

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 15 Issue 3



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

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FRONT COVER: SPARROWS - 40" x 50" - *Diana Malivani was born on the coast of the Black Sea, thus her love for a riotous profusion of colors and energy in her paintings. She is also a physician and author/illustrator of children's books published in Russian, English, French and German. Diana Malivani@yahoo.com*

BACK COVER: DOWNTOWN - *Lydia Randolph, a member of the Alabama Pastel Society, is a full-time artist and musician from North Alabama, where she lives, plays and works. Lydia typically paints scenes of people doing ordinary things, like shopping downtown in the 50s. layaga@bellsouth.net*



THE FOUNTAIN OF SWEET MELANCHOLIA

Atraxura

Digitally Manipulated Photograph

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

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

THE 2nd ANNUAL
ANDREW GLAZE PRIZE FOR POETRY

Lucille Clifton wrote about the importance of bearing witness as a poet. “The Gulf Eats a Riverkeeper” by Cheyenne Taylor is a masterful poem that bears witness on several levels. It is a social justice poem, describing the damage to ocean and ocean life in the moments after an oil tanker explodes. It is an ekphrastic poem, a description of and response to Merritt Johnson’s painting, “Crow Booming the One Big Water, Gulls Flying Away” (part of the Birmingham Museum of Art’s collection.) And it is an observation of humankind’s influence on the natural world. Taylor uses an intriguing form -- split columns of text appear like currents in the gulf and also mimic a crow’s jagged flight as it skirts the burning tanker. Sharp, inventive imagery bears witness to the color and movement of both the gulf and Johnson’s painting: the crow’s “red instinct,” the “cotton wings of gulls,” the chevrons of life as birds and manta rays flee the disaster. Together these elements create a powerful scene which stands alone yet invites the reader to engage with Johnson’s artwork – exactly what an ekphrastic poem should do. I am pleased to award “The Gulf Eats a Riverkeeper” the Andrew Glaze Poetry Prize.

Laura Shovan, Juror

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

THE GULF EATS A RIVERKEEPER

Cheyenne Taylor

After Merritt Johnson, "Crow Booming the
One Big Water, Gulls Flying Away"

who knew it to be true:
the way a crow would skip
dark water, following its own red
instinct into the gust
of gray seeds, rays
catching on the up swing, narrowly
avoiding the cotton wings of gulls.

Chevrons of life beget
pattern demonstrations,
looms of warped silt where
manta rays slit the ripe
ocean through its middle,
ripple to a clavicle
of smoke where oil burns,
and shadows striate water
dark then luminous.

At last
the dull notch of backwash
laces tendrils into the brush,
stroked dandelion yellow.
Heady streaks of petroleum-
brown haze the
offal strands
that pitch the yokes
of collars, pubic bones.

The crow angles its hollow body,
prostrate in the negative space.
A burning ship presses to the horizon.

.....

Cheyenne Taylor received her BA and MA degrees in English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and has worked as a public librarian, university writing tutor, and freelancer for the past two years. Ms. Taylor has earned the 2017 Hackney Literary Award – 2nd Place State Poetry and the 2018 Andrew Glaze Prize. Her poems and reviews have appeared in The Cincinnati Review, Waccamaw, Southern Women’s Journal, and Birmingham Poetry Review.
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DOLLAR TREE DOMINO THEORY

Author Unknown

(Instructions found inside a package of tiny dominoes)

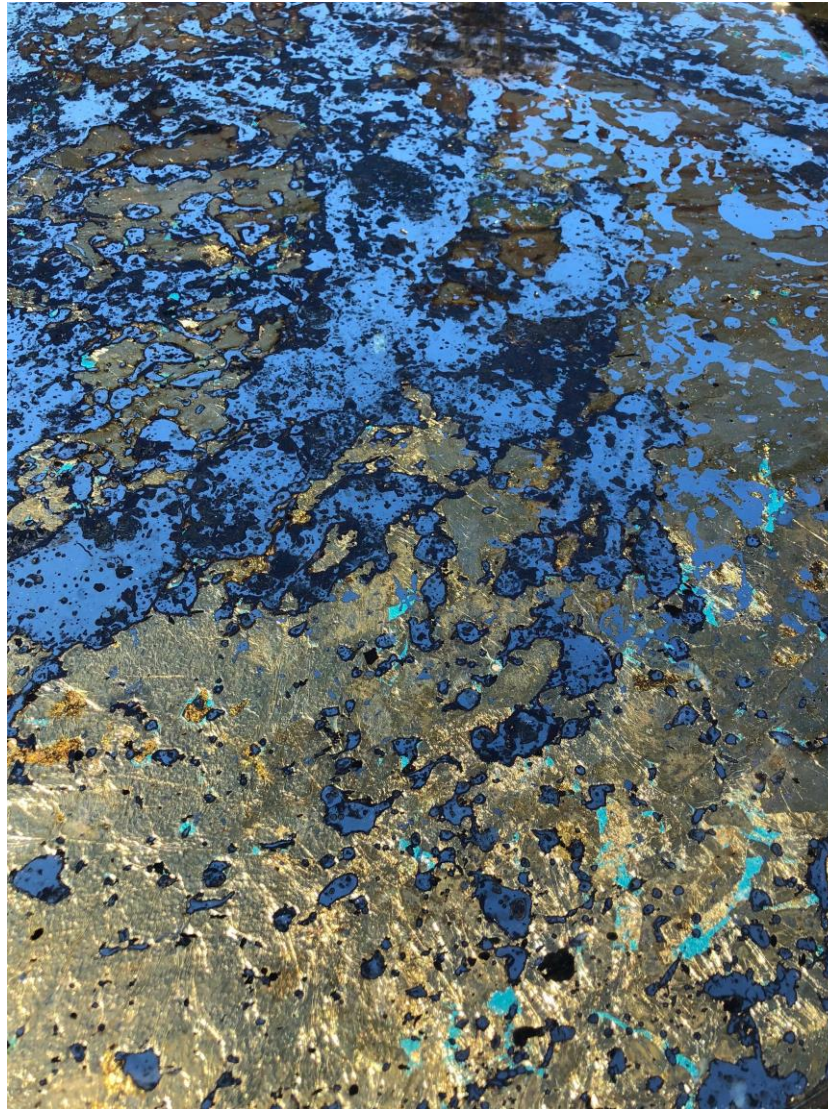
Objet du jeu: Pour être le premier joueur pour se débarrasser de tous leurs dominos.

Jeu De Jeu: Placez tous les dominos sur la table – visage vers le bas. Tous les dominos devraient alors être brouillés (mélange) complètement. Chaque joueur dessine sept (7) dominos et les tient vers le haut de sorte que seulement ils puissent les voir. Les dominos restants sur la table s'appellent la "pile". Le joueur avec les doubles jeux les plus élevés d'abord en étendant ce domino sur la table – receptrice. Le jeu continue alors d'une mode alternative. Afin de jouer, le prochain joueur doit avoir un domino avec un nombre assorti de taches. Que le domino devrait être placé sur la table, dans la ligne – extrémité à finir avec les dominos précédemment placés, Le joueur peut jouer à l'une ou l'autre extrémité de la ligne de domino. Si un joueur ne peut pas jouer parce qu'ils n'ont pas une allumette, ils doivent alors tirer de la "pile" jusqu'à ce qu'ils tirent un domino qui peut être joué. Si ce joueur ne tire pas un domino jouable, ils doivent passer et leurs jeux opposés jusqu'à ce qu'ils puissent faire une allumette avec un de leurs dominos.

Batteries not included.

"I may not have always said what they would have liked for me to say, but they knew it was meant in good nature."

--Will Rogers



GOLD RUSH

Timothy Poe
Antique Mirror Patina Solution
42" Diameter

Tim Poe is a multi-media artist living in Birmingham, AL. He is a graduate of UAB and was the first artist to restore & convert one of the historic buildings at Thomas Republic Steel facility into a studio space. timothypoe23@gmail.com

PATRIOTS AND REBELS

John Bush

*[The following is an excerpt from **Patriots and Rebels**, a historical novel set in North Alabama in the years 1863-65. In it we encounter the stark reality of patriotism and rebellion played out in the words, thoughts, experiences, and emotions of Thomas Files and his fourteen-year-old daughter Mary Francis. Born and raised in the hill country of north Alabama, Tom is determined to defend the United States of America as his ancestors had done in 1776. His strong sense of patriotic loyalty places him and his family in situations of profound conflict and danger. **Patriots and Rebels** is based on the actual records of real people - white Southerners fighting for the Union.]*

Rebel yells pierced the quiet North Alabama night like the yowl of wildcats, jerking us awake. The thud, thud, thud of bullets hitting the house added to our terror. Both of us girls jumped out of bed and went running, screaming for Pa. Ma was sitting straight up in bed, shaking with fear, Pa holding her tight in his arms.

The gruff voice, when it came, sounded very close, from beside the door or maybe at a window. “This is a warning, Tom Files. If we have to come here again, there’s going to be bloodshed. Next time we will get you. All of you.”

The voice told Pa to get his self into town and sign up to fight for the Southern cause.

After that there was just the crunch of gravel under the hooves of departing horses, letting us know the attack was over. The only remaining sounds was our muffled sobs.

The morning sun broke through the gray winter clouds, letting us see the damage done to our house. None of the windows was broke. Their aim had been deliberate. They’d not intended to do us real harm. It was a warning, just like the voice said. It wasn’t the first time the Home Guard had paid us a call, but they’d never been that violent before.

That is how it came to be that Pa and six or eight other men from around here left on the third day of the New Year in 1863. They was going to fight for the Union, with the First Alabama Cavalry, United States Volunteers. He was going to sign on for one year, so we should expect him back home about the same time the next year.

I marked that down in my mind. January 1864. I’d be counting the days.

Pa left just before my thirteenth birthday. It was the worst day of my life, and it lasted near about three years. Longer than that, truth be told, because it still comes back in my sleep, leaving me weak to the stomach. Pa’s words that day still ring clear as a bell in my mind: “*My grandpa and his daddy fought to make this Union back in ’76, and I can’t sit by and let these Secesh* take it apart without putting up a fight. We’re Patriots, and we ain’t taking any part with this rebellion against the*

United States of America.”

The trip to Camp Davies, Mississippi would take three or four days if they was lucky, travelling through the rough hill country of northwest Alabama. If snow came, or if they had to hide out from the Home Guard or Confederate conscription officers along the way, it might take a week or more. Pa figured they'd be safer traveling by night and resting up by day. If the Rebels caught them, they'd either shoot them dead on the spot or else make them sign up with the Confederacy.

“I'm sorry, Mattie, but I have to take the work mule with me,” he said. “The army says volunteers like me should bring a pack animal if we have one, and old Rabbit will do just fine. He's near about as big as a horse and stronger than most, so he'll be easy for me to ride. You're going to need the horse for sure, and it will be here for you until one side or the other comes and takes it from you. I suppose we've just been lucky none of the scavengers have taken them both off before now anyway.”

Ma was crying all the while. He took her in his arms, and they held each other tight, rocking together gently as the sun sank below the trees. Penny and me cried, too, holding on to the both of them. Then he mounted old Rabbit and headed off down the lane to meet the others. I recognized Mr. John Shaw and Mr. Jasper Whitley in the bunch, and there was some more I didn't know.

At the end of the lane Pa looked back and gave us a final goodbye wave, then turned and rode away. Ma stood, her body rocking back and forth, arms crossed tightly against her breast. She stayed there looking after him until there was nothing left to see but a faint trail of dust. When the last hint of the trail disappeared in the wind she sank down into a chair, her arm around my waist, rocking Penny in her lap. Her soft blue eyes had gone still and blank as she stared, unseeing, into the darkening winter sky.

A terrible thought came over me. We was alone.

.....

John C. Bush was born in the panhandle of Florida and grew up in Montgomery, Alabama. A retired Presbyterian minister, he holds degrees from Samford University. A prolific writer in the field of religion, he has turned in retirement to historical fiction. Patriots and Rebels is his first novel dealing with the actual experiences of people from north Alabama who fought on the Union side in America's bloodiest conflict. He and his wife live in Decatur, AL. jbush3838@att.net

*Secesh refers to the Secessionists, those who favored departure from the United States to form the Confederate States of America

NED WAS MADE KING OF HIS COMPANY

David Flynn

Ned was made king of his company's Christmas party. His wife Glenda was queen. In the dining room of the office building where they worked, Ned an office clerk and Glenda in maintenance, their names were read by the company CEO from the podium. The whole room stood and applauded, although there was something funny about two low-level employees, working for the company more than twenty years, each without a promotion, being made king and queen. Ned glowed; Glenda scowled.

The CEO put a velvet crown on Ned's head, and a plastic tiara on Glenda's. He handed Ned a scepter and Glenda a wand. In the glow of the Christmas decorations and the clank of plates being removed from the tables by the catering staff, Ned blessed the crowd. Glenda gave the assembled office workers a nasty frown.

"They are making fun of us," Glenda told him as they walked back to their table, one of the square ones against the back wall. "Quit acting like a moron."

But Ned was enjoying waving the scepter at everybody, and the fake bows from accountants and lawyers who ordinarily would be ordering him around. He did feel like a king.

So that Monday when the clerk showed up still dressed in his crown and still waving his scepter, the higher employees laughed, thinking it was a joke. But it wasn't. The claims coordinator asked him to mail some envelopes, and he snapped, "Mail them yourself, underling." The office manager, his immediate supervisor, ordered him to "Take off that damn get up," and he refused. Finally, the CFO, emerging from his vast office, said, "Ned, Christmas is over."

"That's stupid," Ned said. The king sneered.

All morning he refused to do work, and once even ordered the intern to "Fetch me a coffee."

Glenda was called to the office manager's desk from the toilet she had been cleaning in the early afternoon.

"Glenda, what in hell is going on with your husband?" the woman, large and scowly, said.

"He's just gone nuts," the cleaning woman said. "All weekend he wore that damn hat and wouldn't do a lick of work. I think he's crazy."

"At first, we thought he was joking, but now it's interfering with his job. He has one day to get back to Earth, one day, or he's fired. And he'd better not call the CFO 'peon' again."

Twenty-two years on the job and that's all they give him, Glenda thought. What in the world would we do if he didn't bring home his paycheck, small as it was?

Ned was walking down the hallway of the eighth floor when his wife caught up with him. He wore the crown and carried the scepter. She gasped. The CEO's snotty wife was screaming. Ned had hit her in the head with his scepter when she refused to bow.

Security came running from behind her.

King of crap, Glenda thought bitterly.

.....

David Flynn was born in the textile mill company town of Bemis, TN. His jobs have included newspaper reporter, magazine editor and university teacher. He has five degrees and is both a Fulbright Senior Scholar and a Fulbright Senior Specialist with a recent grant in Indonesia. He is director of the Musicians Reunion, an annual blues festival now in its 35th year. david.flynn.writer@hushmail.com

"I can make amazingly bad fried eggs, and in spite of what people tell me about this method and that, I continue to make amazingly bad fried eggs; tough, with edges like some kind of dirty starched lace, and a taste part sulphur and part singed newspaper."

—MFK Fisher

KEEPER OF THE MEMORIES

Lynn Edge Reeves

My brother and I met for breakfast to celebrate his birthday. I had decided that this year my gift to him would be our father's Bible. As I got ready to take it to him, I was overcome with the thought that it has been almost 50 years since Daddy touched this book.

My brother and I sat at the restaurant going through the pages. Daddy's name written in his own hand. Beautiful. Almost like calligraphy. The bulletin from the last Sunday Daddy had been well enough to attend church. The places where he had marked a scripture. Beside the verses, the name of the pastor who had used it as the subject of his sermon and the date he had preached it.

"Remind me about that time when the preacher . . .," my brother said as he stared at the book. He didn't need to finish. I knew which Sunday he wanted to hear about. The time when the preacher chose Numbers 22:28 as his scripture. That day when he got a little confused while talking about when the Lord spoke through the mouth of an ass.

I told the story. My brother couldn't have been more than three or four years old when it happened, but he says he thinks he remembers it. Well, of course he does. Who could forget the Sunday when Mother spent the rest of the service trying to keep Daddy from laughing out loud?

As I was telling the story, it hit me. I am IT! I am only oldest living one. I am the keeper of the family stories. I am the guardian of the memories. What an enormous burden to bear! How heavy the responsibility of making sure even the youngest ones hear about how my grandmother and I found a still while we were exploring in the woods one day.

As I take on this task, I have to ask myself – how do I make them listen? Invite them all to a party where there will be gifts for everyone and then, instead, lock the doors and force them to sit and listen to hours and hours of memories? Discover some "undeletable" app I can secretly put on their phones that tells story after story every time they try to send a text message? Probably not the best approach.

(Note to self: Be sure they hear about the woman who is our DNA link to Robert E. Lee, the lady who had an extra finger on one hand.)

Do I wait until, like my brother, they ask to hear the story? How can they ask when they never heard about our ancestor, the Civil War bride who accidentally ended up with two husbands?

(Note to self: Be sure to tell them about how my grandparents met because of an outhouse. Second note to self: Explain to them what an outhouse is.)

I try to think how I learned the stories. I remember. I learned them sitting on the porch and peeling peaches with my mother and grandmother. I learned them over a game of Dominos with my great-grandmother. People don't do those things any more.

(Note to self: Be sure to tell them about the endless hours my great-grandmother spent in a windowless room sewing sacks so she could support the children she was raising by herself after she became a widow.)

Where do I go to connect with my children? With my brothers? With my nieces and nephew and with their children? Maybe I'm just not up to this task. But, if not me, then who?

The problem is they don't know that they want to know. They won't know that until they are older. And I might not be around to tell them. I can't sit and wait for them to realize all they don't know. I have to weave this tapestry now and I have to make it vital enough that they will sit at the loom with me.

And so here I am, with an absolute treasure chest full of stories – some funny, some tragic, some inspirational, all a part of who I am, who all the members of my family are. I want to share the jewels inside. I want it, not just so the next generations will know the names of these people they never met, but so that they will know who THEY are. I want them to know they come from strong stock. I want them to know that they can overcome adversity because they see how others have done it.

It's never been easy being the oldest, so much older than my brothers that I think of myself as their second mother. And now, what an awesome, scary job I have in front of me! But I will get it done. I will see to it that they hear. I will weave the tapestry. I will share the jewels. Because the stories are beautiful pieces of the puzzle that is our family. And, mostly, because I come from strong stock, from a long line of determined, gritty, red-headed women.

(Note to self: Be sure to tell them about the time my grandmother sawed a concrete block in half with a hand saw.)

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*Lynn Edge Reeves is a former reporter for The Birmingham News and the author of several books. She currently is a freelance writer and editor and is working on two new book projects. While she may be a wonderful keeper of family memories, most days she can't remember where she left her glasses. **lynnedge@bham.rr.com***

THE WILD KINDNESS

Jim Daniels

of droopy roadside flowers,
battered by exhaust,
waving.

AFTER

Jim Daniels

Your hairline
glistened like wet apricots
in the morning market.

Jim Daniels' recent poetry books include Rowing Inland and Street Calligraphy, 2017, and The Middle Ages, 2018. He is the author of five collections of fiction, four produced screenplays, and has edited five anthologies, including Challenges to the Dream: The Best of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Writing Awards, a competition for high school and college students that he founded in 1999. His next collection of short fiction, The Perp Walk, will be published by Michigan State University Press. jimdaniels@cmu.edu

EXERCISM

Mary Johnson-Butterworth

Begone, my austere Arbiter of Time,
My Batterer who no longer bests me.
Reduce yourself by half, nay, whole.
Ah, to lap up this loss of laps,
To choose not to swim or bike them,
Never to soak in sweat my shaky arms,
My flabby abs, my saggy ass.
You once Fit Bitterly into my days.
Off with your heed for health!
No more tennis for dummies
Or numbing down for your regime.
Permission to leave the pool
Of oppressive standards
For a crotch no longer raw,
Knees for kneeling, I pray.
Ears and eyes no longer
Chlorinated, salined, burning,
Stadiums left to the fans,
Marathons to the Grecians earned,
Sprints replaced by spritzers,
An afternoon delighting in itself
Rather than your trial by fire.
No sopping, harried chaos
Just to make a meeting.
I banish you, Banshee of Rigor.
I reclaim my poet's vigor.

.....

Mary Johnson-Butterworth has been writing all her life and recently embraced "serious" poetry, although not eschewing comical content. Formerly she co-founded a copywriting / marketing firm. Mary has consistently engaged in Social Justice activism throughout the Birmingham area. She is on staff at Anytown Alabama and co-facilitates YWCA Heritage panels.

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EL MESÓN DE LA GUITARRA

James Miller Robinson

Sometimes fantasy and dream actually do merge in reality. On our first night in Madrid we went walking through the Plaza Mayor and the public market, then ended up going into this old tavern called “*El Mesón de la Guitarra*.” We took a small table in the back corner below street level, beneath thick brick walls and arched ceilings in a dungeon-like room hundreds of years old. We ordered *tortilla española*, fried calamari rings, and beer. The eggs in the tortilla were so slimy we asked the waiter if they had been undercooked. He told us no, that’s just the way they make *tortilla española* in Madrid, with the eggs more liquid than in other parts of Spain.

A young man with black shoulder-length hair and a guitar took a chair right beside us and started rendering deep flamenco. This was the kind of place I had been hoping to find throughout our weeks in Spain. We had been to flamenco shows in Granada and Seville, but they seemed somewhat aimed at anonymous tourists and didn’t have the more intimate atmosphere of *El Mesón de la Guitarra*.

He could tell I was getting into the music as I kept time with my foot and eventually ventured into blatantly clapping out rhythm with *palmadas*. We had gone into the luthier shop of Mariano Conde a few blocks away on Amnistía Street earlier in the afternoon where a picture of Leonard Cohen hung on the wall along with pictures of Ed Sheeran, Paco de Lucía, and dozens of other famous musicians who had played or bought Conde guitars over the decades. I engaged the guitarist in some light conversation between pieces, mostly about his guitar and hand-made Spanish guitars in general. I told him I had three hand-made Mexican guitars and one from Spain as well. I looked at his guitar, all scratched and cracked, and realized that it must be the only one he owned.

His name was José and he was from Jaén in Andalucía, one of the nests of flamenco but in the shadows of the larger Granada, Sevilla, and Córdoba. He looked at me and smiled as he played, as though playing directly for me. The people at other tables were talking and laughing in their own multiple conversations, sometimes loud and rowdy, but I was listening and focusing on José’s music.

Then something happened straight out of my most private dreams and fantasies. José lifted the guitar from his thigh and offered it to me. At first, I waved my hand in polite refusal, but he insisted, as did my wife, so I took it and strummed out a few of the flamenco chords and progressions I have been able to mimic over my years of playing guitar. When I finished, I saw that the people all around the lower floor dining rooms had set down their forks, their knives, their

glasses, and a flutter of applause clattered across the rooms. I'm not sure whether it was because they enjoyed what I played, or because I stopped playing.

In any case, it was one of those moments that happen only in dream or fantasy. But it really happened for me that night thanks to this young guitarist from Jaén playing in this crowded, 500-year-old basement tavern just outside the Plaza Mayor in Madrid on a Saturday night when the place was packed with people from all over the world. José from Jaén had the humility to play on when it seemed no one chattering at the tables cared to listen. Then once he found a little ray of spotlight, he had the generosity to share it with me, a total stranger. José from Jaén not only shared a few moments of his light with me that night, he shared the mystic gospel of flamenco.

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James Miller Robinson is author of The Caterpillars at Saint Bernard and Boca del Río in the Afternoon. He is from Huntsville, AL. jmr815@comcast.net

NOTE TO SAM FROM ERIN

Author Unknown

Sam,

Hey sweets! What cha doing? Nothing much here! I just got off the phone with you. Oh yeah, I wasn't in a good mood today. I was kinda depressed. I tried to cover it up so you wouldn't notice. I guess it didn't work. I wrote you two more poems, this time they are not about Nathan. So you won't think they suck! Just kidding!

Tommy was talking to me, and asked if I had heard that Jennifer was going to dump him, and I said no. He said she just wanted to dump him b/c they were in a fight. And that she didn't want to ne more. Is that true. Or did she just lie to him? Ne ways!

I talked to Quinn today. And she told me to tell you hey. Tell Rocky C. and Tony S. that I said hello again. Well I am tired so check-ya-later. Write me back.
Me always

Erin

.....

Note to Sam from Erin was found in an abandoned Birmingham carport among lots of other lost memories. Dated 8/24/96. No word from Sam.

THE IDEAL MAN

Anonymous

The image of my ideal man, dwelling as it does in the hazy “fringe” of consciousness, is necessarily an indefinite and incomplete conception. But it is the conception of a man of fine presence and outer comeliness; of one who has outgrown the rawness of youth and its attendant follies, who is addicted neither to a cane, a monocle nor to razor toes...who smokes the pipe of peace and tranquility, not a roll of white paper; who places the center of gravity for the universe outside himself, and who isn't lazy.

In prep school my ideal man was very definite and tangible, but in these latter days he has yielded to manifold other interests, doubtless a case of the survival of the fittest. At present he is a sort of nebular hypothesis, vague, indistinct and universal.

Perhaps his physique gives him his masterful air, but I feel as if it must be more than skin deep. He reverences womanhood and instinctively lifts his hat to his washerwoman, but often utterly ignores my presence. This ideal man of mind would never send me flowers...

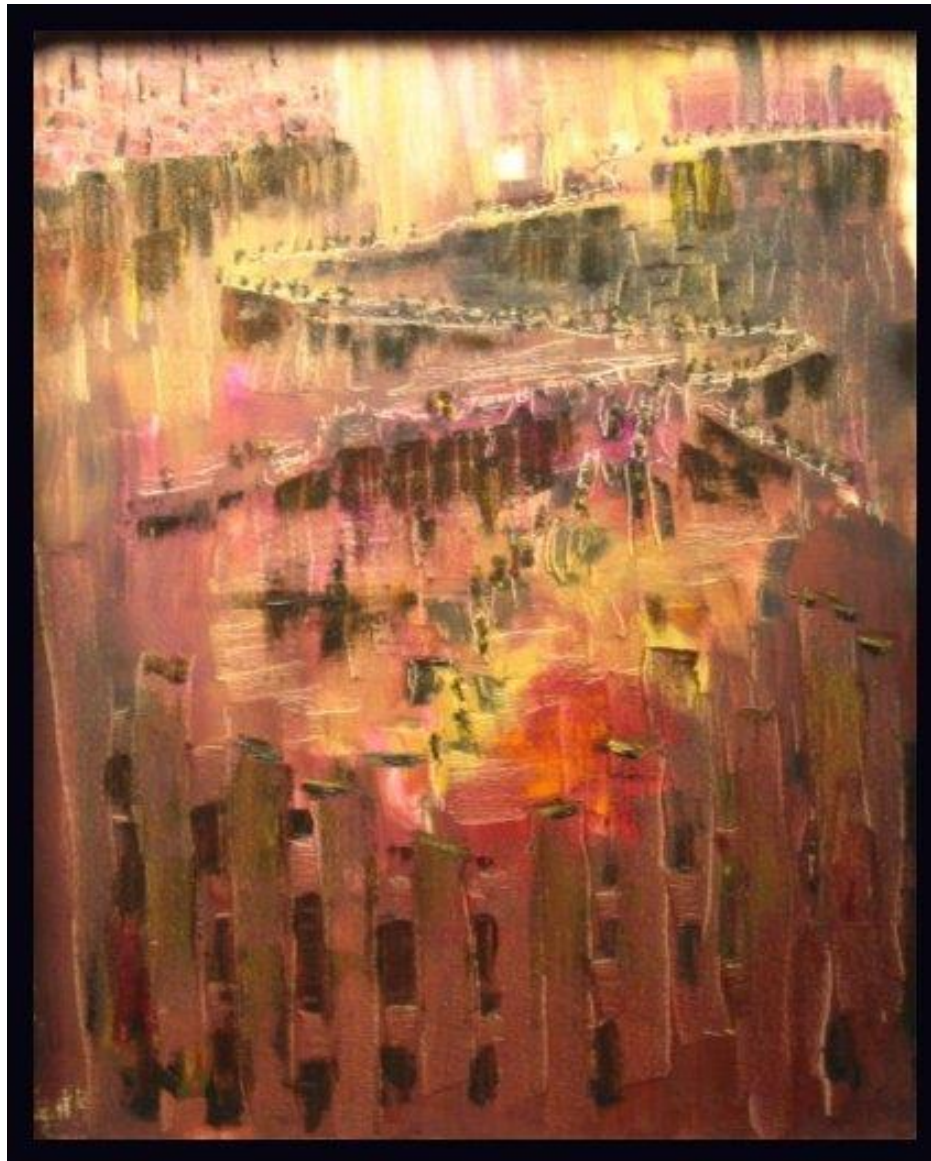
His faults don't seem to have impressed me strongly, but I hope he has them, for when my analysis is tested by synthesis, I'd like him to be quite human.

.....

From The Lllamarada, 1899 yearbook of Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts

"Let's face it, the Wild West would have had a lot less shootings if the architects had made the towns big enough for everybody."

—Argus Hamilton



ABYSS

Ted Openshaw

The late Ted Openshaw loved to paint at his home in Lipscomb, AL.

SO THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED

Richard Key

It was three o'clock on Sunday afternoon, and God was coming over. As you can imagine, there was some straightening up to do. The doorbell rang at exactly three, supporting the adage that God is seldom early, but never late. His radiance was everything you'd expect, and we wore our darkest sunglasses.

We were still in the small talk phase when our little Jimmy ran in from the backyard.

"This is our son Jimmy. Jimmy, this is God. You know God, the one we talk about so much and say our prayers to?" Jimmy looked a bit dazed.

"Wow! You sure are bright! Is your last name Dammit?"

"Jimmy!"

God chuckled. "Kids!"

Barbara got tea for all of us as Jimmy ran off to his room.

"Since you're here in person," I began as we all started to feel chummier, "I've long been an admirer of your creation. It's just so magnificent. The pictures we see from that Hubble telescope are amazing. All the thousands of galaxies, nebulae, and such."

"Oh, it was nothing."

"Well, it wasn't nothing either," I protested. "It was—and is—quite spectacular. And just on our little planet, the oceans, mountains, canyons, glaciers, cloud formations. It just takes my breath away."

God sipped at his tea. "Well, you're kind. I did feel at the time that it was good. Very good if I say so myself."

"It must have taken *forever*," Barbara chimed in. "I mean millions and millions of years."

"Oh, well, when you're busy it doesn't seem so long. Really, it just seemed like five or six days."

"Five or six days! Would you listen at that, Dave? You're just so modest."

God chuckled softly to himself. "Here's a little story I don't tell everyone, but you might find it amusing. Actually, I hadn't planned to start another creation right then. It had been eons since I tried making a universe from scratch and I was a bit rusty. Oh, I had some designs in my head and did a lot of daydreaming, that sort of thing, but didn't really have a firm design on paper, so to speak."

"So, there *are* other universes?"

“Oh, wait. Did I say that? No! No, of course not... I misspoke. Uh, anyway, I was in the shop tinkering with some elements, playing around with different combinations, seeing what would happen if you heated them up. I was whistling away like I do when I’m in a good mood. Anyway, I walked over to get some padded gloves, and on the way back I slipped on a cat toy—one of those mice you fill with catnip or something—and knocked over a couple of flasks filled with hydrogen and a few other things.

” Here, he began to really laugh out loud. “All of a sudden there was this huge blaze, an explosion like you wouldn’t believe.”

“The Big Bang?”

“I’ll say it was. Blew my shop sky high and kept on going. I decided now must be the time, so I just went with it. Looking back now, I think things worked out for the best, but when it was just starting out, I had some serious doubts. As you can see, I’m still glowing from all that.” He chuckled to himself, and added, “You know what was really strange? I didn’t have a cat! I don’t know where that toy came from!”

We all laughed, but God doubled over in merriment, clearly enjoying telling on himself. Barbara and I looked at each other and shared this humorous moment. God had to leave soon afterwards, had things to do. That’s the way it is when you’re a deity, I suppose. I took the dishes back to the kitchen and Barbara joined me.

“Well, that was entertaining,” she commented, still smiling, “and informative. Looks like the universe was the result of a completely random accident after all, like scientists have been telling us for years.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, truly bewildered by her comment. “I understood that the universe was created by one very intelligent and powerful God, and everything pretty much happened for a reason.”

We finished cleaning up in silence, the way couples do when all the conflict is internal, and no one wants to throw the first punch. Barbara took off her apron and said something about going for a walk. I sat down in a chair and picked up a magazine.

.....

Richard Key is a part-time pathologist living in Dothan with his wife Laurie and the venerable feline Kiko. He has been writing stories and essays for about ten years. Although he recently qualified for social security, he has opted to remain socially insecure.

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NOW FULL, NOW DARK

Irene Latham

As if the moon is ever
just the moon. As if
the stars don't shuffle

and burn, tattoo
themselves against
our kneecaps. Forever

comes and goes.
We grasp, strain as
if our lungs can
trestle a tempest.
And when the treetops
whistle, we uncurl

our fists, swing toward
the next branch.
It takes our whole

lives long to realize
we've got it wrong –
dust and more

dust. We pack words in our
cheeks like chipmunks
preparing for blizzard.

As if spring isn't coming.
As if waterfalls won't
flood the valley. Every

time we drown and drown
willingly. As if it could
be any other way.

.....

Irene Latham writes imaginative books for kids from her home in Blount County, AL.

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APPOINTMENT IN SAMARRA

Somerset Maugham

Death speaks:

“There was a merchant in Bagdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling and said, Master, just now when I was in the market-place I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned, I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the market-place and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.”

.....

Somerset Maugham's Appointment in Samarra is a retelling of an ancient Mesopotamian tale. A noted author and playwright, he died in 1965.

“Just because your voice reaches halfway around the world doesn't mean you are wiser than when it reached only to the end of the bar.”

—Edward R. Murrow

**WHEN I WAS YOUNG I WOULD WALK IN THE WOODS
FOREVER**

Ron Riecki

and the woods were always calm, even in a storm
and the woods would always solve my reeling unafraid heart

and the woods were green as laurel, as green as tea and teal
and the woods were my parents when my parents were drowned in life

and the woods would kiss and cuddle
and the woods would tolerate my breath

and the woods felt like the wind in winter and the sun in summer and the spring of
spring
and the woods would hold strong in fall

and the woods have a mind and have a body
and the woods always ate my death.

.....

Ron Riecki's books include And Here: 100 Years of Upper Peninsula Writing, 1917-2017, Here: Women Writing on Michigan's Upper Peninsula, The Way North: Collected Upper Peninsula New Works, and U.P.: a novel. Riecki is currently working on a memoir, essays, and flash non-fiction. ronriekki@hotmail.com



HOMER, ALASKA

Digital Photograph
Lisa Oestreich

Lisa Oestreich, a self-taught photographer, is a retired physician who recently traded her white coat and stethoscope for artist's garb and a paint brush. She and her husband live in a loft in downtown Birmingham, AL, with their dog, Baker. photolisa.lo@gmail.com

A FLAW IN THE OINTMENT

Jim Pate

When I was a student at Auburn University back in the 1970's some of my favorite classes were in English composition and English literature. Since I had gone to high school in Sand Rock, a very small community in northeast Alabama, it took me a while to adjust to the challenges of college level coursework. Fortunately I made "A's" in my English classes, which kept my overall grade point average at a somewhat acceptable level.

In on English class the instructor, a Graduate Assistant, over the course of the first several weeks, covered numerous well-known creations of some of the best poets who ever lived. In practically every instance somewhere in the exposition of a poem this instructor would begin a sentence with the phrase "Now the flaw in this poem is..." and then elucidate on the said "flaw." After this had occurred a number of times in successive classes I jotted down a bit of doggerel that I showed to a classmate sitting nearby at the time and that I now share with you, dear reader.

"I think that I have never saw
A poem that did not have a flaw.
That is why I wrote this one
To show for once it could be done."

My classmate was only slightly amused, and I did not show this to the instructor since I wanted to protect my good English grade record up to the point in my college life.

It is very doubtful that this bit of whimsy will ever make it into any sort of poetry anthology. However, it is now my pleasure to have you see it. Please feel free to pass this rhyme along to any humorous poetry fans you know—if any.

(Ogden Nash, I hope somehow you are seeing this—and smiling.)

.....

Jim Pate dabbles in writing, is a retired librarian, teaches English as a second language, and is a choir member and deacon at his church. A Birminghamian, he is a world-class Scrabble player and loves boomerangs and Caribbean steel drums.

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AUTUMN BEATITUDES

Charles Kinnaird

I am happy with the leaves.
Let them fall
And let them be.
Let there be no stench of burning,
No dissonant noise of leaf blowers,
But let them rest on the ground
Covering a thousand footsteps of summer.
I am happy with beans.
Dried beans in the pantry
Assure me that there is bounty in the earth
And that the world is latent with possibilities.
I am happy with the way they swirl about
in the rinsing bowl
Like hundreds of prayers
On unstrung rosary beads.
If ever I am unsure of what to do next,
I can always cook beans.
I am happy with the sharp clear angular slant
Of the afternoon sunlight,
Reminding me that there comes a time
To slow down.
A time to not think.
A time to settle
Like autumn leaves on the ground.
Like beans in the bottom of the rinsing bowl.

.....

Charles Kinnaird is an English major who makes a living as a registered nurse in Birmingham, AL, where he resides with his wife and daughter. He shares some of his poetry and essays on his blog and meets when he can with a small band of fellow writers.

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Shawn Wray

As I was driving in to work the night shift this evening, I saw something that I haven't seen in a very long time.

I had just pulled off I 20/59 where it runs through downtown Birmingham just before it gets to the dreaded "Malfunction Junction." Anyone from Birmingham knows what I'm talking about. I pulled down to 17th Street and stopped at a red light, waiting to turn. Across the street there was a construction site and a huge crane that stretched a hundred or so feet into the sky. On top of that crane was a platform that had a couple of big, heavy duty metal containers on it...the kind that would be loaded onto a flat car for a train. He was standing on top of that.

The Big Boy.

You know who the Big Boy is. He's the smiling mascot for a giant hamburger that has been passed around to various restaurant chains for decades. He's probably most recognizable if you've seen the Austin Powers movies. Dr. Evil used him as a spaceship.

As I sat there in my car and looked up at him, smiling with a gigantic Santa cap waving in the cold wind, I smiled. He has been the subject of a lot of laughing in my family over the years.

When I was a little kid I was absolutely terrified of the Big Boy.

The story all stems from something that happened to me when I was about three or four years old. This would have been circa 1980 or '81. We were living in Columbus, Mississippi at the time. My dad was in the Air Force and my brother was a baby.

I can only remember two things about living in Columbus. One was that there was an orange replica of the Statue of Liberty in the middle of town. The other was that we went to a church where the pastor didn't care for children very much.

At least, he didn't care for me.

It might have had something to do with the handful of times that his services were interrupted by things that I did. Like the time I got stuck crawling through the opening in the back of a rocking chair in the nursery and the attendant had to go get my dad out of church to come free me.

That's another story.

We had what is commonly referred to as “children’s church” on

Sunday nights. We would sing, play some games, hear a Bible story, and possibly get a snack. It allowed the adults to pay attention to the pastor without interruption and it kept us from being incredibly bored by “big church.”

One night the pastor announced that there would be a special guest for children’s church. The big doors in the back of the room opened and a monster walked inside.

He had feet nearly as big as my entire body. He was wearing a pair of red and white checkered overalls. And his head...was not from this world.

He had hair as black as sin. His mouth was frozen in a grin that looked like he was happy about the absolute horror that was shooting like ice through my veins. His huge, round eyes devoid of any semblance of a soul pierced my heart like a red-hot dagger.

The Big Boy was the stuff of nightmares...and he was grinning at me.

I screamed.

When I tell you that I screamed I don’t mean that I let out a little yelp and then cried like little kids tend to when they’re being shy. I mean that I let out a yell that would make a banshee get goose bumps on the back of her neck.

I made the Wray name proud that day. My ancestor, Faye, was one of the screaming greats.

The church was full of laughing, smiling children and parents looking on with joy. And there was one little boy that was screaming like someone had just set his shoelaces on fire and he was trying to put them out with a bucket of ants.

My dad picked me up as quick as he could and ran out of the sanctuary as the Big Boy led the rest of the children down to the church basement to have a party. I got a lot calmer once I was out of the room. My parents explained to me that the Big Boy was just a costume and that there was a very nice man inside. He went to our church and I saw him all the time. Wouldn’t I like to go to children’s church and have fun with all the other boys and girls?

I said that I would, and they took me down stairs. I could hear all the other kids laughing and playing and singing. I felt better. This was going to be fun.

My dad opened the door to the room they were in. I saw all the

other kids. I took a few steps inside and looked to my left.

The demon was staring at me.

I screamed.

This time they heard it in China.

The Big Boy came out into the hall with my parents. He reached up and grabbed hold of his own head. He decapitated himself right in front of me.

That didn't make the screaming stop.

When he removed his head, I saw a man that I knew inside the shell of the Big Boy's body. He was smiling. He told me it was okay. He wasn't going to hurt me.

"Do you want to come inside?" he asked.

"Will you leave the head off?" I replied.

"No," he said. "I can't do that."

"Then no," I said. He put the head back on. I screamed. We went home.

After that day, I was teased whenever we saw a picture of the Big Boy. Then my parents told the story to my wife and kids. The teasing continues.

It's okay. It's a pretty funny story.

.....

Shawn Wray is a husband, dad, and pawpaw who grew up in central Alabama. When he's not pod-casting he likes to write.

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*“The Internet--whose idea was it to put
all the idiots on earth in touch with
each other?”*

—P.J. O'Rourke



RED BAR STOOL

Maud Belser

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

TRAVELLING IN SPAIN

Stephen Spencer

On a flight from Madrid to Oviedo,
I'm reading in *El Pais* about state-approved mosques
In Asturias, birthplace of the Reconquest,
Where the faithful pray five times each day
To cleanse their sins.

Three Hasidic Jews in the row in front of me
Sway to the rhythm of prayer,
And I imagine penitents on the Camino de Santiago below
Flagellating themselves and walking on bloody knees
To prove their sanctity.

Do these actions provide the comfort of capitulation to something
divine?
Do they ease guilt or settle the mind?
Or perhaps they lead to ecstasy?
Do they guarantee a delayed reward?
If we are so certain, so sure of the end, what is the value of faith?

I think that travel is a genuine act of faith—
Capitulation to human plurality—
The pilot landing this plane in the wind and rain
On Oviedo's short, cliff-side runway,
The cab driver taking me into town,
The waiter serving me tapas and red wine,
The police standing outside the Hotel de la Reconquista,
The crowd in the Metro and along the Calle Uria.

Travel is initially willful but finally uncertain,

Submission but not resignation.
An individual beginning and a collective ending.
The reward is unmediated life—
Beauty, art, food, nature—
The kindness of strangers,
Chance encounters, love—Renewed wakefulness and
youthful wonder.

Atlanta

Named for a fierce huntress, giving her heart to none.
Visions of a Southern Belle confounded by love.
Birthplace of a dreaming King.

The confluence of highways twelve lanes wide
Surges through concrete canyons.
My car swirls around an eddy into
A rivulet toward the promise of
“Georgia Peaches” and “Sweet Potatoes”
Painted on a piece of weathered plywood.

Roasted potatoes, melting butter and brown sugar.
Peach juice moistening my beard and
sluicing down my wrist.

.....

Stephen Spencer is Professor of English and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Athens State University in Alabama. His academic area of expertise is American Literature. As a Fulbright Scholar at Universidad Complutense Madrid, he fell in love with Spain, and its people and culture continue to inspire his work.
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OTHER WAYS OF LOOKING AT SPRING

Marilyn Huey

I saw spring kissing the poison ivy.

I saw spring blessing the thorns
and thistles.

I saw spring spinning and weaving
the wind into a funnel cloud.

I saw spring laughing at me.

.....

Marilyn Huey is a basket weaver and poet who lives in Springville, AL



BARN ON THE HILL

Digital Photography

Dan Deem

Dan Deem is a self-taught photographer whose artistic roots lie in sports and journalism. Deem's work is well represented in many private collections. throughout the U.S., including the Jimmy Carter Library in Atlanta. shewtr@yahoo.com

SWING YOUR PARTNER 'ROUND AND 'ROUND

Billy the Tough Kid zooms and weaves his thick-tired bicycle through the after-school playground crowd, singing loudly with a copy-cat twang, “Swing your partner ’round and ’round! Pick her up and throw her down!”

Billy’s bike comes just close enough to students to make them jump or yell or giggle or hug close their skirts and book bags. Billy is skilled at pushing the boundaries of decorum a tad beyond School Rules. Just enough at the edge not to get disciplined. Just enough to call attention to himself. Just enough to cement a memory that lasts all the way from the 1940’s to the 21st Century.

Billy is a Tough Kid because we meeker students allow him to be. We kind of admire his brazenness—wouldn’t it be fun to be Billy the Tough Kid for a day? What would our Mommas say?

During Northington Elementary School recess one day, Jimmy, a toadie of Billy, calls a few of us into a huddle and shows off his genuine brand-new switchblade knife. We are in awe and are even allowed to touch the polished bone handle.

Jimmy is also the purveyor of naughty French postcards extracted from his WWII-veteran father’s stash, but most of us are too young to appreciate this. We kind of wander off to the safety of volleyball and tag games.

But his conspiratorial zeal makes an impression and remains sheltered in long-term memory.

I find my gentle giant in grammar school. John is a strong, to-the-point, seasoned kid who knows the ways of the world. Who, unlike Billy and Jimmy, never shows off, always dispenses quiet and sometimes misplaced gems of wisdom.

John is my temporary hero because he gives me a lift on his bike when we leave the school grounds. He drops me off at home but never visits. Instead, he pedals the heavy used bike up the hill east of Northington and disappears into the afternoon.

My next-door temporary after-school neighbor, Bubba, is a friendly playmate who has no interest in bullying or winning or showing off. We’re sitting in the shabby Tide Theatre, watching a B-grade movie, scarfing popcorn and sharing a dope (back then, cola drinks were nicknamed “dopes”

for reasons we had to learn in later life). Actor Steve Cochran, a master of B-

gradedness, pulls a gun on somebody and is threatening to blow his head off. I'm really into the story but suddenly realize that Bubba is crying in fear.

"It's OK, Bubba...it's just a movie." He is still upset. Finally I say, "This isn't real, it's just play-like." Bubba calms down because he understands the term "play-like." It's how we kids of playground and front yard and back yard and vacant lot communicate with one another.

"Hey, Bubba, let's play-like you are the bad guy trying to rob a bank and I'm the gunslinger who's going to stop you," or "Let's play-like we are Robin Hood and his Merry Men, out to get the sheriff of Nottingham."

We would play-like in all our spare time during summer days that never lasted long enough.

What lessons did Billy, Jimmy, John, Bubba and all those elementary school companions teach me?

I guess that, without meaning to, they taught me to travel back in time and show some appreciation for them and who they were and who they came from and where they would wind up. They all had lives to live, and I had my life to live, and we all remain connected to this day by those tiny, seemingly insignificant encounters.

If I could meet them just one more time, what would I say today?

I'd tell Billy, Thanks for the memory of a class clown who could take a square dance song and make it funny, make me see it in a new way.

I'd say to Jimmy, thanks for showing me that great knife—I've never had one like that, but I still remember the joy and comfort having that knife in your pocket gave you.

To John, I'd say, Thanks for paying attention to a shy and observant little kid who didn't have many friends, was no good at sports, but who could take the time many decades later to resuscitate a sweet memory of unconditional goodness.

To Bubba, I'd say, Thanks for making me aware that everybody reacts differently, in their own special way, to what is going on around them. I'll never assume that people feel exactly the way I do, and I'll always try to look more closely at who they are and how they feel.

Observing and appreciating people, not judging them, finding that shiny seam of innocence that runs through them, trying to see past the

facade and bluster and acting-out that disguise and protect them from not-

always-friendly realities...

That's what I do on my best days in my best moods. And on the dark days, I try to imagine myself being the clown who knows how to swing my partner 'round and 'round just to get a laugh or a burst of joy out of us both

.....

Jim Reed predicts the past and reminisces about the future at his Museum of Fond Memories/Reed Books in Birmingham, Alabama. www.redclaydiary.com

EASTER BUNNY SURPRISE

Barbara Reed Partrich

"We young'uns were snuggled in our warm beds early Easter morning, April 11, 1909 when Papa walked into our room carrying an Easter basket.

Papa said, "Look what the Easter bunny left you!"

Eva, Percy, Bertha, Cloie, Tempie and little Matty ran to see what was in Papa's basket.

Papa pulled the blanket back and there he was.

We had a tiny baby brother, nestled in the Easter basket surrounded by boiled eggs in various colors.

Papa explained: "He will be named James Thomas Reed, the same as me, and we will call him 'Tommy' so as not to confuse my nickname, Jim, with his."

Aunt Eva told us that the Reed children always believed their brother, Tommy, was a gift from the Easter bunny.

.....

Barbara Partrich, born in 1938, lives in Columbia, SC, and writes about her days in Tuscaloosa, West Blocton, Peterson and other West Alabama locales. This is an excerpt adapted from her memoir-in-progress.

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The woods is where I grew up running down trails slick with pine straw, where I explored through brambles and thickets, where I climbed higher higher higher on pine trees laid low by hurricanes and criss-crossed like so many pick-up sticks.

Baw and I rode our horses through the woods. We'd lope along tethered together by a guide rope. He'd break me off a branch of huckleberries sometimes, and I'd eat them one by one, each a little pop of gritty sweetness.

When you sit among the loblollies, bay laurel, and red oak, the air feels different because it is different. The air is filtered back to you as pure oxygen — oxygen that improves your mood, helps you sleep, makes you more alert. Is that a Bobwhite I hear? Baw could call to the Bobwhites and they'd answer back.

These woods are home.

The city is where I live now, and we have no woods. Trees, yes. Beautiful trees awash in bright fall colors line my street like gaudy maidens on a promenade. But woods? No. Sure, you can go to the state park or a hiking trail. But those places aren't home woods. They're not my woods.

I went to the woods — my woods — for Thanksgiving. It had been a minute since my last trip home because Mama and Daddy come visit me more now. I'd forgotten how the scent of evergreen washes over you as soon as you open the car door. I'd forgotten about the gentle whisper of the wind through pine needles. I'd forgotten what it was like to turn in any direction and see nothing but woods.

After our big midday meal, Husband and I took a walk in the woods.

We went all the way down to "the branch" which is what we call the swampy area to the back of our land where Mill Creek gurgles its way through to feed the lake at the golf course. The branch is my favorite place.

It's cooler down there, shady. The ground goes from sandy to swampy, with mud that will wrap around your ankles and try to hold you there. There's less undergrowth but somehow it seems wilder. The expanse of grey-brown trees and ground is interrupted by bright green shocks of moss scattered here and there like jewels of the swamp. The

water burbles away and lulls you into quiet contemplation of a single spot
where the creek trickles over a few sticks and leaves into a little rippled

pool, foamy at the edges, transparent.

After a while you make your way back up the embankment to the fireline to walk home. Almost as if you are in a trance you stumble across the runnels, the vines and branches pulling at your hair and sweater as if beckoning you to not to go. You think you hear the wind saying “Stay. Stay here in the branch. Don’t go.”

Back up on the path, the sun is bright again, the ground sandy. You hear dogs barking and a distant *crack!* to remind you that it’s hunting season. You wonder just how far a bullet can travel through the woods. Would you know if it hit you? Would you see your blood seeping down through the white Alabama sand as the earth swallowed your life up?

Back inside the house, the woods still called to me. I had to go back out.

The next day, by myself, I forged through the thicker parts. This is no walking trail, no woodland stroll. This is slithering through the wild scuppernong vines and briars. This is getting to a spot where you can finally stand up all the way and not knowing how you’ll scramble back out again. The woods close in on you and embrace you in a way that may smother you into beautiful oblivion.

This is where you become one. I get the feeling the woods have missed me as much as I’ve missed them — neither one of us knowing how much the other was valued, cherished. And in my walks, the prodigal daughter has been welcomed back, forgiven. For it is from the woods that I have come, and it is to the woods that I will someday return.

.....

Audrey McDonald Atkins grew up in Citronelle, AL and spent her childhood roaming through piney woods, swimming in creeks, and rambling about her small town. She ultimately made her way to Birmingham, by way of the University of Montevallo, where she earned a B.A. in English. She now lives with her husband smack dab in the middle of the city and dreams of her return to the woods.

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HOUSE OF ROSE

Rose Brighton is a Birmingham police officer who has discovered she is a witch of an ancient House and the prey of another.

I take the recommendation of a librarian and make my way to the Reed's Museum of Fond Memories a few blocks away on 3rd Avenue North. A chime announces my entrance. From the moment I enter the store, the concept of witches living in Birmingham loses its absurdity. Anything is possible in this place. Old books line the high shelves, exhaling the smell of dusty pages-ink-binding. The stuffed shelves form a narrow, one-person-wide labyrinth of corridors. Stuck in every possible nook are assorted *things*—old copies of *Life* magazine, a *Wonder Woman* comic book, a faded wooden postbox, a jack-in-the-box. It is chaos, clutter, overwhelming, wonderful.

The proprietor, Jim Reed, looks like Santa Claus-on-a-diet and seems to know the incredible jumble as one knows the worn paths of childhood memories.

“Of course I have books on witchcraft,” he assures me. “I have a bit of everything, and if I don't, I'll find it for you.”

He leads me to the occult section, which lives below “true crime” and includes everything from UFOs to astrology. I find several books on witchcraft, including one with recipes, replete with bat's wing and tongue-of-frog. After thumbing through a few such tomes, including *The Dictionary of Witchcraft*, I find nothing mentioning a “House of Rose” or “House of Iron.” I didn't think there would be, but it was worth a shot.

From behind me, someone says, “This is my favorite place in this city.”

I turn at the deep male, velvet voice and look into a pair of intense blue eyes.

“Do you come here often?” he asks.

My earlobes burn when I realize several seconds have passed without an answer from me.

“There are wonders here,” he says in a lovely accent I think is

Italian, smiling, but his gaze remains locked on mine and my imagination has us both under some kind of spell. Maybe it is the book section I am in.

Mr. Reed intrudes into the vibrating space between us and puts a small, worn book in my hands. I sneeze violently from the dust on it, bent over double, and when I look back up, the man has disappeared. I start to ask Reed if he knows anything about him, but I don't. I am annoyed that I had a patently physical reaction to a stranger for no reason.

"What's this?" I ask, holding the book a distance away to keep from sneezing again.

"Something I forgot I had," Reed says. "It looked interesting, and I stuck it somewhere to look through and forgot about it. It seems to be a diary in another language. There are only a few pages to it, but I don't have the time to figure it out."

The faded red-gold ink on the cover seems to be in the shape of a star, which is an old occult symbol, possibly because it was originally the symbol for knowledge of the stars and Venus, in particular. That was a bit of information I picked up from a novel about the wife of Lot. Inside, in a scrawling hand and in the blackest ink I've ever seen, the first words say:

*Popeth yr ydych yn meddwl eich bod yn gwybod am yr ocwlt yn anghywir.
Nid yw'r gwir i'w groesawu, ond byddaf yn dweud hynny, er bod fy nhŷ damn
i mi amdani.*

I look up at Reed. "What language is this?"

"Welsh, I think. I've got a translation dictionary here somewhere, if you're interested."

"I am," I say, and he is off to the hinterlands of the jam-packed shop, or perhaps museum is a better word. In a few minutes, he returns with another small book, *The Englishman's Guide to Welsh*.

What would have been the work of a few seconds with a computer takes about fifteen minutes with the book, but I am not about to wait

to find out what this says and whether it is of any help. Eventually, I

end up with a translation:

*Everything you think you know about the occult
is wrong. The truth is not welcome, but I will tell it,
though my House damn me for it.*

My House. I carefully close the book. “I’ll take them both.”

.....

*T.K. Thorne’s childhood passion for storytelling deepened when she became a police officer in Birmingham, Alabama. “It was a crash course in life and what motivated and mattered to people.” Her fourth book, House of Rose, is excerpted above. T.K. loves traveling and speaking about her books and life lessons. She writes at her mountaintop home near Birmingham, often with two dogs and a cat vying for her lap. **TK@tkthorne.com***

*“I know you feel like you're displaced, like
you don't belong anywhere, but the truth is
you belong to all the places you're from and
all the places you'll go, and they all belong
to you.”*

—Maya Salam

THE LONGEST DRIVE

A path that has no other light but the coiled spring inside of us.

Sometime ago, we became such a light. The car under our seated forms supplied the casing that housed an independent battery, keeping our momentum constant but slow burning!

With the cabin lights on, we were a roving lantern. We were an arching beacon, going forward and onward. We were snapping our fingers then. A madman jumped in front of us. We veered off and went over a cliff and into a starry night.

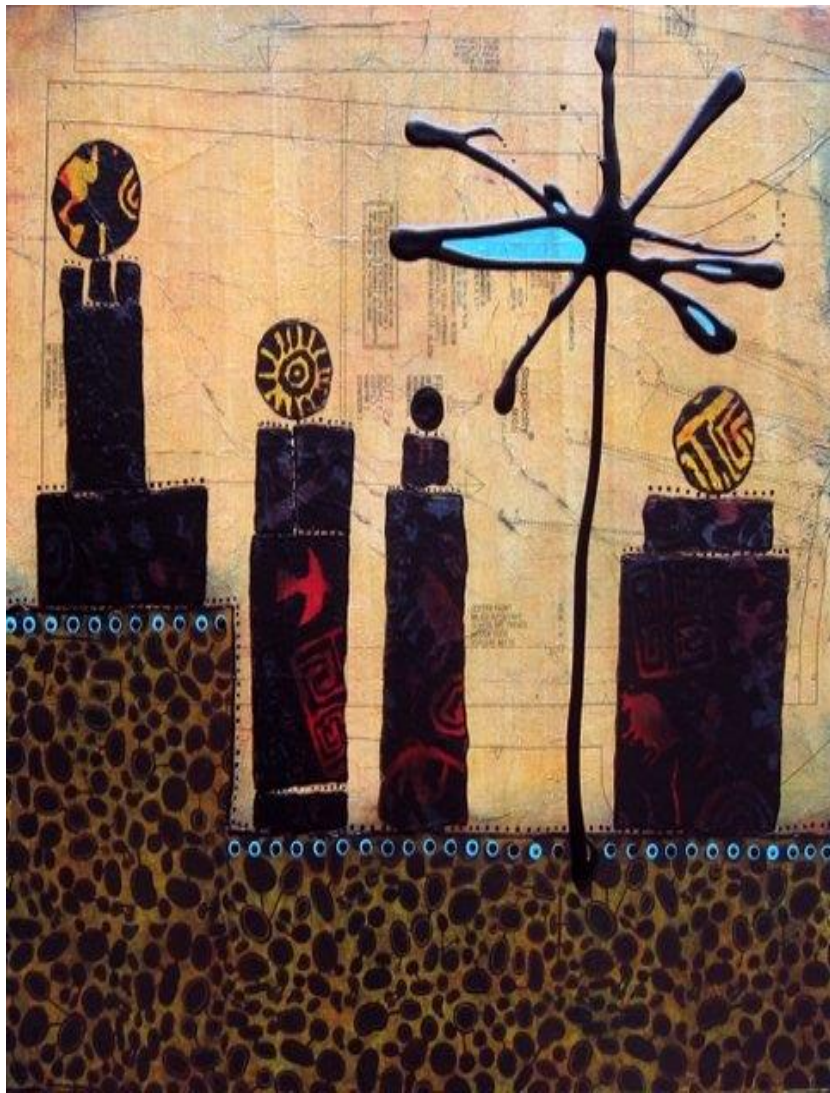
For a moment, we became part of the greater light, another pinprick in the brilliant sky. In that moment, we didn't descend. We didn't say a thing, letting the radio music go.

We broke the sound barrier. Our speed melted the tuning knobs. We lived in that car and fell into the celestial groups that rose in key to our own climb.

Until the canyons came up to curtain every window in the car.

.....

Rey Armenteros is a Los Angeles-based painter whose expressionistic brand of surrealism was largely shaped by the Far East iconography he encountered during his several years in Seoul, Korea. He writes a blog on the methodologies of art titled Through Concentrated Breath.
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SATELLITE

Kay Vinson

16" x 20"

Mixed Media

*Kay Vinson, a native of Birmingham, AL, came home to “retire” as a full-time professional artist, plying her trade in her studio, Wildwood Arts. Kay is a graduate of San Jose State. **wildwoodarts.com***

UNTITLED

I have lived in downtown Birmingham since 2010, but my sense of connection to and appreciation of this place goes back considerably beyond that, to not very long after I arrived in The Magic City as a college freshman in the summer of 1980. With that in mind, I'll take credit for loving downtown when not many did, and for reasons that likely mean little or nothing to most of the swelling multitudes who profess their love for it now.

To be fair, there is a lot more going on downtown these days, which, somewhat perversely, probably has something to do with the fondness of my memories of it in days gone by. When I came to Birmingham, the city was still in the throes of white flight, an exodus that then had been ongoing for the better part of two decades and had gained new impetus following the election less than a year before of Richard Arrington Jr. as its first black mayor. Consequently, downtown was largely abandoned after dark and on weekends and, in the popular perception had become the province of ne'er-do-wells and those too stubborn to heed the writing on the wall.

Looking back, to the extent that I gave my affinity for downtown any thought at all, it's clear that the sensibilities of both camps held some appeal for me, as I loved it for what it was. From another angle, you might say that I saw the possibilities of downtown, even as I reveled in the ample evidences of its dilapidation at the hands of social and political forces that I had only begun to understand. It was because of the people and places I encountered downtown that I became — as I remain — so joyfully immersed in Birmingham's history. My emergent sense of civic pride grew from an ever-expanding awareness of the diamonds that glimmered in the rough of the city's perceived decline.

Among those was Grundy's Music Room, on 4th Avenue North between 19th and 20th Streets. Over several years, my friends and I ended many a night there, soaking in the jazzy strains of the Grundy's Trio — named, like the establishment itself, for owner and multi-instrumentalist Jerry Grundhoefer. We were especially delighted when the Trio was joined by Laura Washington, who in the 1940s had sung with fellow Birmingham native Erskine Hawkins's orchestra in New

York and, more than 40 years later, still had a voice that remains one

of the sweetest I've ever heard.

Grundy's felt like something from another time and place, a true nightclub whose windowless, dimly lit, Naugahyde-upholstered interior one reached via a set of stairs that descended from street level. That alone imparted a mystique which, coupled with the fact of its location, made it a kind of acid-test of a place to take a date — one that, to be sure, impressed some, but caused more to reevaluate their dating options.

Grundy himself was of no help in tilting that balance in my favor. When the band took a break, it was his habit to make the rounds of the room and greet patrons; more than once when I happened to be there with a date, he stopped at my table and made a point of paying me what he may well have deemed a compliment (or, alternatively, may have good-naturedly intended to cause me the trouble it usually did).

“Man!” Grundy would exclaim. “Every time I see you, you’re with a different girl!”

Speaking of irreplaceable establishments defined by the personality of their owners, there was also Pete's Famous Hot Dogs. The undisputed gold standard of what once was Birmingham's embarrassment of riches in the category of hole-in-the-wall hot dog stands, Pete's was established a couple doors off 20th Street on 2nd Avenue North sometime before 1920. Beginning in 1948, it was owned and operated for 63 years by the inimitable Gus Koutroulakis, a nephew of the store's namesake. I made my first trip to Pete's around the same time I started frequenting Grundy's, back when it stayed open until at least 9:00 at night. I became a regular a few years later and remained one until it closed after Gus's death in 2011.

While Jerry Grundhoefer's stock-in-trade was hepcat congeniality,

Gus relied on an unfailing but (mostly) affable irascibility. It might be a brusque introduction to the house rules of the always-crowded seven-by-twenty-foot space in which he operated (for example, if your order was two hot dogs, you got them one at a time; if you asked for the second while Gus was busy with another order, you got a withering look and a barked command along the lines of, “Hold on a minute, Buddy, I'll get to you in a minute”). It might be the opportunity to pick at a regular customer (almost invariably, when Gus spotted me coming through the door, he'd yell out, “Two Specials and a pint of milk!”

When informed, yet again, that I preferred a Coke with my Specials, he'd growl, “Coke? Good God, why'd you stop drinking milk?”).

Or it might be a true crisis, such as the time I went in and Gus

hadn't received his usual shipment of franks. He was on the phone when I got there, giving someone an earful about how crowded the place was and how much business he'd lose if he didn't get the shortage addressed posthaste. "Well, when you find him, tell him to call me!" he told whomever was on the other end of the line. Approximately three minutes later, the phone rang. Gus pounced on it like a panther.

"Hello?" he yelled. Ascertaining the identity of the caller, he yelled again. "Man, where are you? I need some damn weenies!"

There are, of course, other vanished downtown destinations that are deserving of attention here: Smith & Hardwick Books; the once-grand and later seedy Rainbow Room lounge at the pre-restoration Redmont Hotel; and the Old Town Music Hall, to name a few.

Unfortunately, I've used up my allotted space; perhaps Jim Reed — who is, of course, the proprietor of current downtown institution Reed Books — will do me the honor of allowing me to do it again sometime.

.....

Mark Kelly is a Birmingham writer. He is the author of A Powerful Presence: The Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce, History of Birmingham and Toward a New Birmingham, a monograph on the life and times of Richard Arrington Jr., Birmingham's first black mayor. His latest book is Back to Nature: A History of Birmingham's Ruffner Mountain. etymon21@gmail.com

*“She seemed a thing immortal, out of space, as if
the heavenly, perfected creature had been sent
down to earth, in scorn of nature.”*

—Geoffrey Chaucer

THE FIREBALL BROTHERS

They left Montgomery straight from the jailhouse, Mama driving the old pickup truck as fast as it would carry them. They passed through more cow pastures and cotton fields, all separated by one little town after another, and Robert wondered about them all, how the people there lived and why. He assumed, for some reason, that Wally was thinking of something similar and was surprised when Wally asked him if he thought there really was life in space, on other planets.

"I don't know," he said. "I suppose there could be."

"Do you think God lives in space?"

Robert said, "If there is a God, he's supposed to be everywhere, space included."

"Don't you believe in God?" Wally asked, his voice revealing some concern. In Robert's chest, he could feel Wally's desire to pull away in his disbelief, like Wally wanted to see the look on Robert's face to make sure he wasn't pulling his leg.

"You know I don't," Robert said.

"Do you believe in the devil?"

"Nope."

Wally was thoughtful and relaxed again. "Maybe God lives in space, and it was God that joined us together."

"If he did," Robert said, "I sure would like to know why."

.....

Excerpt from M. David Hornbuckle's novel, The Fireball Brothers. David is the author of Zen, Mississippi and The Salvation of Billy Wayne Carter. He teaches and writes in Birmingham, AL. www.livingstonpress.uwa.edu

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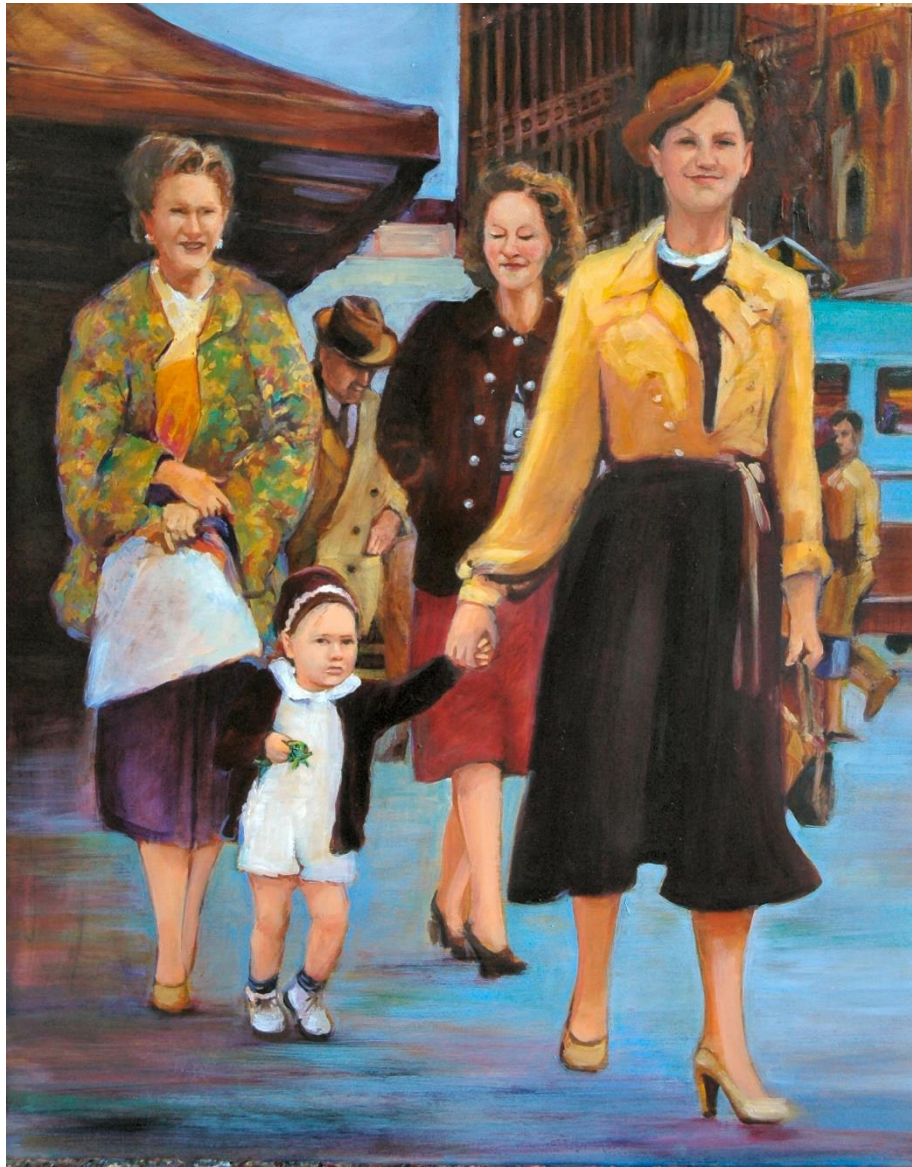
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