even without Julia Child's support. Dessert was Sally's favorite—a tall fluffy coconut cake, followed by hot black coffee and Grand Marnier up. Cheerful goodbyes and cheek kisses were exchanged along with calls of "see you later!" (Much later, I hoped.)

The following morning, I asked Sally if she enjoyed the dinner party. She gave me her familiar quizzical look. "Sally, do you remember seeing your mother and Celia last night?" I asked.

"No," the response.

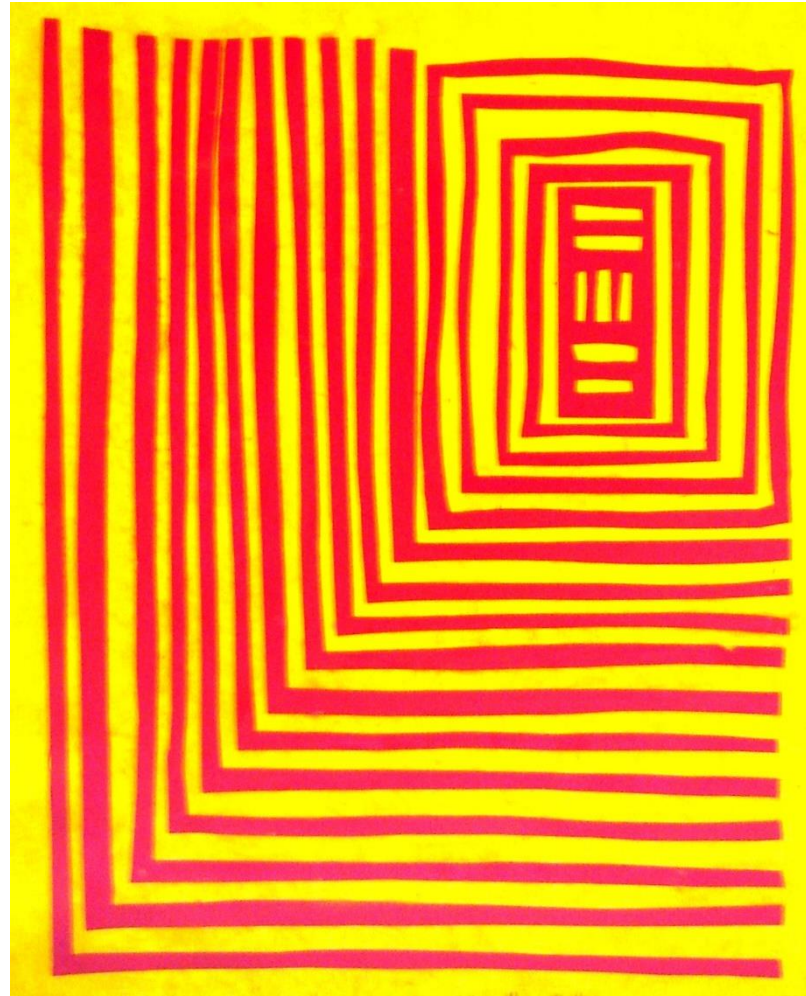
There was nothing left to do but remind her of the dinner party. She was captivated as I described each small detail—the conversations, the joy of being together, the clothes we wore, the food, the laughs, and the love. Sally was fascinated by the account. Her eyes lit up at the mention of coconut cake and Grand Marnier. She smiled throughout the tale and even shed a few tears.

The story ended. Sally fell asleep with a peaceful smile. I sat in a chair pulled close to her hospital bed and with pen and paper began to plan the next dinner party.

.....

Joy Godsey is owner of Godsey Communications and Yesdog Productions, Birmingham, AL. She writes and kayaks and fly fishes. jgodsey@me.com

(Author's note: This piece was written in November 2014, about 7 months prior to Sally's death in June 2015.)



AFTER PETTWAY

Liz Reed

20" x 30"

Mixed Media

Liz Reed retired from a career in market research before enrolling at the University of Alabama in Birmingham to pursue a career in art and in so doing began to exercise the right side of the brain. Her work is primarily mixed media and focused on honoring artists in other fields. AFTER PETTWAY is a paper rendition of one of the famous quilts made in Gee's Bend, AL, by Annie Pettway.

lizreedartist@gmail.com

VOICE

James Ferguson

I want to hear you read	You find a hidden cadence
My fledgling poem aloud	With your rising rhythm
With your coffee tones	You bring a new meaning
Now chicory, now mocha	With your silent pause
You transport my words	The children pad on bare
To a remote place	soles
Where men in straw hats	And slip by in the darkness
Talk about yesterday's rain	The men nod, the women see
And women in bright	A world beyond the trees
fabrics	The aroma of the words arise
Exude wisdom and strength	And mingle with the smoke
When evening fires appear	Men, women, Women, men
Your voice intones the	Poem, voice, Voice, poem
poem	It sizzles like the suckling pig
Shadows make strange	Turning on the spit.
shapes	
That flicker on the houses	

.....

Jim Ferguson practices law and poetry in Birmingham, AL, and recalls other lives and vocations on cool misty days. A frequent explorer of Reed Books and the Museum of Fond Memories, he tries to exercise restraint in commenting on social media but is not always successful. ferguson.jamese@icloud.com

A MODERN DAY ANTAEUS

Roger Barbee

Recently I read a new collection of essays by the Kentucky conservationist, farmer, and writer Wendell Berry. In one of the essays he mentions a writer from Kentucky I had never heard of, much less read. For me, this is one reason for reading writers I respect, like Berry. From them I am always making “discoveries” of new writers and their works. Such was my newest “discovery”—Harriette Arnow and her 1954 novel *The Dollmaker*.

The National Book Award finalist tells the story of Gertie Nevels and her family: Clovis her husband and their five children. Set in the Cumberland Mountains of Kentucky and Detroit during the closing years of World War II, we watch Gertie as she struggles to hold onto what is dear.

We meet Gertie as she rides Dock the mule to the blacktopped highway in order “so's we can stop a car a goen toward th doctor's.” The wrapped bundle she holds on Dock's back is her ill four-year-old son Amos. By the end of the first chapter we realize that Gertie is no ordinary woman, but one who can use a mule to stop a car with two soldiers who are going towards the doctors, show the soldiers how to dig their car out of the soft shoulder of the highway, build a cash reserve that she keeps secretly hidden in the hem of her coat, and use her pocket knife to perform an emergency tracheotomy on Amos with the help of the two soldiers.

Clovis drives an old truck that he uses to haul coal, but because of the war the supply of coal dwindles and he is waiting to be called up for military service. Gertie manages their rented home, raises the crops they need for food and some cash, and teaches their children. On the first Sunday, we are in their cabin, Gertie is reading *Ecclesiastes* to the five children all dressed in their Sunday best. When one of the children complains that she is preaching, Gertie responds: “I ain't preachin', but somebody's got to teach you th Bible.” On this Sunday, we also are first told of the large block of wild cherry wood that Gertie is keeping because she is a carver of wood and “the hair on the block of wood, for if one were close enough, looking down in good light, like now, when the early sunshine fell like a curtain by the southern windows, not falling through but making a brightness in the room, the shape of the top of a head with unparted hair swirling loosely away from the center showed clearly.”

In time, Gertie plans to carve the block so as to reveal the head and face held in the block of wild cherry wood.

As Gertie works and secretly saves egg and milk money, Clovis is called to appear for his military physical. Not hearing from Clovis, Gertie assumes that he has been drafted. She shares this with their children and the older ones express worry for their father. Gertie, in an uncommon loud voice, says, "He'd be better off in the war ta in one a them factories!" Little does she know what her words speak because Clovis soon sends a letter that he was not drafted and is now working as a mechanic in a Detroit factory. He tells Gertie to bring the children because he has found them a home. Gertie, who had purchased the Tipton Place for her family with her hard-earned cash, is forced by her mother and social norms to do the bidding of her husband, leave her beloved hills and move her family to the city. Settled into the too-small government housing flat, her world of quiet self-reliance, home-raised food, a life close to the earth and all its bounty is now one of crowded tenements, noise, grime, unions, and credit. She struggles to keep her family from being swallowed by a life where many adults, as she explains to one of her children, "...spend money, hopen it'll satisfy em, like a man a hunten matches in a strange dark house." Slowly, over time, Gertie realizes that, "It wasn't the way it had used to be back home when she had done her share, maybe more than her share of feeding and fending for the family. Then, with egg money, chicken money, a calf sold here, a pig sold there, she'd bought almost every bit of food they didn't raise. Here, everything, even to the kindling wood, came from Clovis."

But Gertie holds her family together through all of its new life, and she has her carving and the block of wild cherry wood. In fact, people see her "whittlins" as she calls them and she soon is earning money to carve different objects for them.

Gertie Nevels is a character cut from the same cloth as Bathsheba in *Far From the Madding Crowd* and Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*. Like these and other strong female characters, Gertie is determined, dignified, and independent. She lives in the world, but she is not of the world. Loyal to her family and her earth-based values, she quietly goes through each day, doing her best with circumstances not of her making. And she is wise. Called to her children's school because her twelve-year-old son hit a classmate, Gertie tries to tell the teacher that, yes, Reuben was being honest when he told his classmates that he had had a real rifle in Kentucky that he used to hunt. When the teacher expresses alarm that it must have been a toy, Gertie responds:

“I don't want any a my youngens ever a playen with a toy gun, a pointen it at one another, an a usen em for walken canes er anything. Some day when they've got a real gun they'll fergit—an use it like a toy.”

One reason to read this book is that Arnow tells a good story, but there are others, too. It is long—the 1972 hard back edition I purchased is 549 pages, but to read Gertie's story and her wisdom about living, is worth the effort. In it, Arnow shows a world of unions, mass-production, workers maimed by machines, violent strikes, and Gertie's new-found, worst evil, credit. However, through all this and some tragedies, Gertie, the woman who gave her own child an emergency tracheotomy, holds to her values as she carves, cares for her family, and continues, bit by bit, to work on the block of wild cherry to release the face within. She does not yield to the new world that Clovis has placed them in, even when she has to ask the vegetable vendor and milk man for credit in order to feed her family. She is a product of the earth as much as the block of wild cherry wood even while living in a government flat. She holds close her memories of the land in the Cumberland Mountains and how “Back home it would be hot, with the little goose-craw beans hanging plump and green among the late corn...”

Like the mythical Antaeus, Gertie keeps her feet on the earth because she knows that is from which she gains her strength.

.....

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

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“Books demand that we briefly put aside our own beliefs and prejudices and listen to someone else’s.”

—Will Schwalbe

MERRY-GO-ROUND

M-A Auclair

It's when
I have no pen
no keyboard
that perfect lines scribble
across my mind-screen,
antsy words tickle my fingers.

It's when
I have no sleep
that fears fill my gaping night
with a litany of my flaws
shouting me awake.

I wear no water-proof mascara
when tears dribble down my chin
sorrow is slippery, on blurry paper
nib and ink chase soggy poems.

Coursing along orbits

linking antipodes
I gyrate on merry-go-rounds
Ferris wheels and spin tops
thrill rides on roller coasters
ringmasters and carousels
ride horses oscillating

up and down
in mechanical gallop
back to where they began,
in carnival circles
here then gone
and whatever happens
is shaped by words
told, written, read, repeated,
carried around
in trunks, suitcases
or pocket size packets of poetry.

.....

*Marie-Andree Auclair lives in Ottawa, Canada. Her poems have appeared, or are forthcoming, in print and online publications such as In/Words Magazine—which released her chapbook *Contrails* in 2013, *filling Station*, *Structo*, *UK*, *Canthus*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, *Apeiron*, and *Tule Review*. She is working on her next chapbook. syrah@rogers.com*

"I am a frantic multitasker...I do many things poorly, all at once."

--Ayelet Waldman

FEEDING THE ENEMY

Michael Fontana

1972

My uncles stood in the back yard, shooting squirrels for sport. The pistol they used caught the sun and glinted in my eyes.

“Your turn,” Uncle Pete said to me. Pete was a skinny man of 47, pale as flour, dressed in cutoff jeans and a white t-shirt.

He held the gun out. It was hot and heavy in my hand. I was all of 11, small and skinny and freckly, unfamiliar with handling a gun although very familiar with my uncles’ hunting games. They targeted squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, chipmunks, groundhogs, whatever creature might wrongly tread in our backyard. The uncles were there to mind me while mom and dad vacationed out of town. I lifted the pistol up the way I had seen them do it, both hands on the stock, the weight of it still pulling both hands down.

“Now let’s find you a target,” Uncle Ansel said. Ansel was 49, short, stocky and spoke rapidly, dressed in camouflage from head to toe. “Looky there,” he said, pointing to the distant trees. “I see you a squirrel to get.”

I let the weight of the pistol win and drag my arms back down to my knees, the pistol itself still in both hands and covering my crotch.

“No, no, no,” Ansel said, taking a spit off to one side. “Hold the damn thing up.” He grabbed my arms and brought them straight out in front of me, his one big paw holding them up by the elbows.

“I don’t think I can do this,” I said.

He didn’t relent in his grip.

Pete scolded me. “Sure you can. You’re almost a man now. Every man does this. It’s a good release of tension, ain’t it, Ansel?”

“You sure betcha,” Ansel said, maintaining his paw in place. “During my tour, I didn’t let go my pistol for a second. Otherwise the enemy could have shot me dead in an eye’s blink.” He turned his eyes to me. “You don’t want that to happen to you, do you?”

I shook my head no.

“Good. Then let’s find you another squirrel.”

I wasn’t sure that squirrels posed any threat to me directly but I cooperated by keeping my arms propped up even when Ansel released his grip. My hands still shook around the metal of the pistol, knowing to some extent what damage it could do, from taking out squirrels to killing people of all kinds.

Pete meanwhile went out closer to the line of trees, located a squirrel and knocked it off its branch where it landed on the ground, confused.

“Fire on him, boy,” Ansel shouted.

Pete dove out of the way as I forced my fingers to pull the trigger. The bullet left the gun with a resounding pop. It missed the squirrel entirely and whizzed through the trees.

“Who knows where that might have gone,” Pete said, walking back to us, shaking his head in dismay.

“You need to be quicker on the trigger and steadier in your grip,” Ansel said.

For me, the shaking had since spread from my hands through my entire body. Instead of relieving tension, firing that pistol parked it deep inside me.

“I quit,” I said, kneeling and laying the pistol gently on the grass to avoid any further fire.

“You can’t quit,” Ansel said. “What kind of man are you?” His eyes widened on me, his fists clenched, his voice now threatening.

“Yeah, who you think you are?” Pete said.

“I don’t have any enemies yet,” I said, feeling confused and trembling more in the knees.

Pete laughed. “Listen to this,” he said. “This boy’s so naïve, ain’t he, Ansel?”

“Damn right he is. There’s enemies everywhere you turn. The world ain’t a kind place.” He took another spit into the grass.

“Well, squirrels aren’t my enemy,” I said.

Another laugh from Pete. “Squirrels get into all kinds of mischief with people’s property.”

“They’re damn straight the enemy,” Ansel said, shaking his head deeply.

“But I feed the enemy in school,” I said. “We give them peanut butter on pine cones.”

Now they both laughed. “Son, there ain’t no friend out there,” Ansel said. “You need to learn that real quick or you’re going to surely right suffer.”

The gun continued to lay on the grass in front of me, awaiting my return to it. I turned away from it. “I don’t want to live in a world where squirrels are the enemy and you kill all your enemies. It doesn’t sound right from what I learned in church either,” I said.

They both shook their heads.

“What a waste,” Pete said.

“Damn straight,” Ansel said.

They waited until I re-entered the house and then they resumed shooting into the trees, knocking down all manner of fur-covered evil as I watched.

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Michael Fontana lives and writes in Bella Vista, AR. paz9461@yahoo.com

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REPOSE

Joy Godsey

Digital Photograph

Landscape taken at Rivergrove on the Black Warrior River

4.25" x 4.75"

Joy Godsey pursues photography, painting, and pastels as an avocation. She was once a professional artist/ceramicist and owned Hand-Crafted Tiles in Birmingham. There are over 700 residential and commercial installations of Joy's hand-painted and hand-made ceramic tiles in Alabama and across the US. Since 2011, Joy has provided graphic designs for Cracker Barrel Old Country Store tote bags.

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MASTERPIECES BY NUMBERS

Carolyn M. Rhodes

It all came back to me. My childhood memory of the art we all created and the art which surrounded me in New York City. Among the historic influences of my generation, painting-by-numbers books were popular beginning in the early 50s. Although a little less popular nowadays, they are still selling alongside other types of coloring books. Macy's Department stores were the first to test the sale with a big advertising marketing campaign. The number paintings flew off the shelves. Around that time, television was beginning its own instructional courses. "Learn to Draw" with Jon Gnagy ran from the 50s into the 60's.

I hadn't seen a paint kit for years. Recently, however, I came across one at a Treasure Hunt store and bought it for sentimental reasons. It came with brushes, paints, instructions, and a lovely detailed canvas of an elephant with cub. It was serendipity—this once-upon-a-time family activity. My parents proudly displayed our finished masterpieces on our gallery of art walls throughout the rooms. They moved with us from residence to residence.

My sister painted the Renaissance and medieval courts of kings, queens and jesters. These were complex and it would take the steady hand of an artist in the making. She was a perfectionist, never a splash of paint anywhere except in between the lines. I was a little less perfect. At 8 years-old I was given a pair of ballerinas to paint. I loved anything ballet. Mom painted Picasso's *Sunflowers* and still life or garden scenes and often embroidered while I painted. Dad made frames out of wood and stained them to match each and every one. These were hung up either in sets or solo. It didn't matter if my finished masterpiece was no match for my older sister's completed paintings. She showed a talent for drawing and calligraphy in the years to come. What mattered was that I accomplished it. All of us got a spotlight in the gallery of art. It was positive reinforcement that we were special.

Facebook friends from far and near have recalled their very own vivid recollections, heartfelt and poignant.

My cousin, Sandra, remembers that although she had no innate artistic talent she could create a masterpiece and be proud of it. A grandson, Drew,

said his grandfather received a gift of a nude model on canvas. He finished it on blue velvet. After his grandfather passed away, Drew kept it.

Liz's brother-in-law, a truck driver, painted *The Last Supper* on black velvet. She remembers him with admiration. He left a legacy behind, an imprint of his soul on Liz's heart. His re-creation was painted on black velvet and is now with one of his children.

Pam, a retired nurse said, "Over the years from the 60s and throughout my career, patients were given the paint-by-numbers kits for recreational therapy and relaxation."

Don relives his cherished memory, "When I was in the 6th grade, I won a 2nd place prize for our school's art bazaar poster chosen from many entries. I was happy and excited that the prize was a paint-by-numbers set."

Marian, a prolific artist today, remembers loving them. She said, "I was introduced to art through numbers painting. I learned how to use acrylic paints. Today, the kids are busy doing other things."

Diana's mother was an artist so she felt that paint-by-numbers was *tacky*.

Yesterday, I began to paint the new canvas. I felt a sense of loss, a sense of guilt that I didn't value these family paintings to at least have saved just one. Despite regrets I set up the paints and brushes on my little black table. My son suggested I begin along the edges which would be the skyline surrounding the Serengeti and its elephant with cub. I dipped into the little paint well of blue. It was Number 5. But, the paint had dried up from sitting too long on the shelf. I could buy new paints but I realized it is the memory of going home again to a childhood full of love that I really wanted. In conclusion, I'm inclined to *painting by words*.

I like the pretty picture of home, my family gallery of art tucked away in the newly revived synapses of my consciousness for easy retrieval. It's the art many of us created, the artists we've admired over the years who taught us a few lessons. The paint-by-numbers masterpieces I warmly remember and cherish are now safely nestled in the footprint of a child from another era.

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A graduate in drama and dance from the College of Staten Island, NY, Carolyn M. Rhodes is retired from the University of Alabama's College of Business. A native of Tuscaloosa, AL, she is a tech reporter and an arthritis instructor.

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PONTE VECCHIO

Sonia Summers
Acrylic on Canvas
36" x 24"

Sonia Summers creates fine art and commission art. Her painting *Birmingham in the Snow* sold at the 16th Annual Energen Art Competition. Currently, her work can be seen at the Blue Phrog Gallery in Montevallo, AL. Sonia resides in Birmingham, AL, with her husband, their daughter, and their pets.

soniajacksonsummers.weebly.com

FOXY

Taylor Sheppard

He looked at me as a vulture does a carcass, deciphering which parts to eat first and which parts to savor. He's drunk; drunker than the other two with him. They've noticed me, but they aren't vulgarly observing me like him. My gum forms a bubble as I exhale out, twirling a pen around my fingers. Thumb to pinky, pinky to thumb. The gum explodes in a pop, snapping back to my lips. I peel the sticky pieces off with my tongue. He takes a final swig of beer, and I stand at the diner counter.

Fake smile, fake hip swings, soft and sensual touch on the shoulder.

"Another one?" I ask with the light, soprano voice of a mouse. He looks up, lopsided grin stretched across his faded face.

"Yajus know what Ihawant, don't ya, Foxy?"

I flick my head, my long ponytail crossing from one shoulder to the other like ribbon in the wind.

"Well you know I'm going to take care of you, Hun."

Winking, I take the glass from his hand, resisting the urge to lurch away as he slips his arm around my waist. Rather I look down, smile, and twirl delicately to the side. Too many fast movements, and he'll be put off.

Walking to the keg, I feel their eyes. The predators. The ones that come before the scavengers, teeth bared and fangs dripping as they assess the most efficient way to end the life before them. I play dead, filling a new glass and pretending I can't hear the hissing as they flick their tongues.

Slut, they whisper. *Whore*, they snigger amongst themselves, forming a tight and impenetrable circle for protection. The waitresses cluster together, examining my every move, judging my appearance, waiting for me to stumble so they can pounce. The vultures were easy enough to fend off—at least while I was alive.

I sashay back to the man, handing him the glass with a smile before sliding away once more. The other two aren't worth my attention; they'll tip for common courtesies, but he'll tip for the performance.

As I pass the circle, warning rattles go off, their tails quivering with poisonous anticipation. I continue on without a glance and slip once more behind the bar, the time dragging. My gold-glittered, pointed nails tap against the laminate counter, one finger at a time hitting the surface. Picking up a napkin, I blot my ruby lips, a few traces of color coming off. A movement catches my eye, and I look up lazily, a promising smile lighting my lips.

“Oh, are you all ready, Hun?”

He grins down at me like a man in the thrall of a stroke, only half of his face responding to the commands he’s trying to send.

“Ida stay foyous, but islate. Guysa gotta go.”

He leans onto the counter before me, the stench of alcohol hitting my face and curling around my hair.

“Imma leave tis fors you, and maybe Ills seeya tonight.”

He doesn’t say it like a question, but rather as an inevitability. I take a sliver of paper from him. In pink, from the pen I’d left with the check, are ten nearly illegible numbers. He slips his hand around my upper arm, and I look at him again. Sticking to the show, I hold the paper up and then push it in my apron, letting him see that I had kept it.

“Your friends are waiting for you. Don’t keep them standing too long; you don’t want any trouble for me, do you?”

He looks over his shoulder in annoyance, but releases my arm and steps away.

“Ya knows I ony want ya ‘appy, babies. Imma see yousa tonight.”

He takes a step back, winking and stumbling, and then exits the diner. Huffing in annoyance, I retrieve the number from my apron, trash it, and make my way to clear off the newly abandoned table. A rustling of scales tells me that a serpent has followed.

I don’t look up from the dishes I’m clearing as she lurks next to me.

“Wow, did I feel a romantic connection there? I swear there was some intimate eye contact and caressing.”

“*Romantic* is hardly the word I’d use, but call it what you’d like.”

“Well, there was certainly something there. You know, there’s a term for selling yourself for money. It’s called prostitution.”

Before I respond, she snickers and walks away. I ignore the comment, and instead finish clearing the plates, clean my tables, and clock out.

The night is cool as I walk to my rusted-out Volkswagen, shrugging on a light coat. Two more predators are gathered around their vehicles, parked alongside mine.

“Was it worth it, flirting with the slug?” one of them asks viciously.

I give her an obscene gesture before climbing into the driver’s seat and turning the engine over, allowing the car to warm. The faint smell of alcohol combined with diner grease and sweat, wafts around me like a fog. As the car heats, I open the glovebox and pullout a scrap of paper. At the top reads: Escape Plan Funds: \$5826. Below that is a list of numbers, starting at 53 and

gradually increasing. I pull out the cash before picking the pink pen out of the apron lying beside me on the passenger's seat. Neatly, I write at the bottom \$5928.

For a while I look at the paper, and then laugh quietly to myself. They may be snakes and vultures, but I was a fox, sly and cunning.

"Yeah, it was worth it," I breathe.

In the backseat of the Volkswagen are my two, gold-glittered suitcases, "Foxy" spelled across them with pink alphabet stickers. I return the count to the glovebox, eyeing the airplane ticket and passport tucked within.

"I've got a plane to catch."

Backing out of the parking lot, I chug away from the diner, leaving only a trail of exhaust behind for the predators and scavengers within.

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Taylor Shepard writes from college. Shepeard427225@avilau.email

"I am both happy and sad at the same time, and I'm still trying to figure out how that could be."

—Stephen Chbosky

HERE THERE BE TOMBSTONE MONIKERS

Jim Reed

“My mama named me after a dead baby on a tombstone.” This is one grand entrance I won’t soon forget.

I’m at the shop, plying the book trade, when this rather feisty first-time customer throws open the front door and makes her pronouncement. Her name is Olivia, which she explains is not a common moniker. Her mother did not want her to carry a family name—something unique was in order.

So, while tiptoeing through the tombstones one day, she spied a child’s grave with the name Olivia chiseled thereon. It resonated. It stuck. And right here right now, the second Olivia stands, obviously confused and a little angry about knowing her roots.

“Yep, I’m named after a dead baby.” She manages to grin and frown simultaneously.

All of us humanoids have names. Most of these names are stamped upon us and stick there for a lifetime. Some of these names are deleted by those of us who want to pick our own. As Pearl Bailey once said, “You can taste a word.”

I like the taste of my name as it escapes my lips. I don’t mind hearing it being tossed back to me. I would not dream of changing it, out of respect for my father and grandfather, who carried the same name.

I don’t mind being Jimmy Three. It sounds a little like a small-time con man’s name. Jimmy Three.

Well, you can call me Jim. My schoolmates always called me James. My friends and family call me Jim. I wouldn’t even mind being called my full name, James Thomas Reed III, except that it sounds pretentious and too multisyllabic.

And some day, somebody might get cute and carve my name onto a granite tombstone. Then, generations later, when the name Jim isn’t so common anymore, some jokester parent might decide to pluck Jim from the stone and plop it into the lineage of their latest offspring.

Then, thirty years after that, a smiling frowning Jim could be caught telling all within hearing that his folks named him after a dead guy in a cemetery. Maybe I’ll get to roll over laughing in my six-foot resting place

.....

Jim Reed writes, curates and owns an old bookstore in Birmingham, AL

www.redclaydiary.com

dream of peace

Sanaz Davoodzadehfar

1

The peace

Was too tired to think

It lighted a cigarette.

Lay down on a leather sofa

And tried to forget the whole world

A little bit later

It fell asleep

Like a little child

خسته تر از آن بود که فکر می کرد

سیگاری روشن کرد

روی مبلی چرمی دراز کشید

سعی کرد جهان را فراموش کند

کمی بعد

چون کودکی خردسال

خوابش برد

صلح

Totally unexpected,
 My pencil turned to a plane tree
 Full of crows,
 And the crows covered all my words.
 How can I write now
 That my heart had a dove for you?

بی مقدمه مدادم چناری شد
 پر از کلاغ
 و روی تمام حرف هایم را
 کلاغ گرفت
 حالا چطور بنویسم
 دلم برایت کبوتر داشت

Sanaz Davoodzadehfar began her arts career with theater and won many awards in this field. At the same time her collection of poetry, I Walk on a Dead Word, was translated and published in Arabic. Her poems have been published on many websites and in major Arab newspapers and magazines as well as translated into many different languages including German, Turkish, Swedish, Kurdish, and French.

SHOPPING FOR COFFEE

John Grey

Cold outside
But he's in the tropical aisle of the supermarket
What? No palm trees?

His right hand meanders through the various coffees,
settles on a choice blend
made of the finest Brazilian beans.

South American jungles.
Lovely spot it must be.
The lungs of the world.
Big lazy rivers to float upon.
Abarema. Shrieking macaws.
Tangles of liana.

One bag of the finest
and he's resting up from his latest trek,
lolling in the sun by the riverbank.
In dolce far niente.
He longs for a place
where he can sleep six months out of twelve.
And where it's too hot to fight.
Too hot to complain about the heat.

Strange how a mixture designed to jolt him to life
rubs shoulders with such lethargy.
Lovely flowers of idleness.
Air like the hothouse in
the botanical gardens.
But there's nothing deliberate,
nothing regimented, about these rare plants.
They grow where everything else
has no right to.

But then he remembers the snakes. The jaguars.
And how does tapir taste medium rare.
And every known and unknown sickness
buzzing on the wing-beat of insects.

He replaces the package,
chooses something from the Kona Coast instead.
Exotic yes but still made in the USA.
Nothing lurking in good old American imagery.
At least, nothing that he's not terrified of already.

.....

John Grey is an Australian poet, a US resident. His work has recently been published in New Plains Review, South Carolina Review, Gargoyle and Silkworm. More of his poetry is upcoming in Big Muddy Review, Main Street Rag and Spoon River Poetry Review. jgrey10233@aol.com

“We are here to help each other get
through this thing, whatever it is.”

—Mark Vonnegut

CORDED KNOTS

Gail Gehlken

*I'll put this begonia
on the shelf over my sink
when I get home,*

she said as much to herself
as to me.
She doesn't know
she's not going home again

and I can't tell her
so we sit tatting
like she taught me to do
twenty years ago

making hard corded knots
into rings that won't unravel
like lives do.

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Gail Gehlken's poetry has appeared in Birmingham Arts Journal, Literary Mobile, Whoever Remembers Us: Anthology of Alabama Poets, Alabama Sampler, and Potpourri Literary Journal. She has two chapbooks published by Finishing Line Press: A Good Season (2016) and Standing Stones (2011). ggehlken@yahoo.com

WORLD GONE BY

Jeanette Willert

In the town of my childhood
we young ones
ran wild
charging briared mountain paths,
balancing like aerialists
on mossy river booms,
channeling currents
careening to the falls.

Invincible, we felt,
as Saturday matinee heroes.
Myth wrestled and laughed
through us
alive
as Batman, Cisco or Roy and Dale.

No one noted Time,
sly trickster,
stealing in,
nor the universe snickering
as our sudden wings
latched to a quickened wind
buffeting each on his own way.

When I think of those gilded days
I sometimes wonder
how this cautious little owl
took nest in me.

.....

As a professor of English Education at Canisius College in Buffalo, NY, Jeanette Willert taught aspiring teachers of writing and literature. For more than a decade she served as director of the Western New York Writing Project (an affiliate of the National Writing Project). She is active in the Alabama State Poetry Society. Her poems have won recognition in ASPS contests. hrwillert@gmail.com

THIRTY AND OUT

S. J. MacLean--2015 Hackney Literary Awards--2nd Place, National Story

Well of course people will cast blame. It's human nature to look for wrongdoing in others, and in those days, nineteen forty-four if memory serves right, there were plenty of reasons to accuse others of treason. Accidents happen, though, and individuals whose recollections have dulled have a way of forgetting, even those who believe they've been wronged. Ella bends over her journal and writes. *The coloreds were sent off to prison. The Japanese were sent off to the camps.* It's a shame things like that occurred but people thought differently during the war, and who's to say which neighbors were so virtuous they would not have turned on each other?

Detroit's old Kelsey-Hayes plant, which faces her kitchen window, shadows the table where she writes. Bearing down on the number-two pencil she's worn to a stub, she'd like to get this out before four o'clock closes in on December's last day. Sharpening the pencil in a sharpener attached to the table, she starts again. A week before the Port Chicago explosion, Umeko and Takeshi Matsumoto with their three girls and two suitcases sat on the sidewalk in front of their house. Waiting for a bus to transport them to Tulelake, they turned away from her as she stood in the front window of her living room next door although she hadn't parted the curtains to gawk at her neighbors. It was James Jackson she was watching, walking the path to her house.

He didn't acknowledge her when Arthur opened the door; in those days whites and blacks didn't mingle and men in the services didn't mix, it being the war when people didn't mind what color got killed unless it was one of their own. He handed a document to Arthur. He was a Navy man, too.

"They want to interview you," said Arthur, after James left.

"I don't know why they'd want me."

"I suppose because you were home that day."

"Well that's true." Smoking a Chesterfield, she blew smoke in front of her face.

Thirty years retired and thirty years Arthur dead, and her only child, Sarah, twenty-four years gone. You never expect your child to pass before you do, even if she was sixty-two years old, but then, you don't expect your long-lost grandson to come around either. Though he hasn't yet shown up tonight. Don't tell her she's got to stuff her puffy feet into her shoes, pull up her black rubber boots and slog through the snow. She'll have to melt the car lock with her lighter since she's not left the house in days, hope the car starts, and drive over to Vernor. It's New Year's Eve and she's got to retrieve Akin.

The war-like names parents give their kids these days, Akin, Alex, as if they want their little cretins to become warriors. People have no idea what a big war is like—not even, God forgive her the heresy—Vietnam. In forty-four everyone contributed; she certainly did. She loved the giant furnaces lapping up iron ore with their tongues at the foundry, men pouring fiery molten waste into pots the size of small cars and outsized erector-set cranes stalking the Richmond docks. She even liked the sound of rivets going in from guns at the Ford plant. Ella stops writing

and curls her right index finger. *Rat-a-tat tat, rat-a-tat tat*, a sound she likened to machine gun fire though the women making Jeeps thought it sounded more like laying down large carpet tacks.

Most of all she loved the lacey white veils showering her with fire when she welded and giant slabs of iron slamming down on the big ships. BAM! She pounds the kitchen table with a fist. BAM! BAM! Like that.

Everything was white light and important, full of big noise.

Oh yes, she was someone during the war, building the big Boulder Class Victory ships in Richmond, California. Then the war ended, she and Arthur returned home to Detroit, and soon she became one of those women people don't much talk about anymore.

She picks up her pencil and bears down so hard on the journal page, the pencil tip breaks.

Ten o'clock and Akin not here, she drives down Michigan Avenue and heads over to Vernor. She flicks on the wipers to clear snow from the windows. If the police stop her she'll put on her Alzheimer act, the one she started using after the DMV took away her license for good. It makes her mad she can't recall the year it happened, she likes to think she's still sharp, although with snow and sleet sliding down the windshield she has to admit her vision is shot. She'll write that down later and maybe even read it out loud when her senior journaling class gets back together again in two weeks. A certain amount of honesty is important. The journal's about you, the twenty-five-year-old instructor, Felicia, who doesn't like that Ella writes in the third person, had said. Couldn't you switch over?

No she could not. The girl's clicking tongue studs were starting to annoy her.

Dusky violet clouds in a dead winter sky turn the bronze archways of Michigan Central Station slime green. Parking in front of the monstrosity, she lets the motor run and surveys broken glass in the old railroad station's entryway doors. There are no other cars on the street but she's not afraid, as most of her neighborhood in southwest Detroit, where she's lived on Gilbert Street for over forty-five years, is empty too. Of course, if someone saw her parked in front of Michigan Central Station, the very same train depot to which she and Arthur returned from California after the war, they might think her memory is gone. Thank you very much it is not.

When Akin told her he'd found the barbed wire surrounding the building cut, she knew immediately he'd crawled through the wire, avoided broken glass in a window or one of the massive front doors and gone in. Now, although he says he's just curious and denies it, she suspects he is living there.

"You should see the place, Nana. Blues and greens, red, yellows and oranges on the columns and archways, everything so big and beautiful it's like an explosion."

For a moment, she thought the colors he saw were residue from the brain injury he'd suffered in Iraq, until he mentioned the graffiti, but it wasn't so much the colors that tipped her off how the station seduced him, it was the way his face seemed to take on a glow. She knows the thrill. It's the power of destruction he loves, as if a bomb had rocked the great door and windows, archways and columns into a trashed wasteland. How is it that the explosion in Iraq

leads him to darkness while the shock wave knocking her and James from bed those many years ago, followed by a fireball broiling the sky, forever set her aflame?

A half hour it's been, maybe she should crawl into the building, but it's probably better to let her grandson know she's not stalking him so she waits until a group of men duck through holes in the glass of the station's front doors. As Akin ghosts toward her, she steps from the car.

"I thought you might need a ride."

He climbs in the front seat and they drive home to Gilbert Street.

About two months ago, her grandson shocked her when he showed up at her door. His mother had moved to Oakland, California when he was around two years old, one of the reasons she and her daughter had become so estranged. Sarah had wanted nothing to do with the city that every day reminded her of the father she never knew.

"You're my only family, Nana, Akin said. "I want to be here for you."

It was soon obvious, though, she needed to be here for him, a thirty-one-year-old man with no job. Refusing to stay with her, he told her he was living with friends.

Ella pours hot water from a kettle over her Sanka and carries her coffee cup and a bottle of beer to the kitchen table.

"I'm not supposed to drink, Nana."

"You stay in that train station you'll be drinking."

"It's the medicine."

"New Year's Eve, one's not going to hurt. I want you to come with me to the veterans' ceremony next week. If you show pride in your service and reconnect with the military, it will help you get back to normal."

You would think she had asked him to eat lunch with the Devil. He's ashamed to attend the city-sponsored celebration for war veterans on Belle Isle, with a special dedication to women who supported the troops during World War II. Since she's the only able-minded woman left in Detroit who built the big ships, she's been asked to give a little speech about what it was like in those days. What an honor.

"I can't, Nana. People still talk."

They do, particularly about men who walk away from war. She'd seen the newspaper accounts how members of his platoon had accused him of deserting after an explosion. They say he'd disappeared and Iraqi police found him days later wandering along a dry river bed. Although nothing came of an inquiry, and a doctor testified men who appear uninjured often suffer brain injuries from explosion shock waves, rumors keep circling. Well she knows something about rumors, how they feed on themselves.

Ella slices air with the sharp-boned edge of one hand. "The truth will come out."

That's what James Jackson said, after the Navy inquiry began. The look on his face, she'll never forget it, and to this day she doesn't know whether it was sheer hatred or something worse, a statement of fact.

"Sooner or later the truth will come out, Ella. It always does."

About ten years ago she thought she saw him in the Post Office on Springwells Street when a man in front of the line, next to the counter, held her gaze steady, and even then, some fifty plus years later, she turned away. When he walked past her, though, he was just another old man.

“The military was my life,” Akin says. “I’m washed up. It’s wrong.”

“Wrong? You should know wrong.”

After she and Arthur came home to Detroit the factories wouldn’t hire women welders, and she was supposed to stay home and feed her baby out of a bottle? Arthur was a good man and they’d had a good marriage; he accepted the child. Eventually she found work on the line at Fleetwood although it wasn’t what she wanted. She wanted slabs of metal, steel beams, blast furnaces, and fire. Even Arthur, after thirty years on the line at Jefferson Assembly, didn’t realize how useless he would become after retiring, but that’s how it was in those days. Thirty years working, guaranteed out, the union had fought long and hard for the right to become nothing, and within a month after retiring he died of a heart attack. It amazes her that she herself is thirty years past retirement when it was a running joke among auto workers that after you retired you would drop dead the next day.

“When the war ended,” she says, “everything changed suddenly. Like that!”

She puts down her coffee cup and stops. Her grandson is staring at her. Coffee has spilled onto her hand and there’s a chip on the bottom rim of her good china cup.

Cracks and booms everywhere, she shuffles to a front a window to look out. It’s midnight and her neighbors, whoever’s left of them, are standing on the sidewalk shooting guns at the stars. Cherry bombs explode and rockets pierce holes in the curtain of night. She turns to wish Akin Happy New Year but the front door’s wide open and her grandson’s not there. Walking outside as quickly as her left hip will allow, she finds him standing on the sidewalk mesmerized by the fireworks, and when she reaches him he’s clutching at the ends of his red flannel shirt, which is hanging out of his pants. He is weeping.

“Oh no, Akin, dear boy, everything will be all right.”

When the neighborhood finally quiets and her grandson falls asleep in the second bedroom down the hall, she returns to her journal and flips open the gray cover to the first page. What did the class hope to achieve by keeping a journal, Felicia had asked her students. Write it down. But Ella could think of only two items: (a) explain what happened and; (b) make things right. Lately she’s started to see her days living in Port Chicago and working in Richmond in color, rather than in black and white, and last week in the Senior Center, while passing the open door of an art room on her way to her journaling class a brown swirl on white canvas startled her. She saw James’ hand on her skin.

What a time they’d had in an underground club over in Vallejo where there were other mixed couples, dancing, drinking, listening to music, always careful to avoid acknowledging each other if they happened to pass on Richmond’s bustling streets. If she was with Arthur, who knew James only because he’d recognized him as one of the mechanics in a Detroit garage where he took his car, and acknowledged him with a tilt of his head, or maybe a few words, she nodded, too. But that was about it.

Glancing through the window at the darkened Kelsey-Hayes plant, which the city is planning to demolish, she concentrates. Amazing how buildings, people and even history change. How, depending upon your vantage point, the past is never still and memory is slippery and adjusts to the person you want to be. She'd been thinking about that for some time and after Akin arrived in Detroit she acted and willed him the house. It's not worth much, but he can live in it or sell it to pay medical people to do whatever it is they do for traumatized people these days. Money, though, that comes and goes. Money is never enough. She doesn't know for sure her grandson didn't desert and imagines she never will, but one thing she will leave him is the certainty that James Jackson was right.

A hand on her thigh, a roar, the sky is on fire. Shredded curtains sway wildly, windows shatter, and Arthur's Navy black dress shoes glow orange. A second boom and she flies from bed, hits the wall, and falls to the floor. Pinned by a toppled dresser her ears hum, columns of smoke and flame build massive columns in the night sky and Japanese warplanes fly through her fear. White light, screaming, the world is imploding and yet she feels light. The weight on her legs disappears. Is Arthur pushing the bureau away? Oh yes, that's right, Arthur's on duty tonight. James searches her face with his fingers, lifts her from the floor and clings to her as they stumble past shards of glass to the front door. They jump off the porch, which no longer has steps.

A mound of boards that used to be the porch of Umeko and Takeshi's bungalow rests on the ground, chimney bricks trail down the sloped roof, and Helen Richardson, who lives across the street, next to the Wilsons, appears in the doorframe of her house, which is missing the roof. Making their way along the street with a few of her neighbors—she can no longer call who—they pass two upended car frames so twisted it's impossible to determine the make, pieces of metal from baby carriages and children's trikes, and splintered piles of wood that used to be houses.

"The ships," people are shouting.

Almost everyone's heading toward the port but smoke billows everywhere, occluding the sky, and forces them back as ghastly orange clouds spirit through haze and fire in the distance, narrowing a slit between daylight and night.

"Where's the post office?" someone says. "Wasn't it over there?"

At one-thirty in the morning, it's a new year. A good time to reconcile an accounting of the disaster, to square up facts that have accumulated in her mind, particularly since she stopped working thirty years ago. To this day, she wonders if she imagined what she witnessed or whether she created details that magnified the explosion to make it even more catastrophic than it was. As if such a thing were possible. Did she make up the fact that when she and James tried to reach the port a man stopped them and said *there ain't no port no more*? Or that one of the two ships men were loading with shells and bombs had been obliterated and the other had been blown out of the water?

It wouldn't have been possible to see those events, she later realized, since a firestorm was eating the sky and devouring structures and equipment that hadn't been annihilated. Especially the dead men, three hundred and twenty in all, many of their bodies were never found. And yet

she's continued to embellish over the years, sometimes telling people over five hundred black men died or that close to a thousand people sustained injuries and she helped build one of the destroyed ships, the *S.S. E. A. Bryan*, when she hadn't.

It used to feel good to create facts about the explosion so devastating they would overwhelm crimes committed in the aftermath, make them shrink in comparison, seem small.

Ella resumes writing and considers what to include in the speech she plans to give Sunday, which she'll share with her journaling class. She will tell her audience it was considered a great honor to build liberty ships during the war while the men were off fighting, how after the war women were dismissed as if they were nothing and what terrible injustices occurred such as sending the Matsumotos off to a camp and putting all those black men in jail.

When you think of it, which she does every day as she nears her end, the wrongs were enormous. It seemed to her within days of the explosion, even before all the body parts were located and the *Quinalt Victory* was discovered upside down in water five hundred yards away from the dock, rumors started. Enlisted men loading the ships with shells and bombs had sabotaged them, people said, and by the time the Navy Court of Inquiry began four days later, the rumors had fed on themselves and mushroomed. The enlisted laborers were of an inferior class. They had no experience handling live arms.

James was in the first group of men who refused to load ammunition onto a ship arriving at Mare Island three weeks later, and many of them were arrested. Although some of the surviving enlisted men had been evacuated to Camp Shoemaker in Oakland, he had been ordered to stay in Port Chicago to search for body parts. When he met her in a little motel next to the Horse Cow Bar in Vallejo, he seemed dazed.

"You've got to tell them, Ella," he said. "Tell them I was with you that night."

Shaken by the way his hands trembled and sweat dripped off his brow, she didn't respond. As perspiration dampened his heavy brows and made his skin glisten, he continually shifted toward a window and jumped when a door down the hall slammed. It wasn't so much how worried he was about being seen in the motel that rattled her as it was how fragmented he appeared, so pulled apart. He must have sensed how fearful she was about testifying, how the consequences might pull apart her own life, because that's when he told her, "Sooner or later the truth will come out, Ella. It always does."

She supposes her silence caused him doubt, just as some of her neighbors must have seen him on the walk to her house on those afternoons or nights when Arthur was working and never said anything. But someone betrayed her. After James was arrested she heard people speculate how he was a leader in the mutiny because he wanted to sabotage the war effort and that's why he wasn't at the pier the night of the explosion. He was a deserter.

Years after the war she learned he did twelve years.

All of this Ella records. She writes compulsively as if her life depended upon the facts of who she once was and had strived to be and who she wants to become, which, when she considers herself at age eighteen and at the advanced age she is now, isn't all that much different. Finally,

exhausted, at three-thirty in the morning she goes to bed, and when she wakes up, her grandson is gone.

When Akin doesn't visit her for five days she toys with the idea of crawling through the hole in the barbed wire at the train station to confront him, yet hesitates and allows herself a glimmer of hope because not once before New Year's Eve had he slept at her house. She doesn't want to shock him although Sunday morning, surprise of surprises, Akin gives her a jolt. Banging the knocker on her door, the doorbell having given up close to fifteen years ago, he smiles at her nervously when she lets him inside.

"I won't go to the honoring ceremony, Nana, but I want you to know I'm proud of you."

This declaration of faith that should cause her joy, she's afraid she might cry. Her grandson leans over her. How much height has she lost over the years? Three inches? Four? She will not be diminished. Even after she dies she will not have anyone considering her small.

"I have important things to say. I want you to hear."

"No."

"Don't go to that train station anymore. I'm leaving you the house. When I'm gone..." he opens his mouth, but she silences him by raising a hand: "promise me you'll talk to medical people and stay here. And go through my papers. The deed and insurance documents are in the front of my journal. Promise you'll read it."

"I'm going to stay here tonight, Nana, but don't talk like that."

"Say it! You must say it!"

Her grandson looks slightly amused, and for some reason that gives her another small flicker of hope. "I do. I promise."

Close to seventy people nod in solemn agreement when she tells them how women helped build the liberty ships in Richmond and how she lived in Port Chicago when the explosion destroyed so much. Not just the ships and port, nor the lives of men sent to prison, but something more important, the truth. Black enlisted men went to prison for mutiny while their white officers went free. Although the injustice of it all has long been acknowledged, she tells the audience, an assortment of veterans and government dignitaries, she's here to right wrongs. After her talk people gather around tables to eat small cakes, puff pastries and flakey-crust tartlets, and drink tea and coffee as several people ask her questions and discuss their own service. Some even thank her.

When the sun dips low in the sky and casts orange light through the floor to ceiling windows, she leaves Flynn Pavilion and drives toward MacArthur Bridge, which spans the river from Belle Isle. When she reaches the bridge, she stops, parks her car, gets out, and walks to the rail to look at the city's skyline. Periodically turning toward her unlocked car, she doesn't want anyone stealing her purse on the front seat and tossing her identification, what's left of it, a library and medical insurance cards, into a garbage bin. She will not be anonymous.

Using her good hip to hoist herself onto the middle rail, she leans forward. Staring downriver, the bridge lights come on, and so do the lights across the river in Windsor and at the Ren Cen and others skyscrapers. Sun slips down glass buildings, bronzes black water blue. She

loves what this city once was. Zug Island blast furnaces throwing off flames, locomotives powering right into the factory at Rouge and freighters carrying coke and iron ore pulling up to the docks. As silly as it sounds, she even liked the sight of Levy's old slag heap. Now look at the place. Three dollar cupcakes and five- dollar coffee, for one cup, mind you, up near the university.

What a fine day this was. The audience was so appreciative and the elegant little pastries and flower arrangements on tables overlooking the river something you might expect to find at classier gatherings. Sunlight poured through the windows the entire time she was there. Imagine! A sunny January day in Detroit although the temperature is frigid and ice flows drift on the river. Veterans and government officials will remember her, not that she told them everything, of course. She didn't mention, for example, the journal entry she wrote just this morning about the inquiry and the burdens some people carried years later.

And what would she have told them? That people were different during the war so wrongs were committed? You don't share a journal with strangers. Anyway, these days it's all public record, so if people want to know more about the explosion and its aftermath they can look it up on their computers or go to the library. Strangers don't need to know details that have stayed with her all these years, the questions the officer at the inquiry asked and how she tilted toward him and focused on his metals to still her anxiety. The man's uniform was deep blue, his metals bright brass.

"Mr. Jackson claims he was with you."

"I can't help what he claims."

"He was not at your house that night?"

"No."

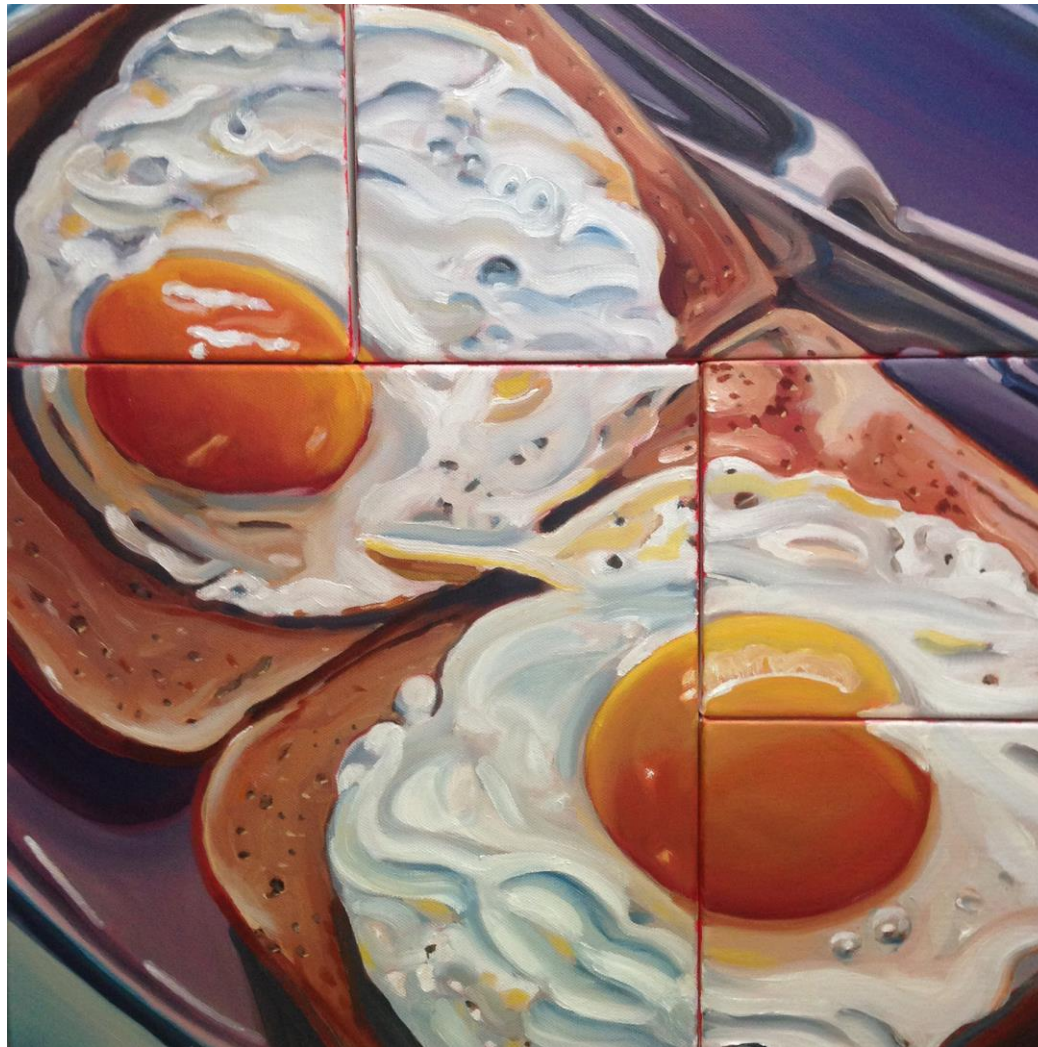
"Well, which is it? Was he there or was he not?"

"No Sir. He was not."

To this day, she recalls how she tried to narrow the distance between herself and the officer, as if by angling into him she could project confidence and weaken his doubts, and apparently, it worked. People, when confronted with difficult choices, will rationalize the truth. Ella leans over the rail toward the Navy man, stretches toward bronze and blue, and as the sun falls away and the Detroit River blackens, she closes the distance between them and the day's light goes out.

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S. J. MacLean's fiction appears in literary journals such as The Briar Cliff Review, Inkwell, Pennsylvania Literary Review and May Day Magazine (New American Press). MacLean lives in northern California and is working on a cycle of stories that originate in Detroit. macleansjm@gmail.com



EGGS AND TOAST

Craig Ford
Oil on Canvas
18" x 18"

Craig Ford, a graduate of the University of Georgia, is an oil painter who elevates ordinary objects into different contexts and ideas. Nostalgic icons and everyday items find places in his compositions, akin to a subtler form of Popart. www.craigfordfineart.com craig_ford@att.net

THE GOLDEN RULE THROUGH THE CENTURIES

“Do nothing to thy neighbor which thou wouldst not have him to thee hereafter.”

—Mahabharata, 800 B.C.

“That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self.”

—Dadistan-I dinik, Zend-Avesta 700 B.C.

“Hurt not others with that which pains yourself.”

—Undana Varga 500 B.C.

“Do not do unto others what you would not they should do unto you.”

—Confucius 5th century B.C.

“Never do to other persons what would pain thyself.”

—Panchatantra 200 B.C.

“Whatsoever thou wouldst that men should not do to thee, do not do that to them.”

—Hillel Ha-Babli 30 B.C.

“As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.”

—St. Luke 75 A.D.

“All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”

—St. Matthew 75 A.D.

“If people do good to you, you will do good to them, and if they oppress you, oppress them not again.”

—Mohammed 7th century A.D.

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Jim Reed collects quotes, among other things, at Reed Books, the Museum of Fond Memories in Downtown Birmingham, AL. www.JimReedBooks.com



LIFE DRAWING STUDY #2

Jeff Faulk
Charcoal on Paper
18" x 36"

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