

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 16 Issue 1



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: JOY - Pastel on Canvas - DOLLY ALEXANDER *loves to bring glowing colors to life, as they glistened across the water, landing on the sand lighting the child with "Pure Joy."* Dolly is a member of the Alabama Pastel Society and the Southeastern Pastel Society. She lives in Flowery Branch, GA. bal2@bellsouth.net

BACK COVER: FATHER AND SON OUT FOR A RIDE - Weshon Hornsby – **Acrylic on Canvas.** *Mr. Hornsby is a painter of landscapes, animals, still life imagery, cityscapes and portraits. Although his collection is eclectic there is a common thread of brush stroke, bold colors and personal style that makes his work cohesive. His work can be found in private collections, in web galleries, brick and mortar galleries and in print. He lives in Newark, DE. WeshonHornsby.mosaicglobe.com. wephunk1@yahoo.com*

A ROOM WITH NO VIEW

Ronald Carter

It's pouring outside on this winter night, but my room in a downtown Birmingham flophouse is warm and dry. The homeless brothers on the street would probably call it cozy. I'm on the bed with my back leaning against the headboard, smoking a Black and Mild cigar and sipping Old Crow from a chipped glass, listening to a jazz program on the radio. Smoking isn't permitted in this room, but I crack the window a couple of inches and pretend it does some good.

Although I was born and raised in Birmingham, I left when the steel mill closed about 40 years ago and went to California. I'm just passing through town now, on sort of a sentimental visit. Pretty much all my family and friends are dead, and I'm feeling a little lonely and blue tonight. My mind keeps drifting back to the old days, visiting ghosts.

I was a wild, angry young man back then, in the Sixties, though I didn't really understand what I was mad about. I'll tell you right up front, I wasn't a race man. I wasn't a demonstrator or a hero; just a workin' man. All I cared about was the ladies. I was a heat-seeking missile, dying to hook up. I spent all my free time in bars chasing poontang. Worked hard at the mill and played hard in the clubs.

One night, I got into a bar fight and knifed a guy. That cost me a year in the Birmingham City Jail. After a few months, they made me a trusty. One of my jobs was to bring plates of food to guys in solitary confinement. That's how I met Martin Luther King.

This was in the spring of 1963, and Dr. King had been arrested for leading a protest march. They put him in solitary confinement in a cell with cinder blocks on three sides. They wouldn't let him see nobody, not even his lawyer. No books or writing stuff. The first day Dr. King was in jail I brought him his dinner, some slop, like bread and gravy. Dr. King asked me to sneak in a newspaper, which I did. On the front page of the Birmingham News there was a letter written by eight white ministers. They called Dr. King an outside agitator and said that the fight against segregation should be in the courts, not in the streets. This got Dr. King all worked up. He asked me to smuggle in some paper and a pencil. For

the next four days he was writing on a little pad of paper whenever the jailers weren't around. Finally, Dr. King passed me about thirty sheets of paper he'd written on; told me to give them to Ralph Abernathy, who was in another cell where his lawyer could visit. Then, Dr. King gave me another bunch of papers he'd written on and told me to burn them. Reverend Abernathy got Dr. King's writing published in a magazine. They called it Letter from the Birmingham Jail, and it was real famous.

Well, I disobeyed; I didn't burn those papers he gave me, I kept them. At first under the mattress in my cell. When I got out, I stuck them in my mother's Bible. I still keep them in Mother's Bible.

Yesterday I met a white retired history teacher on the street, and we got to talking about the civil rights movement, and I told him about all this. He got all excited and said, "What you have could be very valuable, King's first draft of Letter from the Birmingham Jail. Have you ever thought about selling it?"

I said, "No, I'm not looking to sell anything."

He said, "But, what you have could be worth thousands of dollars. You could be on easy street."

"Sir," I said, "I'm probably not gonna live too much longer. Material things don't mean much. Those little pages of handwriting are priceless to me. Whenever I feel sad, I take them out and read them. The Reverend Martin Luther King touched this paper! These are his thoughts, his words!"

Well, I'm a little down tonight. Father Time is a cruel master who's made me dependent on a cane, lots of public restrooms and the kindness of strangers. Lately, it's been getting worse; just breathing hurts like the devil. So, I light up another Black and Mild, pour half a glass of whisky, and get the Bible out of my backpack. Listening to the rain and John Coltrane, I sit in this shitty room and touch the paper Martin Luther King touched.

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Ron Carter is a retired lawyer and high school teacher who recently moved from Birmingham to Baltimore. His writing ambitions have been nurtured by Carolynne B. Scott's writers' workshop and by Chervis Isom. "A Room With No View" is his first published story. perriercarter@yahoo.com

THE PENGUIN

Terri Kirby Erickson

Oh my father who is dying — legs and belly
swollen, hands trembling—somewhere inside
your ravaged body is the boy who drove

a Plymouth to his best girl's house
and after that, The Penguin. You told me once

The Penguin had the best burgers
in town, and milkshakes so thick you could eat

them with a spoon. Remember how you draped
your arm like a loose sweater across

my mother's bare shoulders? I knew then,
he said, she was the one for me. Now she waits

by your chair with pills to ease the pain
that dogs you like a playground bully. Please,

I pray, let death be kind. Let it come to him
like a front-porch-kiss beneath an arc
of light that follows him all the way home.

.....

Terri Kirby Erickson is the author of five collections of poetry. Her work has appeared in American Life in Poetry, Atlanta Review, The Sun, The Writer's Almanac, Valparaiso Poetry Review, and many others. Awards include the Joy Harjo Poetry Prize and a Nautilus Book Award. She lives in North Carolina. tkerickson@triad.rr.com

FILLED WITH LAUGHTER

Carla Youngblood

The smell of a coconut pound cake filled the nostrils of my three brothers, sister, mom, dad and me as we enjoyed one of our favorite meals: cabbage, mac-n-cheese, fried pork chops and corn bread. My momma is one of the greatest cooks ever and as everyone reached a certain age, she taught her children to cook. There was no set age, but when she felt you were ready. Obviously, she never thought I was ready because she never taught me to cook. However, I was smart enough to sit in the kitchen and just watch. Mealtime was always special in our house which was nestled in the middle of the block.

2417 33rd Avenue North was the place where all the magic happened. The house consisted of three bedrooms, a living room and dining that was connected to a huge kitchen. We lived one block from McDonald's, but we didn't eat there often. The meals at home were too good and no one wanted to miss out on the fun and exciting conversations we shared at the dinner table. There was only one rule about mealtime; no one could come to the kitchen table mad with someone else. That rule helped keep a happy home.

The meals shared with the family are what makes the kitchen my special room. We shared at least 85% of our meals together. Momma would make it a point to cook somebody's favorite dish every day. The oldest brother, Tony always wanted collard greens. Lamar (who died in September 2000) was next to the oldest and loved a casserole of any kind. My sister, Renee, who is the middle child, is always satisfied with a piece of fried chicken. Alphonzo, Jr. who we call Al, really loves his cabbage and he always had to have a raw piece first. He is next to the youngest. I am the baby of the bunch and mac-n-cheese has always made me the happiest kid on earth and the same still holds true today. Daddy was the pork chop man. We ate so much pork chop growing up. I have eaten enough pork chop to last me a lifetime. Momma has the sweet tooth. She would eat dessert first and I find myself doing it now. Until I was thirteen years old, we had homemade dessert every day. Everything she cooked was delicious, but the family time shared made the food taste even better.

The kitchen was in the back of the house. It had lots of windows and cabinets with beige and rose floral print wallpaper. There was no dishwasher in there. My brothers, sister and I were the dishwashers. We all had weekly chores and cleaning the kitchen was the best for me. I would trade chores with anybody for dish week. They really didn't like cleaning the kitchen and they would sometimes pay me to clean the kitchen on their week. Being in the kitchen meant being with the family longer because that kitchen table was used for everything.

We did our homework together at the kitchen table. During the week, we would come home from school and do our homework while Momma cooked. Momma said: "Doing our homework together made it easy for us all." With the exception of the oldest, somebody could always help because of prior first-hand experience with the teacher. I breezed through grade school and high school because of all of their experiences. I can recall taking tests. I would close my eyes and remember the homework sections at the kitchen table to come up with the correct answers. Momma was right!

If there was enough time between homework and mealtime, we would go outside and play for a while. Nobody stayed out too long. Based on what Momma was cooking, we knew how long it should take for the meal to be ready and we all came home from playing with our different friends at the same time. It was as if a dinner bell sat in ours heads.

Dinner time was always so special. We took this time to share what happened during the day. Who got a new phone number from someone? Who gave a phone number to someone? We shared funny memories of the day. Mealtime normally lasted about an hour in a half. Eating took that long because of all the laughing we did. Jokes were our specialty. As the baby, it would be hard for me to get a word in sometimes so I would take center stage and start telling jokes about anything and everything I could think of. My childhood laid the foundation for my comedy career. To be honest, I lived in a house full of comedians, I am just the only one who took the stage.

We played cards at the kitchen table which was something else we looked forward to. We played a little during the week, but on the weekend, we would play for hours. During the winter months, cooking, eating and playing cards filled the weekends. Nobody had particular partners and being my daddy's partner was a treat because he didn't play as much. He would sit back and just watch. From the look on his face, I

think he was proud to have his family together, safe and happy. Our friends would come to the kitchen windows asking to come in because our laughter could be heard outside. Sometimes Momma would let them come in and other times she would say, “it’s enough of us to enjoy without any outsiders.”

Oh, how I miss that kitchen. Now that we are grown and have families of our own, meals shared together are far and few. Sharing daily memories is almost non-existent and playing cards together is a luxury when we can make it happen. I long for that special room.

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Birmingham native, Carla Youngblood, was educated at Birmingham-Southern College and the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She is a performing comedian and breast cancer survivor. Her first book, Cancer Ain’t Funny – Laugh Anyway, has recently been released. thetruthcy@gmail.com

ADOPTED II-B

S.E.B. Detling

In a room with the wanted babies, I am
without name, without

breast, love, or celebration. I am
grasping for something to be mine.

Tight fisted above my heart, I am
holding my discarded-ness.

This immense nothingness that I am,
alone, is all mine.

.....

S.E.B. Detling is originally from Memphis and now teaches at Spring Hill College in Mobile, AL, as an instructor of Spanish, while pursuing a second master’s degree in creative writing at the University of South Alabama. sebdetling@gmail.com

SUMMER OF '69

Andrew Tyson

For most, the summer of '69 was the beginning of a new era of man's landing on the moon. The words, "one small step for man..." were heard around the world. For me, it was "one giant leap," because the summer of '69 will be remembered as the summer when our family moved. Everything I knew was left behind, including friends. At the age of ten this was difficult.

Visiting family friends in Oklahoma when our new home was selected, I didn't see it until my return. Naturally, I got the smallest bedroom in the house, but with me being the smallest this only made sense. I didn't complain. My room had the strongest heating vent in the house, not to mention that it doubled as my personal listening device into all the other rooms in the house. (Smile.)

Quickly, I made the new room my own, my place of retreat and refuge. In a house full of girls, I had to. It was a matter of male survival.

Not speaking for the girls, but for me this was a hard age, a great age, a time of self-discovery and trying to figure out who I was. Unfortunately, some of these revelations would not come until decades later.

Much was learned over the next eight years, many things I never spoke of. Sorry reader, I not telling of them now either.

Here my life would form and take shape. Like a snowball rolling downhill, the memories added one upon another, constantly growing larger as each year passed. My room became a silent witness to all that transpired.

If I were to attempt to write of all the memories, happy and sad, I dare say that there would not be enough paper to contain them. Thinking back on those years, those memories, I cannot help but smile, sometimes shaking my head wondering how I survived, or better asked, how my mother survived.

Shortly after graduation I traded in my old room for a new room by joining the Air Force. While I was away my mother remarried. Her husband was one of those who snored terribly loud, so she moved into my old room in order to sleep at night. Mom remained in the room even after her husband passed away. I guess she had memories of her own in that room as she got older. Was it more to her than just a room? I will never

know. In my memory I can still see her on the bed with Buddy her cat. She had many cats that went through that room as the years went on, but Buddy was the last. I have a picture of my oldest granddaughter on Mom's bed playing with Buddy.

At the age of seventy Mom passed away from cancer. I figured she would be the last person to live in that room, but life has taught me one thing: don't try and second guess it.

After Mom died, I bought out my two sisters' share of the house and I moved back to the home of my youth. I could have reclaimed the old room, but in some small way, it seemed best to move on to another room, one that would hold new memories.

Remember me writing about not second-guessing life? I was not kidding. It was the summer of 2013 when I received a letter from my granddaughter Amber. She was thirteen at that time, her home-life in turmoil and she asked to come live with me. I accepted.

Amber became the new resident of my childhood room. Those walls had never experienced anything like this before, a teenage girl. In a way I got to relive some of the memories of my daughter's youth. But believe me, it was not all fun and games. The eighth grade must have been enough, Amber returned to live with her mother at year's end; she left me with enough memories and stories to fill a book. Oh, that's right, I did write a book about our life together. Maybe one day you will read it.



For Mom, for Amber – I love you.

Amber found a love for photography and art, something she later attributed to me. In my home her art still graces the walls alongside my own. That alone is a bonding memory to last a lifetime.

Presently it is the summer of 2019, fifty years after I first moved into my room. The years have quickly moved from the present to the past. Three generations have lived within those walls.

Today it is used for storage. Amber's bed, still adorned with her black and pink bedspread, is covered with boxes.

It seems unreal to think that her life was taken from her exactly one year ago. Looking around the room I feel a lifetime of memories coming to mind and smile. Slowly, I back out of the room, closing the door as if to hold all those years within. I place a white rose on the doorknob and remember.

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

"What moves me most in a work of literature is recognition. When I must stop my reading and say to myself: Yes, this is true. It is just like this. I knew, but I did not know that I knew until I read it here."

—Hjavier Marias

FIDDLER CRABS AS HELIOTROPIC HARLEQUINS

Richard Weaver

Part clown, part coroner, sometimes
they dance as if around the sun,
moving right then left, opening and closing
each claw full in the light. Their shells
are the colors escaping a driftwood fire,
in the sea itself. Like me they dance drunkenly,
waiting for the pure moment of their return
to water, and the mangrove's sheltering roots.

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Richard Weaver's poems are loosely based on Walter Anderson's Logs, his watercolors, oil paintings, and conversations with his family. Many of Weaver's poems have been accepted or appeared in: Southern Quarterly, Stonecoast Review, Gloom Cupboard, Steel Toe, Allegro, The Little Patuxent Review, Edison Literary Journal, Foliate Oak, Linden Avenue & Deep South Magazine. whelkstar@gmail.com

*"I urge you to please notice when
you are happy, and exclaim or
murmur or think at some point, 'If
this isn't nice, I don't know what is.'"*

—Kurt Vonnegut

GRANPA'S ROOM

Steve Edmondson

Have you ever smelled liniment? Spoken, it's one of those words my country kin can give even emphasis to each of its three syllables. Maybe it is a country thing, having a strong remembrance linked to a smell. After all, it is a semi-scientific fact that memories may be awakened by a forgotten scent. Can you remember what an aged and perfumed aunt reeked of as she hugged you on a Sunday morning? I sure can, and it wasn't Chanel No 5.

Liniment, the patent medicine type in the tall, thin, dark brown bottle, had a definite medicinal odor, an odor usually associated with old sick people with arthritic joints and a mysterious malady called lumbago. I've never known what lumbago is or was or represented, and no longer care.

My strongest association of sickly old folks rubbed with liniment comes from probably my last visit with my paternal grandfather. I may have been eight or so when my father took me to see him a last time. Granpa was in his eighties, and on the edge of dementia. As a little boy, uneducated in the ways people lived in the 40's, I just thought him to be mean. And mean he had been. Always would be.

Pa drove us to see him at his boarding house. I think now it was probably representative of the times. Just an old house, where a family had been raised, children running laughing down the hall and up the stairs. It had been divided into as many single rooms as possible, to hold more boarders.

Now make no quick judgment; this wasn't the beginning of nursing homes, with food and care and comfort. Far from it. It was the final parking place for an unloved and alone ancestor, a place to pass the time until the kin himself passed along, usually to sparse notice.

I followed Pa up the rocky walk to the half-rotted porch, and we went in, and stood inside for a long moment before a florid and sweaty woman, quite a bit overweight, came out from somewhere.

"Y'all here to see Mr. Edmonson?" Pa nodded a yes and then inquired of the old man's health.

"How is he doing anyway?"

“Oh, about the same. Sleeps a lot. Don’t eat much, but that’s alright since his County Old Age Pension don’t pay for much in foodstuffs for him. Let me go see if he is awake, got his clothes on. Y’all wouldn’t happen to have some old clothes you could bring him? Need to change him up a little once in a while. He ain’t got no underwear either. Uh, did y’all bring any money for his account?”

Pa just nodded at her comments, her requests. I had the feeling he didn’t much intend to do anything for the old man.

We were led down a dusty hall, cobwebs above and squeaky floor underneath. The door to his room had his name on it, and under that my Pa’s name and the name of another son, with an address and a “close-by telephone number.” The house woman saw me looking, and explained tersely, “For funeral home if they have to come. Ain’t no ambulance for to go to the hospital.”

It was time to see Granpa.

We timidly entered the room, and there he was, sitting in a straight-back chair, which was almost hidden by his hulking frame. He was seated beside a small bed, covered by what appeared to be a sheet or two and an old quilted comforter. Some sort of stuffed, lumpy cloth bag looked to be his pillow. At the bedside there was a small table, perhaps two feet square, that held a water pitcher and snuff can and bottle of liniment. Behind it, hanging on a nail on the wall, was the semblance of a towel. More likely a faded and coarse cotton fertilizer sack. We had a similar one at home. When it got to smelling dank, like this room, it got washed. The sole decoration of the room was a faded paper print of Franklin D. Roosevelt, tacked to a wall.

Granpa was sitting somewhat upright, but with sloping shoulders. He looked up at us with near lifeless watery, gray eyes. He had on a plain blue work shirt with loose britches without a belt. Heavy shoes were on his feet, near hiding dirty white socks. His straight hair was thin, gray and oily.

Pa spoke to him, half cheerfully, half inquiring. Granpa looked up, recognized us, nodded and gruffly grunted a greeting of sorts. While they carried on a broken conversation, I looked about the room. Walls of flat, unpainted wooden boards. A ceiling to match the walls. A single small electric light bulb was suspended from above, with a dangling string to tug on or off. Part of the flooring was more of the pine board type; cracked and splitting linoleum covered the rest. The entrance door had a glass knob, quite incongruous. The window, letting in limited light through the

dirty four panes, appeared not to have been cleaned since the turn of the century; any century. The smell of his liniment was pervasive.

I looked back at Granpa. Pa had told me of better days for the old man. He had been a farmer and had a general store for a few years. He was said to have made and sold whiskey. It was told he had once gambled with “The Yellow Kid,” a Chicago gambler visiting Jabo Carter’s once-famous casino at the Bangor Cave just north of Birmingham. “I’d come home with my pockets stuffed with money!”

Then I remembered Granma telling of him coming home at daylight, after the cards went wrong and he had lost the home place.

I looked back at him a last time. I never wanted to see him again, nor his dark room. I didn’t want to hear his tales or listen to his bragging. There was nothing I could do for him; nothing he could do for me. This had been my goodbye visit, yet no one said goodbye. We didn’t have to.

Only the smell of liniment remains.

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Stephen Edmondson lives alone in Homewood, AL, without a dog but surrounded by dear friends. He writes about a variety of topics, quite often eccentric folk he has known from his childhood forward. He is often published in Birmingham Arts Journal. His book of original short stories is To Live and Die in Alabama.
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*"We must make the best of mankind
as they are, since we cannot have them
as we wish."*

—George Washington

THOUGHTS ON THE THINKING ROOM

Ben Thompson

In our house, the bathroom was the only room that had a locking door. This made it a sanctuary of safety from my angry older brother. He had five years on me, so he was impossible to outrun. My only hope was to make it up the stairs and down the hall to the bathroom. There I could slam the paper-thin door in his face and at the last possible second get the push button lock engaged before he had a chance to twist the knob from the outside. Whatever knob we had not yet destroyed by our daily routine jiggled like a loose tooth.

Having just escaped a dose of brotherly love and having nowhere to go I would lie on top of the cool dirty laundry that lay piled behind the swing of the door. I could smell everybody from there. Dad's dirty work shirts mixed with Mamma's make up and the scent of the shampoo we all shared drying out of that morning's bath towels.

If I had to, I could stay there forever. I had a toilet to use, water to drink and a pink tube of Miss Piggy's bubble gum flavored toothpaste to eat. Lucky for me, Steven would give up before it came to that. I'd listen for his footsteps creaking and cracking down the hall in strategic retreat.

The bathroom was just large enough for mother and child to stand single file in line with the mirror. The top of the toilet served as the counter and when we needed more room, we put the lid down. Beneath the sink was a moisture-faded world of everything we needed to live a sanitary, scented (or unscented) itch-free life.

In the mornings before school, Mamma would drag us out of bed by our toes. By then, the aroma of Barbasol® Shaving Cream would be all that remained of Dad. Trading yawns, the three of us would line up in the hallway alongside the floor furnace awaiting our chance to pee.

My little sister Holly and I would eat our breakfast while big brother Steven took a shower. Holly and I had not yet graduated to bathing on our feet. For us, baths happened at night, giving He-Man and my Ninja Turtles ample time to declare a winner of their underwater battle.

Socks were always scarce in the morning. Mamma would have to dig through the dirty pile in search of the cleanest pair. The first sock was always easy to find but its mate refused to be taken alive. Hiding deep in the pile, refusing to show itself, the frantic search would bring my mother within inches of uttering one of my father's favorite cuss words. With sock

found and my mother's contention for sainthood intact, she would bounce from bathroom to kitchen to keep us moving.

Then, for the grand finale, a pink glob of that bubble-gum flavored toothpaste on my toothbrush. Standing alongside the floor furnace once again, Holly and I would take turns stepping inside to spit.

The sound of the school bus would send us running through the wet grass to the mailbox. Just before stepping up through the open doors, we'd look back. And there, framed by the oval window of our front door, Mamma would smile. Satisfied with her daily miracle. What she did after we were gone was always a mystery.

If there was any hot water left, she probably took a shower.

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*Ben Thompson is a husband, father, storyteller, writer and Birmingham firefighter. His work has appeared previously in Birmingham Arts Journal. He and his family live in Hoover, AL. **benthompson11@yahoo.com***

*"I taught millions to read but
not one to sin."*

—Noah Webster



ART DE VIVRE

Diana Malivani

30" x 48"

Oil on Canvas

Diana Malivani was born on the coast of the Black Sea, thus her love for riotous profusion of colors and energy in her paintings. In addition to painting, Malivani excels as a physician and an illustrator of children's books published in Russian, French, English, and German. She lives in Cyprus.

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MY RED ROOM, MY REAL REFUGE

Liz Reed

“Wanna make God laugh? Tell him your plans.”

Robert Altman

My room is red—bold, bright, warm, inviting and the treasured place of memories —most heart-warming; some, scary. When the painters saw the chosen paint color, they blanched. “Are you sure?” they asked.

“Yes.”

After all was said and done, they brought some painter friends over to see “their” red room. It is striking, and comfortable, and a complement to gray walls in the rest of the downstairs.

My room has large windows and multiple functions. During the day my red room serves as my office. Bright light streams through 100-plus-year-old windows, igniting the rainbow maker that sends colorful prism streaks wandering across the walls like so many dragonflies, a gift from a daughter with a note, “May you always have rainbows.”

During the day my red room has a large dining room table which serves as meeting space for writers who depend upon me to guide them through the writing-for-publication process. The walls are covered with interesting old and new art—not the typical workspace for an editor. The kitchen is handy for coffee, water—whatever slakes thirsts of impassioned wordsmiths.

“Staging area” is another use for my red room. Like road crews whose heavy machinery sleeps overnight in an empty field waiting for morning, the dining room table holds all the tools of my trade as well as my other job—“running the big house,” husband says. A glance at the table top offers: my purse, of course, the checkbook, the “for deposit only” stamp, manuscripts waiting to be reviewed, eye-soothing drops, pens, pencils (one has a red end and a blue end – handy for proofreading text), mail and bills, ads, solicitations, promises of great plays and concerts, a copy of the most recent Birmingham Arts Journal, my To Do list (in categorical columns), a note pad, the cell phone ... all the accoutrements of daily living ... and working.

From my desk in my red room, I look through the beveled-glass front door at brightly blooming crepe myrtle lining the block, our neighbor’s picket fence, a Keep Birmingham Beautiful sign, our street, and the alley.

The alley view is helpful for keeping up with walkers, amblers, students on their way to the university nearby, workers and waste management vehicles, and frustrated souls who have gotten lost trying to find Vulcan who watches over us all from the top of Red Mountain.

From the desk in my red room I can watch over plumbers, Mr. Fix-Its, the HVAC guys, the electricians, the lawn fellows, roofers, the woman who does battle with dust bunnies, stacks and stacks of books tumbling over each other, and fine soot, gift of the original coal-fired heater and fireplaces in this old house.

The best purpose of my red room is keeper of memories: family suppers, intimate dinner parties for close friends, large soup & salad evenings with friends and strangers from Jazz Vespers held quarterly by a church nearby, planning sessions with neighbors, afternoon coffee with people in search of a shoulder or sounding-board.

The dining room table in my red room is also a place of surprises and changes in plans and processing/reprocessing news whether positive or negative:

“We’re moving to Idaho.”

“Hallie has broken her engagement and canceled the wedding.”

“Ryan is going to Mongolia for the summer.”

“Rebecca will be in Italy next semester for the Bruno European Culture program—15 countries and class credit!”

“Jessica and Matt are getting a divorce.”

“Danielle is transitioning to Dan.”

“Becky’s PhD hooding ceremony will be in May.”

“Becky is pregnant. Baby girl in November.”

“Grandmother just called. Paw Paw died last night.”

“Mom, I have breast cancer.”

“Mary made the swim team!”

“Jessica really loves her new job.”

“Rob and Heather are moving to Denver.”

“Heather is pregnant. Baby girl in February.”

“John and Paula are moving to Denver.”

“Reed is studying Environmental Policy Making in Japan next summer.”

“We’re moving to the Bahamas.”

“Dorian wiped out Abaco so we’re not moving to the Bahamas. We’re not sure what’s next for us.”

“We are moving to the Bahamas after all, to Andros – not much damage there from the hurricane.”

And the absolute worst news:

“Mom, Glenn had a heart attack last night. He didn’t make it. He died at the hospital early this morning.”

Over the years, we’ve had lots of surprises, challenges and change – most of which were introduced and played out in my red room. What’s the point of creating a life plan at the dining room table in my red room? The goings and doings of family are going to change life’s plans frequently. And we are going to support decisions made, actions taken—sometimes with fears and doubt (kept to ourselves); other times with gladness and singing and sharing with family and friends.

When the pace of life gets a little overwhelming, my red room is our place of refuge and solace. A game (or three) of solitaire on the computer provides enough detachment, time alone and willingness to prepare for the coming days and coming surprises. When sleep is elusive, a midnight visit to my red room, glass of milk in hand, urges me back to bed in search of dreams and restoration. When work is too demanding, my red room is a great place for fantasizing travel to foreign lands. When running the big house seems endless (it IS endless of course), my red room is the place for refining ideas about renovations, new colors inside and outside, new plants and an arbor for the yard. And making lists—always making lists.

From where I sit in my red room, I imagine everyone has a red room—bold, bright, warm, inviting and the treasured place of fond memories. That is my hope. Everyone needs a room (red or otherwise) for resting, reflecting, refreshing mind and spirit. And planning the next family supper, party with friends, neighborhood meeting, next publishing venture. And expecting change. Always change. And change invites worry.

It helps most to wonder how God is going to handle these challenges instead of worrying how I’m going to. When I go back to worrying, I wonder, again.

.....

Liz Reed retired from a career from marketing research to engage her right brain in assorted creative endeavors. She stays busy as an editor, writing coach, dress designer, grandmother (and soon-to-be great grandmother), artist & art editor for Birmingham Arts Journal – and “running the big house.”

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ALABAMA ANTHEM

Jim Reed

Alabama is a state of mind.

No, I take that back.

Alabama is your state of mind.

Alabama is my state of mind.

Look at the map

There is no logical border.

If logic prevailed, Alabama would be panhandled-with-care to the Gulf
and barely miss the Mississippi to the west and stick-toed in the
Atlantic to the east.

The Alabama state of my mind is:

Alabama is a truncated
Arbitrarily-bordered
Mixture of Appalachian
Foothills and Gulf beaches

And Tennessean

Valleys and Southern

Pines and black dirt

Flatlands and red

Clay banks and

Human-formed mounds

And dinosaur-chalked

Banks and 'gator

Swamps and

Cricks and meandering-barged rivers

And angel-haired falls and bluebird

Nests and mosquito bites

And chigger itches and ancient

Warrior-ghosts and

Dirt-poor moonshiners

And proud farmers and

Vegetable-stand pickups

And blue highways

And washboard roads
And scorching sun and
Humid rashes and
Fields endless fields
And full moon-activated
Cemeteries and
Tombstone graveyards and
Midwife shacks and
Breezeways and clapboards
And wild blackberries and lazy
Cows cud-ding and calves
Cuddling and hay bales and
Barn lofts and suckling puppies
And strutting blue roosters
And water moccasins
And synchronized
Twilight fireflies

And glistening stars so close you can
Touch them.

Alabama in my state of mind is

Far-off 3:00 A.M. train
Whistles and howling dogs
And skittish deer and roadside
Tire carcasses and skulking
Buzzards and dearly departed
Armadillos and skunk-fragranced
Air blended with sweet honeysuckle and smothered
With kudzu and lifesaving
Breezes interspersed with
Gaspig-for-air heat.

Alabama in my state of mind is

At her best
When you close your eyes
And remember how
Good she was when you
Were young, how wise

She became as you yourself
Wised up and how good she
Can be whenever she
Re-claims her fairness
Of spirit, whenever she
Gets back to
The earth, gets back
Down to earth,

Remembers her hard-working
Closely tied families.

In my state-of-Alabama-mind,

Alabama is at her best
When she's all potential and
Hope and strut...at her
Best when she remembers
Her humble beginnings...
At her best when she
Gives up the chanting
And pays attention to
The babies and the infirm and the
Poor...at her best when
She recalls how wonderful
It is to be paid tender attention to,
To be well-paid with tender attention

Y'all come visit. Stay as long as you like.
See how easily we embrace you
How lavishly we feed you
How generously we share stories with one another
See what we are really like

.....

*Jim Reed writes in the small pieces of time found among the shelves in his Reed
Books and Museum of Fond Memories, Birmingham, AL*

jim@jimreedbooks.com

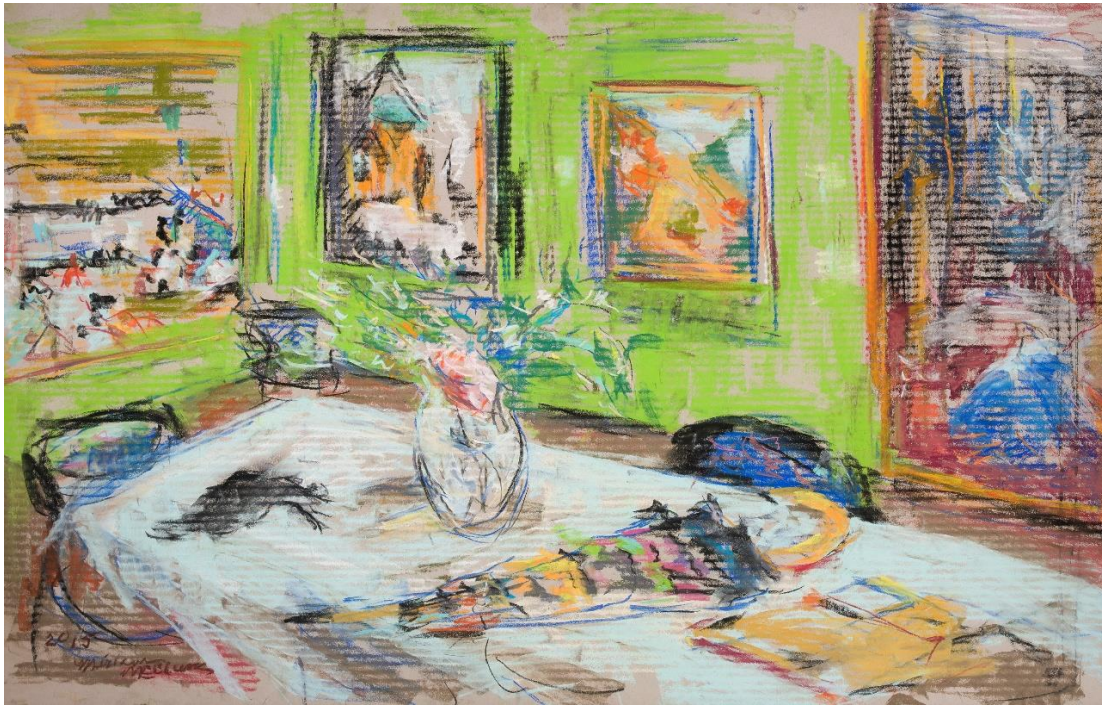
HOW THE PIANIST FOUND HIS FINGERS

Noel Conneely

He hadn't really lost them.
Just the pieces they were playing were slow.
So his fingers would practise
the next phrase while waiting for it to come,
suspending time in the pause.
The keyboard was not really a place to lose yourself.
Sometimes he would borrow his hand from
the music for a moment to scratch his chin.
Not that his chin was itchy but his hands,
idle between notes needed something to do
and so his tongue would search his lips
for the next clue and his eyes might
look for unfindables in the near far.
He played a mean riff and all this
purity stifled his vulgarity so he
tipped his girlfriend over the edge
and picked up with some floozie from
the far side of the canal and then
there was no then. It was all now.

.....

Noel Conneely has had work in *Atlanta Review*, *Poetry Ireland*,
Lalitamba, and other publications in Ireland and the U.S.
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UMBRELLA AND FLOWERS AT THE GALLERY

Miriam McClung

Miriam McClung's painting won one of two publication prizes at the recent Alabama Pastel Society's annual show. Ms. McClung was born in Birmingham in 1935. She considers herself fortunate to have parents who encouraged her artistic development from an early age.

McClung majored in art at the University of Alabama and did further study at the Art Students League in New York City. She still finds Birmingham a great source of inspiration for her work.
miriammclung.com.

A ROOM AMONG THE TREES

Mary Franke Beacham

When I was four, my mom took me to the library with my older sister and cousin (also four) in tow. I still remember my shock when my cousin revealed he had not only never been to a library but didn't even know what one was. My mom left the three of us in the children's section while she went to collect her standard of Agatha Christie, Rita Mae Brown, and Anne George. Jackson, hands empty, ducked around the shelf to see what I was up to. Upon seeing my bundle of books, he was astounded.

"Well you definitely can't get alllllll those."

"Yes I can." (I was pretty self-assured, even at four)

"No you can't. Your mom will NEVER let you."

"Why not?" (Sometimes you have to listen to someone before you explain why they're wrong.)

"It'd be WAY too expensive!"

Cue my smug look. "Well, Jackson, you don't pay for these books. This is a li-bra-ry. You borrow them for free and then bring them back after you finish reading them." And so began my enduring love for the library.

Only a few years after my absolute victory, the city tore down the library of my early childhood, and built a brand-new library, full of light and glass. The city branded the library as the "Library in the Forest" and even made nature trails into the surrounding woods. I was skeptical at first. The old library was all I had known and had fairytale characters parading down the walls in the staircase. The new staircase didn't even have walls. My march down to the children's floor was more one of protest than excitement.

Despite my best efforts, the new library was impossible to dislike, even when subjected to the whims and stubbornness of an eight-year-old. The biggest attraction by far (besides the bearded dragon), was the new reading room. Built almost in the style of an observation deck, it projected off the back of the library, straight into the trees beyond. The top level was a patio, but the bottom half, reached from the children's section on one side and the young adult side on the other, was a triangular construction, enclosed on all sides by glass.

Curling up in one of the sun-warmed chairs with my new books made me feel like a cherished bird in an aviary devised just for me. From then on, every trip to the library had to include a visit to my room among the trees. Ensnared inside my miniature palace of snug chairs and soft pillows, nothing outside that room could touch me. The glass walls gave me an unobstructed view of my domain, whether that meant near-solid sheets of rain or rays of sun passing through the trees to dapple the forest floor with spots of warmth. In that room, all weather was perfect reading weather. For years, that room would serve as my refuge from anything I wanted to briefly escape from and provided the perfect place to dive into the new worlds books so willingly bestow.

As I grew older, my visits to the room became much less frequent. The awkwardness of middle school set in, and I had to relinquish my claim whenever someone had the audacity to intrude into my territory. Despite regaining a modicum of my four-year-old assurance, my visits dwindled even further. Now, my trips to the library consisted of mad dashes from the car inside, where I was under strict orders to take NO LONGER than twenty minutes to collect all my books. I was now only a passing traveler, no longer the room's queen. Once I moved away for college, my visits, fleeting already, ceased entirely. The libraries at school, behemoths that they are, have nothing that compares to my little estate.

The longing for a tranquil escape coupled with the nostalgia for simpler times even now acts as a powerful pull on my consciousness. Even now, after all this time, a trip home isn't complete until I make a trip to my library. And it really does feel like mine. My sense of ownership was founded when I explained what a library was; finding my room over which I might rule only cemented it. Presently on my way to being a teacher, I look forward to more quiet afternoons protected from the worst of the Alabama heat, now grading papers instead of writing them, but still taking the opportunity, at least every now and then, to enjoy a book (or three) in my tiny kingdom.

.....

Mary Franke Beacham is a 21-year-old Birmingham native. Currently a senior at the University of Alabama, she is pursuing a double major in English and Latin. At UA, she also works for the on-campus Writing Center. She plans on returning to Birmingham to teach upon obtaining her master's degree in Education.

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WHITE HERON AND CROW

Richard Weaver

Almost comic they sit:
one white, the other black
with a blue tint; one large and lean,
the other small and squat.
Opposites paired now.
I feel I was meant to witness
this display of order,
patterns within patterns,
the whole island a showcase.

While one preens its feathers
the other stands guard, watching me,
desperado at a distance.
My pen and ink the only weapon
they have to fear. I draw them
though they seemed determine
to outwait me, and the wind promises
rain soon, more to follow.
One last sketch before we run.

.....

Richard Weaver's poems are loosely based on Walter Anderson's Logs, his watercolors, oil paintings, and conversations with his family. Many of Weaver's poems have been accepted or appeared in: Southern Quarterly, Stonecoast Review, Gloom Cupboard, Steel Toe, Allegro, The Little Patuxent Review, Edison Literary Journal, Foliate Oak, Linden Avenue & Deep South Magazine. whelkstar@gmail.com

MY “REEDING” ROOM

Patrick Mills

I trudge down a labyrinthine hallway to the large, wooden door. Fumbling for keys, smooth glide of the mechanism unlocking. I enter and the heavy door pulls shut behind me, not shutting me in, but rather shutting the rest of the world out. My fifteen-pound backpack slides off — a literal weight off my shoulders — as I collapse into a chair and unsuccessfully attempt to sigh out a day’s worth of stress.

My eyes gaze around the familiar room – stacks of sheet music, a neglected Keurig®, scattered textbooks. It’s all so beautifully disorganized, straight out of the Home and Garden magazine for a tortured artist. Even though this room exists for the express purpose of making clarinet reeds — pieces of wood that vibrate to produce the instrument’s sound — a total of approximately one reed has ever been crafted here. Now, only my friend Thomas and I possess keys to the “reed room,” which has devolved into our personal practice room/study space/storage unit.

In this tiny, windowless room, I find respite. Mainly respite from the outside world. From inside the reed room, the outside world is distant — fragmented, like the fleeting figures and shadows that a transforming caterpillar might observe through the walls of his chrysalis. I can hear faint music wafting through the school and muted voices passing, but all of this belongs to a different world.

Something about it here feels safe. Maybe it’s the lack of square footage that makes it feel like the walls are hugging me. Maybe it’s just the privacy, knowing that I am alone and will remain alone for as long as I want in this locked room, before I reemerge into the world. Whatever the reason, the room is warm and comfortable and safe.

Sometimes I come here to practice. To be able to set up all my instruments, pull out all my music, and establish my equipment realm (as all us woodwind players do) without the worry of eventually being kicked out of a practice room.

Sometimes I come here to relax. In this room, I’ve spent countless hours huddling over my small phone screen, watching the X Files and snacking on Famous Amos cookies from the downstairs vending machine. On one particular occasion, I fell asleep on the uncomfortable wooden

desk, lucid dreamed for a while, and then woke up with a numb right arm and only two minutes to scramble to class.

But on this particular occasion, I've come to work. And not just to work, but to get work done. When I use the reed room to work, it means business. It means I'm suspending any human interaction until I get results. It's almost masochistically comforting to have such a defined purpose, a white whale that might pull your Ahab into the wee hours of the night (morning?). The reed room is perfect for this, because in it, temporality seems to halt. Sheltered away on the highest floor of the building, with no windows to allow any natural indication of time, the room is trapped in amber. That feeling of timelessness, plus my clarity of purpose, make any assignment surmountable while I'm in my cloistered space.

But enough procrastinating. I pull out my laptop, open a Word document, and start typing: "I trudge down a labyrinthine hallway to the large, wooden door..."

.....

Patrick Mills is a Birmingham native who currently attends Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN. He is a rising senior studying clarinet performance and political science. On campus, he works as a consultant at The Writing Studio and is Editor-in-Chief of the Vanderbilt Historical Review. pattymills3@gmail.com

*"It is better to be part of beauty
for one instant and then cease to
exist than to exist forever
and never be a part of beauty"*

—Don Marquis

TWO SHORES

Jonathan Mayhall

Once, all ya needed
To make it
In Atlantic City
Was a tall hat'
And a starfish
To steer it by.
Down where I was
Forged
It was no different,
Really.
They sold salt-water
Taffeta
In Gulf Shores,
Alabama,
And it was just as easy
To drown there
As anywhere
Else.

And ya could stand on
The shore
And see nothin' but sea
And sand,
White enough to blind
A pony.
For as far as ya could see,
And for as long as
Ya could
Stand.
And I stood,
I stood.

Jonathan Mayhall was born in Birmingham (West End), AL, and grew up in Midfield, AL. A graduate of the University of Alabama and University of Alabama at Birmingham, he teaches psychology at Beville State Community College (Walker College Campus). He is also a songwriter and performs with the duo The Spook House Saints. spookhousesaints@gmail.com

THE LAST ROOM

Carl Schinasi

This is the room where my mother ate her last meal. The room's flower-covered wallpaper surrounds me. Like a swaddling cloth, it traps me in her dying days, her dying moments, into the glaze in her eyes at her last living breath. Those flowers, an odd pattern of yellow sunflowers and large rose blooms on a teal background, bring back memories of my mother saying during her dying days, "Those flowers sure look pretty. We should go out and pick some. Maybe we can make petal wine out of them." A window hazy with grit opens halfway to the landscape outside. A long stretch of parched land soaks up the rays of a beating down sun. A scatter of dried potpourri, its fragrance evaporated long ago, sits in an unglazed clay bowl. It captures the time now frozen in a room left unkempt and untouched, where my mother took her last breath.

I haven't been back here in years. They told me to come since the house was to be torn down. Developers have bought the house and the dried land on which it was built. "We can give it new life," they said. "We can also give you lots of money for it." My brother didn't consider me when he leaped at the chance to sell and signed the contract, even though the house and decision to sell was half mine.

When he told me, the first thing I said was, "But don't you remember that time...? In mom's bedroom when we'd spin round and round, try to stand after, and we'd yell in fright thinking those flowers had jumped off the wall and were chasing us?" That time you cried out, "I'm in a cave being buried under bright petals." Mom lay in bed and laughed until she cried, deeply inhaling the smoke from her Camel cigarette, choking out with a coughing breath, "I wish this could last forever." And then you ran to her bed, jumped in and snuggled with her, the nasty smoke rising from your curly hair as she inhaled and exhaled as if it were her living blood. She was dying even then and we didn't know it. The room kept us close. It nailed us into never-to-be-forgotten images, like the nails sealing down a coffin lid.

The cancer didn't show itself until later. But as these things go, not really that much. Each time I walked into her room when I was in high school, the wallpaper whispered to me. "I'm choking, I'm choking," it said and I heard my mother hack out a villainous cough. Then she'd spit black

goo into a glass. With each passing year the wallpaper faded and faded more infiltrated by the clouds of stinking cigarette smoke. The rose blooms turned from bright red to salmon-colored, the brilliant yellows to pale imitations of themselves.

I remember at the last. I bend over my mother with her skin looking like dried apricots. It smelled of the hellish smoke that will kill her. She lies on her side. She can't move. All she can do now is listen, mostly to the room of decaying flowers and whatever messages she receives from inside. I want to tell her I love her, but she knows that. I've said it before. Maybe not enough. Maybe not so the wounds on the wall can whisper it back to her. In my heart, I know she knows that. So why be obvious, why be redundant? Instead it comes to mind to speak softly, "Mom, I know you can hear me. Listen: Thank you for the gift of life."

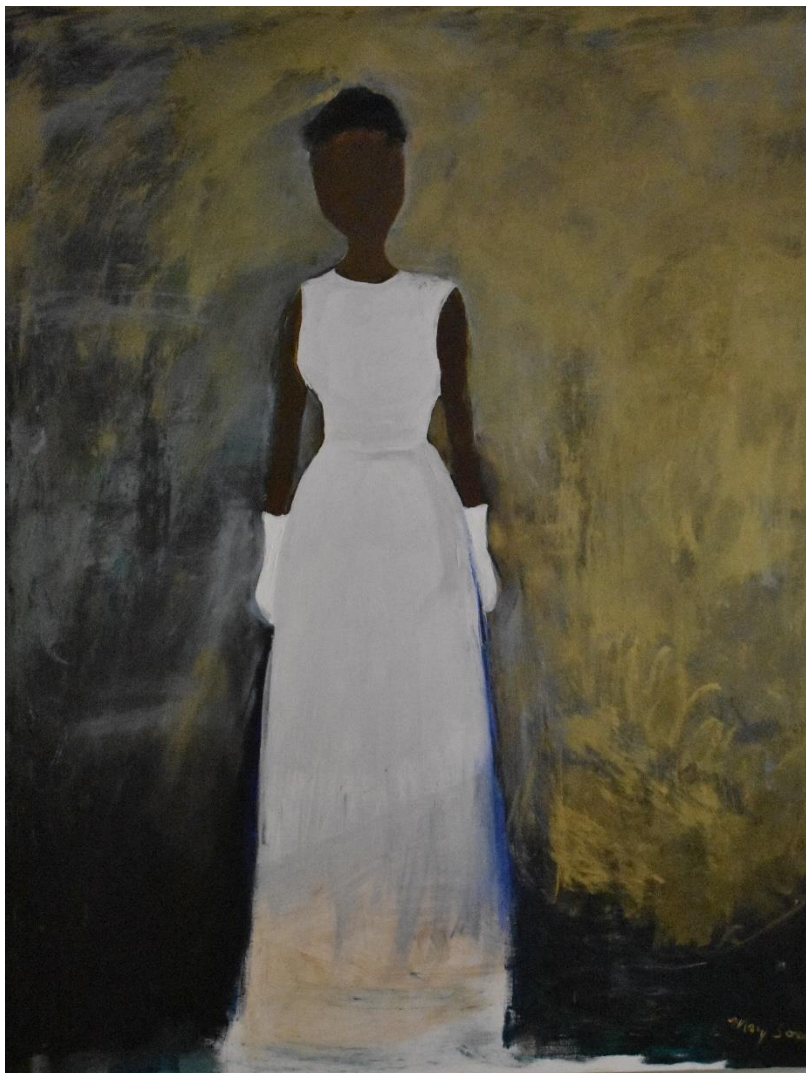
It must be a faint flicker of a smile that crosses her lips. It must be her last vestige of energy to make this, her very last movement. Her last movement before the room closes in on her, on us. The sour smell in the room of long-gone cigarette smoke seeps into my eyes and deeply into my lungs, as death takes a bow.

Who knows how long I stood immobile in that room staring down at my mother. Finally, as if wrestling my way out of a box, I come to from that stone state. A tarantula crawls across the linoleum floor. I lift my foot and crash down on it with a resounding blow. No more, I think. This house, this room will know no more death than its own.

.....

Carl Schinasi, an erstwhile New Yorker, is a retired professor. He writes, paints and takes photographs. He lives in Birmingham, AL.

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MOTHER IN WHITE

Mary Sood

48" x 78"

Acrylic on Canvas

Mary Sood serves as Director of Public Relations at Talladega College in Talladega, AL. She is an accomplished artist, writer, author, editor, and publisher who lives in Birmingham, AL

BLUEBERRY POEM

Kwoya Maples

for Terence Crutcher

Write a poem about blueberries, they said—
how cold and sweet and stolen.

Write that poem instead of this poem
I carry in my chest as I move down the sidewalk,
the poem breathing and growing with every step, stretching
toward—

Write a poem about blueberries
instead of the one about the body, which is tender,
crusted in the road, and leaking blue.
How easily the crushed pulp
disperses with the rain.

Write a poem about blueberries;
how they grow low to the ground
or reach up over fences,
for relief.

Write this poem instead of the mother's grief
over the membrane torn in her son's mouth,
his last word, "oh"
The shape of a blueberry.

.....

Kwoya Fagin Maples is a writer from Charleston, SC. A Cave Canem fellow, her poetry collection Mend (University Press of Kentucky, 2018) was finalist for the Association of Writers & Writing Programs for non-fiction prize. Maples is also a 2019 recipient of a literary fellowship from the Alabama State Council on the Arts. kwofagin@yahoo.com

THE VACANT HOUSE

Wayne Scheer

When Mr. Ludlow died, his house sat vacant and the Neighborhood Patrol worried.

“No good can come from a vacant house” became the neighborhood mantra.

This took me back to the abandoned house central to my childhood, over sixty years ago. The stone house stood on a weed-infested lot on the corner of a typical Brooklyn street lined with apartment buildings. It was probably a farmhouse dating back to a time when nature rather than cement dominated. Only sections of a roof survived along with a rotted wooden floor with weeds growing up through the slats. But rooms remained distinct. One still had a door.

The teenagers ruled the inside of the house. Our world was limited to the front porch, what we city kids called the stoop. Raised off the ground about three feet, it was perfect for jump and roll maneuvers onto the cushy weeds. The stoops we knew were surrounded by concrete, making such maneuvers far less attractive.

I realize now how small the lot was, but to us city kids it represented untamed wilderness. We sent out search parties scouting for treasure. Beer bottles and Coke cans to our young imaginations represented relics of ancient civilizations. Once an old mattress appeared and quickly transformed into a trampoline. The older kids soon dragged it into the house.

Inside, childhood gave way to adolescence. We'd push aside the old sheets the big kids used to cover the window holes and peek at our future. Boys and girls sat on the floor smoking, drinking beer and playing spin-the-bottle. They laughed in a way only older kids laughed.

I eventually entered the inner sanctum of adolescence. I choked on Chesterfields, kissed Maria Caprietti and made it to second base with Barbara Rubin. It was in the private room, the one with the door, where I discovered what had happened to the old mattress. Eileen Rikard and I had no idea what to do when we shared our “Seven Minutes of Heaven.” After a little fumbling and petting, we agreed not to do anything, promising never to tell the other kids. Eileen kept her word, as did I. That could have been where I first learned to trust the opposite sex.

Members of our Neighborhood Patrol offered a collective sigh of relief when the Ludlow House was sold and a young couple with a baby moved in. “No good can come from a vacant house,” our neighbors chanted.

I’m happy I grew up when I did.

.....

Wayne Scheer has been nominated for four Pushcart Prizes and a Best of the Net. He’s published numerous stories, poems and essays in print and online, including Revealing Moments, a collection of flash stories. His short story, “Zen and the Art of House Painting” has been made into a short film.

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https://issuu.com/pearnoir/docs/revealing_moments.

<https://vimeo.com/18491827>



TODAY’S POEM

Danny P. Barbare

Each day, it is the clean

Of it

How tomorrow the floor

Will want

To be walked upon

Hold its shine.

.....

*Danny P. Barbare has recently been published in North Dakota Quarterly and Columbia College Literary Review. He resides in the Upstate of the Carolinas with his wife, family, and small dog Miley. **barbaredaniel@yahoo.com***



WHITE MUSHROOMS

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. atrasyvania@gmail.com

13 YEARS

CL Bledsoe

It's early, salt still
on the roads and teeth
in the air. Every day,
I'm a little later
to my chair, but no one
looks up when I stomp
in. Nights, oh, I need
you, but you are so
long dead.

There were massive, white
mushrooms in the spent
mulch beside the sidewalk,
but someone tore them
out. The lady who came
to clean Dad's house got mad
at us for picking bitterweed
flowers. Said you were dying,
at least we could find
daisies. Boo planted seeds
in the yard, stood outside
to shoo the cows away.

.....

I walk fast, like you used to
before the sickness
won, from door to cows
and home again. They're gone
now, the cows, and the trees
I always wanted to stop
and play under. You said
it was fine to wait, but I couldn't
stand to see your back
disappearing over the hill.

*CL Bledsoe's latest poetry collection is Trashcans in Love. His latest short story collection is The Shower Fixture Played the Blues. His latest novel is The Funny Thing About... Bledsoe lives in northern Virginia with his daughter and blogs with Michael Gushue. clbledsoe@gmail.com
<https://medium.com/@howtoeven>*

THE COLD ROOM

Thomas Neil Dennis

*Sometimes I think this world is a great big prison yard
Some of us are prisoners, and some of us are guards*

--Bob Dylan, George Jackson

After booking, they take him to the last door on the right, put him in and shut the door. The color of the walls is something approaching anti-psychotic pale avocado. This room is the freezer. The locked door has one long smeary window. Straight ahead is a metal bunk, something meant to hold a bed but lacking anything resembling a bed. He sits on it, then leans over to squint closely at what appears to be, nah, not mouse turds arranged in letters.

Twenty, maybe thirty feet above the entrance are the large vents shooting the cold air into this relatively small room. All around the vents hang bits of white paper and it takes him a while to suss this out but eventually he understands that previous occupants had spent a lot of time throwing wet toilet paper at the vents in an attempt to make the place a little less icy. It had not worked. It reminded him of an art exhibit he had seen not two weeks previously.

Loud noises as lines of prisoners, some in orange and some not, move past his door. Right inside the door is the metal toilet and next to it a water fountain of sorts. He drinks a lot of water. The toilet is not smelly, but he was unable to conceive a case of diarrhea bad enough to make him use it. At the door's window he catches an administrative eye. He mimes holding a phone to his ear: "I need to make a phone call."

Guard: "Okay, hang on, in a minute."

The bulky man with weapons and flashlights bouncing around his waist comes back and takes him to the phone bank but alas, when he tries to make the call, he realizes he has no glasses and it's not going to work. He can't see to call, and so unsuccessfully tries to ring up someone who might give a damn. Someone who might be wondering whence has he evanesced at sundown on a Sunday night. Nothing. It is a complicated phone system.

"I'm sorry, your number cannot be completed as dialed."

"Where's my glasses?"

"Sorry."

Now he is escorted back to the noticeably chillier room.

He sits, waits to be told when and if he may be released.

To the right of the single cot, on the wall just a few feet away, is a brief crimson button alongside the dots of a speaker, but he is certain it is there only for decoration or perhaps the amusement of those outside. He speaks into it a few times, but it's almost certainly not working. An ironic "For Display Only" is scratched into the brick behind the stained, stainless steel panel.

Breakfast of one almost-cooked hard-boiled egg plus cold dry toast comes in at some point, but he's not ready to eat it, even though the guard says he should eat it.

"Drink a lotta water too. Helps when we test you later this morning."

"Test me?"

"Yeah, they'll test you to see if you can get out."

Clomping black-shoe echoes ring off down the hallway outside this room's door, sounds he tries not to interpret too unpleasantly.

He's not sleeping. He hears the sounds of an office. A change is taking place outside the room. Random rambling voice-sounds. In what appears to be the dead of night — though this room is brightly lit by high-flown fluorescence — a Caucasian dude, a flunky, comes by mopping floors. He looks like the down-fallen son of a former State Supreme Court Judge.

At another point, a great gang of guys who looked as though they had been doing landscaping march past his door and there is a clanging that indicates incarceration. What was their crime? It must be nearing dawn — there was a certain bustling movement in the administrative office outside his door, the shift-change thing.

Yet, after another indistinguishable space of time — he keeps punching the button on the wall — here come the landscapers out again. Freed? To trial? Doors slam. Men yell and scream-sing in a room down the hall. You cannot smell coffee brewing, but you know it is somewhere.

Jesus, it's cold in here.

He shivers again and again, serial shivers, teeth-chattering shivers, rolling abdominal shivers until a simple idea slides into his semi-demented brain: he rolls to his side on the icy metal cot — what cruel expert on corrections told them to create just one small cot of iron? — and

shimmied his pale, short-sleeved ocher t-shirt up enough to cover his ears, his head slipping down behind the cloth, bearded chin tucked down to breathe warmth into his solar plexus. If he slept, it was quite unsound.

He practiced his yoga breathing, slow and steady, but the control of aching thoughts was beyond his expertise.

He put into his mind's eye the faces of people who, it was possible, still cared for him.

Once he saw someone standing outside his locked door, looking in at him as he looked through the glass windows of the lemur home on visits to the local zoo. It was hard to tell, but he thought he saw a smile on the person's face.

The door grunted. The person entered, motioned at the prisoner.

"Come on, we're gonna test you . . . "

"For what?"

"To see if you can leave this morning."

.....

Thomas Neil Dennis, born in 1953 near Helena, AL, now writes in a tidy sound-proof cabin not far from the source of the Cahaba River. He hates summer. thomas.neil.dennis@gmail.com

"This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees, where humans just arrived."

—Richard Powers

garden of frost

Evan Clark Anders

in the garden of frost,
the contour of an elegy

appears as magnolias.

if i must presume this as fate
i demand to know gods face

i demand a return to sender.

grief, grief lies within dust
of woolgather

beneath gold trim of sky,
we began as a tongue

entering a mouth.

born into manufactured defiance
god becomes a disregarded relic

to a generation out of whispers.

a legend like monuments of past war
there is no end to blood.

in the garden of frost,
magnolias sway in the wilted suffering

of damned carnations.
the shape of an elegy appears,
amongst rows of jagged tombstones

like fragmented teeth
submerged in dry wheat,

a somber seed
blossoms into revolution

we eagerly forgive that which consumes us
we always forgive, my son,

vicious the frost which we cling.

listen to my laughter,
there is no grief

simply magnolias.



no conclusion to paper myths

Evan Clark Anders

like the sun stumbling
out of her horizon

like fingers hesitant of their reach

like freeze-dried emotions
defrosting autumn afternoon

afternoon like a peach
ambivalent towards her ripeness

it becomes vines
consuming a chapel

it becomes mountains
without names

it becomes sparrows
devouring the raspberries

we planted the last march

grief in the hustle
down avenues of isolation

the last great sadness
left to be discovered.

i open the door
to taste sunlight.

.....

Evan Clark Anders brews coffee for mass consumption in Philadelphia. His poems have appeared in Philadelphia Stories, California Quarterly, North Dakota Quarterly, and Third Point Press. He changes diapers and thinks Bob Dylan was best in the eighties. evanclarkanders@hotmail.com

*“Surround yourself with the dreamers
and the doers, the believers and
thinkers, but most of all, surround
yourself with those who see the
greatness within you, even when you
don’t see it yourself.”*

—Edmund Lee

THIS OLD HOUSE, THIS OLD ROOM

Tom Sheehan

For true appointment with time, this house was, in its infancy, the Oyster Inn, a stagecoach stop on the Boston-Newburyport run late 18th Century. Part proof of that portrayal is layers of discarded oyster shells that every garden attempt in the backyard has revealed, a thick white archeological stratum most likely boasting pre-Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary chalk. Such digs uncovered old sump holes, dried and rock-throated wells gone back to earth, leech fields and cesspools laying a way of drainage off to the river 200 feet away. Who knows where those fluids went? The theory is, after seventeen feet of plunging, purity is re-established.

Rafters and beams of three floors are either 9x12 or 10x13 or 8x11 or thereabouts in its barn-body mix, leveled on the top for floor or the bottom for ceiling sighting. It's where ancient coin was deposited by carpenter or builder as a token fetish on a base sill thicker than linemen's thighs. Inside one wall and atop one window coming down in constant maintenance of the years, came forth a child's high button shoe nailed with a square nail to a lintel as a carpenter's statement. The old shoe's sole is worn extremely thin on one side as if that carpenter's child or builder's child had dragged one foot through her early life. The shoe likely is a fetish, a buttoned talisman or an amulet, or, as my father once pointed out from worldly tours with the Marines, an *antinganting*, which a legendary Filipino had left impressed on his storied mind.

Oh, that child haunts me yet. She comes back each time I look upon the shoe framed in a recess of glass with a museum of house nails and clay marbles exhumed from beam restoration or foundation gravel. Each night dousing last kitchen light, emptying out day, so much like a shopkeeper at the till, I think she might be the daughter of another father who looked over my shoulder that day in the upstairs bathroom, where my territory, my time, was invaded, with a quiet retreat following. Honor among parents, perhaps, or the Good Carpenter, Joseph himself, making a stand for his tradesmen.

A house it is where boards in the roof are sometimes thirty-six inches broad in their endless cover (telling me the local forests have gone through generation change). It's a house where a portion of one

cellar is a single stone no horse of theirs could have moved during construction and instead became part of the house's lasting support. It is where archways of red mickey bricks out of a long-gone nearby kiln stand as tunnels through the basement, and two and a half centuries later continue to hold up for needed warmth all eight fireplaces including two beehive ovens. Some nights alone, letting all my genes work their way into a froth of knowledge, or letting them free of baseboard or wainscoting, I taste the bread and the beans from those ovens, know the mud that sealed these domed cooking chambers, feel the kitchen work its magic.

This is, further, a room from its yard I can throw a stone well into the First Iron Works of America, Cradle of American Industry. Waiting to sit again in that front yard, by the granite walk and steps, is a smooth granite hitching post, four hundred pounds or better, buried I'd guess for near a century in the backyard. There is a hole drilled through ten inches of that granite column, that snubbing post, that horse holder, where the wrought iron ring has fled back into the earth again. Though one son, I know, will put both back where they belong, time coming, time allowed, tools at home in his hands, and history.

On the floor of the wainscoted front room, in front of another fireplace sitting on those red mickey arches, where my wife, as my young son said, "(Mommy) was kissing (infant) Betsy on the floor." Betsy in the wrath of a momentary seizure, *grand mal*, and Mommy, RN, giving mouth-to-mouth to her daughter for the first of two tries. The spot of that life-saving retrieval was, as it proved out, but feet away from the door where I met her sneaking back in at four o'clock of a morning in her fifteenth year, having slipped out her brothers' window, that route cover thought broadcast safe. "Oh, dad," she unflappably said, "you're up early." (Now *she* has children she must watch!)

But, all that aside, it is this room here that counts. At one and the same time, it is meager and plush, 11x30 in measure, a fireplace and hearth jutting off one wall, another wall lined with 60 feet of bookshelves. A quick look shows all the signed copies from Seamus Heaney, Galway Kinnell, Donald Junkins and Donald Hall among other Donalds, John Farrow's (sic) "City of Ice," comrade James Hickey's "Chrysanthemum in the Snow," some bound mementos of my own, and at least a dozen sports trophies in hockey, football, baseball and

softball awarded to my children. It has one window looking out on the Iron Work's original slag pile, Saugus River's salt basin plush with reeds and marsh grass, and telescopes towards Boston and the ocean a mere five miles away, and three doors to front and back halls and a small bathroom. Without doubt it is the warmest room in the house with only one 11-foot wall, an outside wall, the other three with camel hair in the plaster mix all being inside walls. The floor is maple that I can't replace commercially, (the floor where a closet once sat is now lumberyard oak, slightly off-color but in the mix). My original computer, an old Mac with a screen like a postage stamp, no longer humming late into the night or well before dawn, sits against one wall, beside the fireplace; here, where I work, a newer unit, chock full of ideas, aspirations, and memories of him, tonnage.

.....

Tom Sheehan, 92nd year, published 44 books, (Alone, with the Good Graces/Jock Poems and Reflections for Proper Bostonians/The Grand Royal Stand-off at Darby's Creek/Small Victories for the Soul VII.

tomfsheehan@comcast.net

"Gentlemen, I have just completed my new novel. It is so good I am not even going to send it to you. Why don't you just come and get it?"

—Snoopy



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