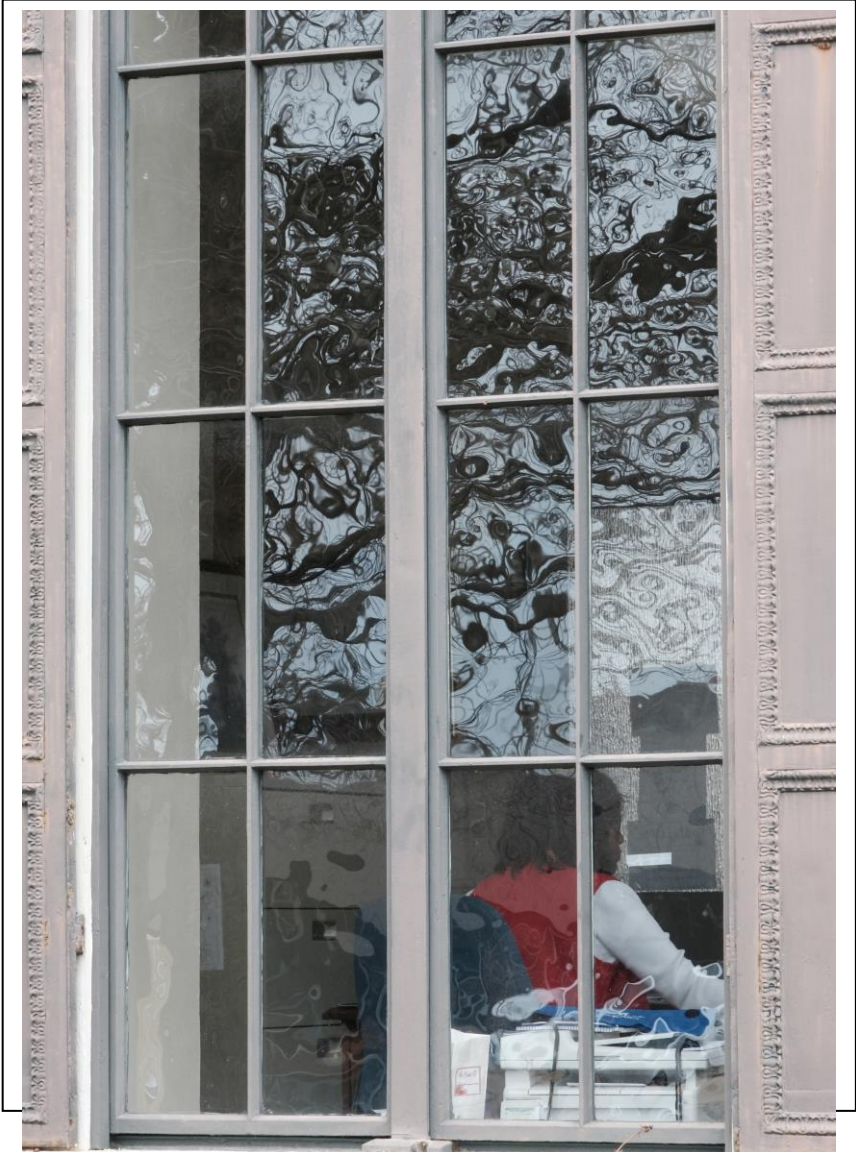


Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 18 Issue2



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.

\$6.00



Birmingham Arts Journal

GLAZE PRIZE – SNOW DAY	Kate Moore	1
DEEP SOUTH AIRPORT WAITING LOT	Jim Reed	3
WINTER POEM	Barry Curtis	4
THE SWEETEST SCENT	Kevin Brown	6
AFTER SUMMER RAIN	Diana Malivani	8
THINGS OF THE EARTH	Gage Crowder	9
MY JERUSALEM	Karim Shamsi-Basha	10
FATHER’S DAY (A TRUE STORY)	Ron Carter	12
8 th ANNUAL GLENN FELDMAN CONTEST	Jessie Shi	
LIFE DURING THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT		15
THE SCHOLAR	Cyndi Marble	17
SOLO WITH CHORUS	Joe Whitten	18
HOW TO PICK A MULBERRY	Ben Thompson	19
IN THE GARDEN: A PRAYER	Gage Crowder	21
stacks, scabs, and bruises	Dan Jacoby	22
WALKER	Jennifer Horne	23
TUG OF LOVE	Erin Hardin	24–25
UP IN MURREN	Tim J. Hunter	26
SUNDAY MORNING BRUNCH	Ahmad Austin	32
WINTER FIELD	Norbert Kovacs	33
THE ELEPHANT BOX	Russell Working	34
SUCCESSION	Catherine Flynn	39
REUNION	John Zedolik	40
COLORS	Beth Conklin	41
TO RILKE	Seth Tanner	42
I DREAM THESE WORDS HAVE		
ENTERED HOSPICE	Mike Foster	43
LEAVING, OR COMING BACK	Charlie Peters	44
THE OG MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN	Barry Curtis	47

FRONT COVER: WORKING LATE – Digital Photograph – Larry O. Gay

Larry Gay photographs iconic structures and landscapes and tells stories via his pictures in his native Birmingham, AL. logay@bellsouth.net www.larryogay.com

BACK COVER: WHISKEY MOCK - Victoria Martin is a graphic designer and painter from a family of talented artists in Huntsville, AL. She earned a BFA Mississippi State University. During her free time you can typically find Victoria showcasing her art and supporting other artists at some of local art markets throughout North Alabama.

ArtinMartinDesigns.com

THE 6th ANNUAL ANDREW GLAZE PRIZE FOR POETRY

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 select an out-of-state juror who receives an honorarium in the amount of \$100. Juror and winner are announced on the Journal website in the first issue of the Journal each year.

birminghamartsjournal.com

SNOW DAY

Kate Moore

I hold a snow globe in my mind, shake it till it shimmers

Winter squall announced itself
by snowplow's amber lights, streaking
slow across my bedroom wall
by morning, December steeped in stillness
driveway drifts rose three feet tall
neighbor boys broomed backyard rink
I laced up new white skates, as frosty
flakes continued their silent fall, later
dragging red saucer and sled, answering
snowbanks' siren call, we spent all
day laughing, ignoring the cold, careening
down hills — wooed by whistling wind

Long winters settle into view, frozen childhood glimmers

Kate Moore, former Director of K-12 Instruction, now serves as a family literacy coach. She's a three-term Poet Laureate for the City of San Ramon, CA. Her chapbook, Avians of Mourning, was published in 2020. She holds a Doctorate in Educational Leadership for Social Justice from California State University.

[katemcmoore@gmail](mailto:katemcmoore@gmail.com)

A NOTE FROM THE JUROR – Georgia Heard

I love poems such as “Snowday” that stretch traditional forms like this fourteen-line sonnet variation that instead of using a conventional sonnet rhyme scheme uses internal rhyme of just one sound *wall, tall, all*, etc. as well as recurring alliteration; the poem chimes more than it rhymes. I also love how Kate Moore brackets the childhood memory with italicized first and last lines and how rhyming end words *shimmers* and *glimmers* frame the poem.

The metaphoric conceit of shaking a snow globe as memory works beautifully with the central image of the poem: a snowy day. And the vivid description like *a snowplow’s amber lights, streaking/slow across my bedroom wall and tall/neighborhood boys broomed backyard rink* make that memory come alive.

Kate Moore also incorporates what I think is a sonnet’s most interesting device the Volta, or turn, where the poem shifts the narrative and tone and the speaker becomes more present in the line that begins: *I laced up new white skates*.

I also love how the mostly enjambed lines propel the poem forward almost breathlessly as we careen down the poem with the speaker (and our own memories of a snow day) on a word sled *wooded by whistling winds*.

.....

Georgia Heard received her MFA in poetry at Columbia University and is a founding member of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project where she coached teachers and students in the NYC public schools in writing and poetry for over ten years. She is the author of 20 books for readers of all ages including poems and a journal, *A FIELD GUIDE TO THE HEART: POEMS OF LOVE, COMFORT AND HOPE* (co-authored with Rebeckai Kai Dotlich), an anthology of poems, *THE WOMAN IN THIS POEM: WOMEN’S VOICES IN POETRY*, and *MY THOUGHTS ARE CLOUDS: POEMS FOR MINDFULNESS*, among others. She is the NCTE 2023 Excellence in Poetry for Children Award Winner and offers online poetry writing workshops at The Poet’s Studio. Georgia lives in Singer Island, FL, with her family.
www.georgiaheard.com

DEEP SOUTH AIRPORT WAITING LOT

Jim Reed

I'm marking time in this Deep South village airport cellphone lot.

This array of idling vehicles constitutes a sub-village of sorts. A place of temporary inhabitants.

Those of us who are sitting and waiting do not rent space here. We just occupy space. We scratch our phone screens. We allow ear pods to overwhelm and expurgate our thoughts. We fidget. We await the call.

The call will let us know whether there are delayed or on-time or early arrivals. The call will let us know that the arrivers have descended safely.

The call will free us up to focus on the next challenge, then the next.

There is little to do but stare forth through the windshield and note our surroundings. Green hills and one-way arrows and don't-you-dare-park-here signs. A lone grey trash receptacle and several metallic light poles and some landscaped trees.

And people. There are people. Nestled all snug in their bubbles. Linked but oblivious of their links.

ACs and motors hum and grumble, closed windows and locked doors replace would-be side-by-side conversations between waiting-room strangers.

We only guess at what lies racing through each other's minds.

Evidence of lives being lived abound. Car tags display coded and numbered and lettered mysteries. Stickers and slogans and keyed scratches and red mud and hitches hold clues.

Other hard-to-read-in-the-dark signs and notices tell us we had better do something or not-do-something or face the unknown consequences. A chain link fence enslaves tall, ungroomed weeds.

Fifty shades of gray clouds loll about in the dark, layered skies. Aircraft materialize and descend and ascend. Remnants of once-present objects stand purposeless.

The ring. The voice on the phone cheerfully announces a soft landing. Onward to luggage retrieval and loved ones' reception. Soon the second act commences. Now, breathing resumes

.....
Jim Reed has authored hundreds of stories about life Down South. He owns and operates Reed Books/The Museum of Fond Memories in Birmingham.

www.iimreedbooks.com

WINTER POEM

Barry Curtis

That is the best time for poetry:
Dripping eaves and leafless trees
Seem somehow fundamental to that state
Wherein the void lulls us to emptiness.
Shakespeare knew this, and others;
All that talk of Bare, ruined choirs
Was a weather vane pointing out directions
Across a map where history has no meaning
Other than the universal discontent
Of blustery exits and entrances.
And as I grow older and more aware
Of each passing year's solstitial turn,
And understand just how impossible
This task of turning right the world,
The brisk air seems more and more my friend,
More and more the music at my core.
The necessary lies cannot stand up to it.
Illusions find that they must retreat.
Either lie down and play dead
In the snow swirling ceaselessly down
Or hop a plane heading to Bermuda
And pay for limbs to be renewed.
It is, however, an appropriate season
For dark nights of the soul:
Everything is so centered, so full of stillness
That you begin to imagine learning
The nocturnal patience of the reticent owl,

Solitary in the hushed hours of twilight
And you begin saying goodbye
To your quest of modern thought
And all the sermons of the changing age
And all the lessons ever taught
And see the shrouded figure of all folly
As a target for snowballs.
Which is not exactly the same thing
As giving up the ghost
Which was the tone that informed
The lines of this poem's first inception:
The wind blows fiery and cold
And madly like an old friend or a demon:
I'd say that makes us even.

.....

*Barry Curtis is a poet who has been living in Birmingham, AL for the last 30 years. Currently, he lives near Highland Avenue with his daughter, her companion and their five dogs. **Okiepoetcreek53@Yahoo.com***

*“Don't look for every moment to be a
10. Sometimes you have to celebrate the
fours, fives and sixes.”*

—Sarah Wildman

THE SWEETEST SCENT

Kevin Brown

My father died of heart failure the same Chinese New Year girls began to draw my eye instead of ire. I wasn't present for his death but figured it even since he wasn't present for my life.

We all lived in Kowloon, but we no longer lived together, though mom claimed that the case even when we did. When he roamed within the same walls instead of a few kilometers away, he worked for people who only spoke to him in snaps. One snap for tea. Three to open the door, five to get out and close it behind him. He never looked at his superiors because his eyes were always closed as he smiled and bowed until they passed. They never looked at him because they were superior.

He smiled so much at work his face molded into a frown at home. He never talked to us when he spoke aloud, and never spoke aloud when he talked to us. Orders were given with grunts and snaps. If we ever caught his eye, we had gotten in his way.

Nights, he'd drink bottles of baijiu, then snap his fingers for his jacket. Slam furniture, slam doors as he left amidst my mother's pleas to not. He'd return the next morning smelling nothing like her fragrance and carrying a bottle of Dynasty XO a few sips shy of dry. Mother would weep in pain, then rage as she'd scream that he's nothing but a disgraceful eunuch. I always tried to look away before she hit the wall, and I always failed to plug my ears before she hit the tile. Then all was silence and sobs as we waited for his snore.

The end began with what I didn't know was his way of bonding. Drunk, he told me the proudest moment of his life was as a boy he'd smelled Bruce Lee in person. He'd had the opportunity to shake his hand, but when the star approached, he could only smile and bow, his eyes clenched in what would be his greatest ability. "The scent of cologne was so strong," he said, eyes closed to stanch the welling. "It was the smell of a great man."

Then he left without a grunt or snap and never returned. It took forever to clear his stench from our home and hearts.

The last time I saw him alive was a Sunday morning Mom and I had yum tsa in Tsim Sha Tsui. Afterward, we walked the Avenue of Stars, and I saw

him standing in the shadow of Bruce Lee's statue. Staring out at the junks crossing Victoria Harbor, the South China Sea like dragon scales in the chop. I yelled his name several times, but he closed his eyes and lowered his head, then faced the statue and walked away.

Heart failure was listed as the COD my mother said, because "failure" was insufficient on a death certificate. At his wake, a family wearing white cried. Mom and I wore red and did not. In Chinese tradition, if a son is not present at his father's death, he must crawl toward the coffin wailing for penance. With Taoist chants around me, I lowered to palms and kneecaps and crawled toward the man who'd always run away from me. Every millimeter neared left more of him behind. Clenching my eyes, I wept with laughter at the proudest moment of my life. The scent of formaldehyde was so strong. It was the smell of a failed man.

.....

Kevin Brown has published two short story collections, Death Roll and Ink On Wood, and has had fiction, non-fiction and poetry published in over 200 literary journals, magazines, and anthologies. He has won numerous writing competitions, fellowships, and grants, and was nominated for multiple prizes and awards, including three Pushcart Prizes. 5ivelights@gmail.com

*“Suppose your dreams could socialize
with my dreams. Suppose your
imaginary friends met my imaginary
friends. Suppose your shadow could
dance with my shadow. Just suppose.”*

—Jim Reed



AFTER SUMMER RAIN

Diana Malivani

Oil on Canvas

50cm x 50cm

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.

DianaMalivani@gmail.com

THINGS OF THE EARTH

Gage Crowder

I want so much to hold
all the lonely things of earth
within me—
to keep spring's solitary
sparrow in my spacious
cage of ribs,
to invite the friendless
wind into my cordial
lungs,
to let lonesome light
into my million, vermilion
veins—
but most of all, I want
to welcome you,
dear reader,
to this table set for two,
between the bread and wine,
within my heart.

.....

Gage Crowder is a divinity student, working and living in North Alabama. Though mostly content with the difficult art of the theological essay or sermon, he occasionally stumbles onto a poem. His previous prose and poetry have appeared in Panoplyzine, The Fountains, Birmingham Arts Journal and The West Florida Legend.
gage.crowder@yahoo.com

MY JERUSALEM

Karim Shamsi-Basha

I hold her close to my chest and sing,
“Yalla tnamm Habeebty, Gharrat Betrouh.”
Go to sleep my love; the night raids will go away.
My voice is soft enough to surrender,
loud enough to hush the bombs.
My Jerusalem,
An arid juniper tree,

falling in a chasm of the gods,
in dark and wretched land.
Her branches shield and protect me,
but fierce light pierces through.
My limbs are torn, shredded.
I ache. I cry. I scream.
No one hears.

My Jerusalem.
I relish my city of angels.
The city of the living and dead,
an overwhelming and sinking dread.
Its valleys run with bloody creeks,
trails snake with horror,
souls laden with fear.

My Jerusalem.
A land of narrow alleys and fragile peace,
aged souqs and ancient war,
cold streams and hearts warm.
Land of green figs and beauty ethereal.
Sand storms brutal and fierce,
carrying me above the clouds,
where the wind blows,
where the crows are mute,
and where raindrops turn into tears,
of crying men and mad poets.

My Jerusalem.
History and future intertwine.
Grass sprouts amid the worn bricks.
Children howl for breast milk,
and grown-ups kill over creeds.
A cocoon of life and death,
a tired and dire breath.

My Jerusalem,
Cries in the silence of a forest.
She's a faint desert mirage,
a bloody tempest,

a parched oasis.
My baby forever weeps.
No one hears.

.....

Karim Shamsi-Basha is a writer and photographer who immigrated at the age of 18 from Damascus, Syria. His latest children's book, The Cat Man of Aleppo (co-written with Irene Latham), was awarded a Caldecott Honor and the Middle East Book Award. The book also received starred reviews from Publisher Weekly, Booklist, Kirkus Reviews, and others. Karim lives to spread the message: Humanity in Everywhere. karimshamsibasha@gmail.com

*“I was not instructed, so I was able to
keep my freedom.”*

—Cecilia Vicuna

FATHER'S DAY (A True Story)

Ron Carter

The runt of a litter of eight, they called him “the Wisp.” Growing up small for his age in St. Augustine, Florida, Willie had the proverbial experiences of an undersized kid in African American poverty: stolen lunch money, stolen bicycle, stolen self-worth. His daddy tried to teach him to stand his ground and defend himself, but Willie’s instinctive reaction to bullies was to run. Running became his escape, literally and figuratively. He loved to run, and á la Forrest Gump, he ran *everywhere*: to and from school; on errands for his mother; he even delivered newspapers on the run when his bicycle was stolen.

Weighing in at an anemic 120 lbs. and against the wishes of his mother, Willie tried out for the football team his junior year of high school in 1952. The coaches stifled sniggers and the equipment manager laughed out loud when Willie dressed for the first practice; everything but his shoes was far too big. He looked like a stick figure in shoulder pads. The laughter stopped when the team ran wind sprints. Willie was *fast*.

The Wisp looked too frail to play football, but Coach Robinson couldn’t ignore his blazing speed. By the middle of the season, Willie was returning punts and kickoffs with great success. Robinson winced at every violent tackle, but Willie always sprang up and sprinted off the field. His momma and daddy never missed a home game.

By his senior year, Willie had gained five inches and twenty-five pounds, and Coach Robinson made him his starting tailback. Although still undersized for a running back, Willie carried the offensive load for the team. College scouts were concerned about the speedster’s slight frame, but Coach Robinson convinced Florida A&M in Tallahassee to offer him a scholarship.

During the summer before going off to college, Willie hauled hay for a group of sharecroppers. A summer of hoisting sixty-pound bales sculpted Willie into a 6-foot 1-inch Adonis. On the first day of football practice at A&M, no one laughed at the 180-pound specimen from St. Augustine.

Florida A&M was coached by the legendary Jake Gaither, who quickly recognized the exceptional talent of his new halfback; but he had a personal rule against playing freshmen. At practices, Willie ran over and around A&M's first unit. By October, Coach Gaither abandoned his rule and Willie became a starter and a star. On every game day, his momma and daddy took a 4-hour bus ride to Tallahassee; each time they coasted home on victory and parental pride. A&M didn't lose a game during the regular season.

The Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference championship game was called the Orange Blossom Classic. In 1954, the Florida A&M Rattlers would face the Maryland State College Hawks in the Orange Bowl on Saturday, December 26.

Willie caught a ride home to St. Augustine on Christmas Eve. It was a warmly festive occasion in the small frame house, with a simple tree and candles and three generations of Galimores. It was their tradition to open gifts on Christmas Eve, and the living room rocked with squeals of delight and hoots of mock-derision. When the old grandfather clock chimed ten, Willie's daddy said, "Honey, your food is just too good; guess I ate too much. Anyway, I'm too old to stay up with you young people. I'm hittin' the rack, and I suggest y'all do the same or Santa Claus won't come."

On Christmas morning the grandchildren awoke at dawn. As they crept into the living room to see what Santa had left, they were startled by their grandmother's high-pitched wail piercing the early morning calm. Upon waking she had found her husband lying still and cold beside her. The doctor said Henry Galimore had died of a heart attack in his sleep.

Coach Gaither telephoned before noon to express his condolences and to tell Willie to forget about the game on Saturday; his presence with the bereaved family was far more important than a football game. Willie said, "No, coach, I'll be playing tomorrow. My daddy would have wanted me to."

That Orange Blossom Classic game of 1954 is still talked about by those who saw it. Freshman Willie Galimore ran like a madman, tearing holes in Maryland State's line and outrunning the defensive backs. He was a man possessed and would not be stopped. That day, the Wisp ran for 295 yards (a stadium record that stood for 44 years) and scored four touchdowns. Florida A&M won 28-14.

After the game, a grizzled newspaper reporter approached Willie in the dressing room. "Young man, I've been covering college football for thirty years, and I've never seen anything like your performance today. Just

remarkable. What in the world inspired you to play with such abandon like you did today?"

"Well, sir, my father died yesterday."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. So you were playing for him."

"Well, sir, in a way. My daddy was blind. Today was the first time he got to see me play."

Willie Galimore was a three-time Black college All-American. He was drafted by the Chicago Bears and was an All-Pro running back in 1957 and 1958. He was active in the Civil Rights Movement, leading the fight to integrate all-white hotels in Florida. At the age of 29, he was killed in an automobile accident in Ohio.

.....

Ron Carter is a retired lawyer and teacher. A former Birmingham resident, he now lives and writes in Baltimore, MD. perriercarter@yahoo.com

"We are visitors on this planet. We are here for ninety or one hundred years at the very most. During that period, we must try to do something good, something useful, with our lives. If you contribute to other people's happiness, you will find the true goal, the true meaning of life."

—H.H. The 14th Dalai Lama

THE 8th ANNUAL GLENN FELDMAN HISTORICAL ESSAY CONTEST

Mrs. Jeannie Reed Feldman established the Glenn Feldman Historical Essay Contest at Southminster Day School in memory of Dr. Glenn Feldman (1962-2015), a professor of History at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Feldman earned his Ph.D. at Auburn University under the direction of Dr. Wayne Flynt. He was the author of eleven books on civil rights and political history in Alabama. His primary emphasis in teaching focused on his ability to do primary research about his chosen topic and write for the non-historian. This award encourages fourth graders to conduct primary research about a civil rights topic and write their understanding for other elementary grade students.

LIFE DURING THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

Jessie Shi

“Emily, wake up, we don't want to be late,” said my mom while shaking me awake. I sat up and said to my mom, “But Mom, it’s only 7:30. We leave at 8:30.”

My mom said to me, “Have you forgotten what happened last week?”

Only then did I remember what had happened the last time I rode the bus. It had been a normal day. I went to school and then rode the bus to my mom’s work.

I hugged her and went to the storage room to play marbles with the other girls waiting for their parents to finish their shift. When her shift was over, we rode the bus home.

When we were on the bus, I saw Mrs. Parks. She would often come over and give us some homemade cookies. I waved at her, and she gave me a tired smile.

We sat in the black section while Mrs. Parks sat in the white section. At the next stop, several white people came on and the driver ordered the black people, including Mrs. Parks, to give up their seats. While the other three black people gave up their seats, Mrs. Parks stayed put. The driver ordered her to give up her seat or he would call the police.

Mrs. Parks said, “Go, call the police. I’m not giving up my seat.”

Then suddenly my mom stood up and said, “Why can’t she sit?”

The driver said, “SIT DOWN! LADY, YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO INTERFERE.”

My mom sat down shakily, and I held her hand.

The driver turned back to Mrs. Parks and said, “Alright, I will.” As we watched, Mrs. Parks got arrested.

We went to the speech about the boycott and decided to join in. We have been carpooling and walking ever since. Now we have to wake up early and walk everywhere. After school, we have to ride with friends or walk. Now when we walk, my mom sometimes asks me about what I would do if I was Mrs. Parks.

I hope this boycott ends soon because I’m getting tired of walking everywhere. When the buses are fair, I hope to be able to ride in the front. My mom said we might celebrate our win by getting us both new shoes and socks. I haven’t ridden the bus since that day. I’m still shocked that someone could be so mean just because we look different. I hope things will not depend on race in the future.

Sources:

- Who Sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott? By Insha Fitzpatrick
- Sweet Justice: Georgia Gilmore and the Montgomery Bus Boycott by Mara Rockcliff
- Tales of the Montgomery Bus Boycott by Larry Coryell

.....
Jessie Shi is a fourth-grade student at the Southminster Day School in Vestavia Hills, AL. jeanniefeldman@att.net



THE SCHOLAR

Cyndi Marble

Pastel

14" by 17" framed

Cyndi Marble was born in Massachusetts and grew up in Georgia. She earned a BFA in Textile Design, is a Member of Excellence of Alabama Pastel Society and Member of Excellence, and President of Southeastern Pastel Society. Cyndi maintains a studio at her home in Loganville, GA. cynansam@att.net

SOLO WITH CHORUS ON GREENSPORT ROAD, ST. CLAIR COUNTY

Joe Whitten

I hear the song of winter trees in harmonies
of sun-drenched tarnished silver gray
with counterpoint of evergreen
against eternal depths of blue.
The mountain oaks, in chorus,
blend voices with fence-row willows
and solo sycamore.
Ecstatic words of praise
swell forté through my soul,
and yet I hum them pianissimo,
letting antiphonal anthems
draw me into the crescendo
that fills nature's cathedral with joy.

.....

Joseph Whitten, a retired educator, lives in Odenville, AL. He is a past president of the Alabama State Poetry Society and a member of Alabama Writers' Conclave, the Pennsylvania Poetry Society, and the Georgia Poetry Society.

whitten93@gmail.com

*"I work. I get on my bus, and I ride my
bus to the next date. And then I get back
on the bus after the show and ride to the
next date. Simple as that."*

—Loretta Lynn

HOW TO PICK A MULBERRY

Ben Thompson

The first thing you have to do is to be bored. Very, bored. It has to be summer, close to noon. After throwing a few rocks at the mailbox, you'll hear a car coming. By the sound of the missing muffler, you'll know it's your cousin Debbie. It has only been an hour since you last saw her pass, but she'll wave with her whole arm outside the window, leaving behind a thick trail of smoke.

In the stink and silence that remains, you'll walk out into the road. There you'll find a weather-shaven tennis ball in the weeds. You and your little sister Holly will present it to your big brother, Stephen, in hopes that he will play with you. He'll accept, tossing it into the air to smack it with a baseball bat. As it arches high out into the field, you'll need to watch and see where it lands, because Holly will race you to it.

She's a whole year younger than you are, but she's quick. You'll both land on the ball at the same time. Don't fight for it too long, because it'll remind Stephen that you are both too little to be hanging around. You'll need to compromise. Holly can be the one to give Stephen the ball so he can hit it into the woods.

No one will see where it lands. You'll take the trail Paw Paw drives his station wagon down to chop wood. At the creek, you'll forget the tennis ball when you dig up a clear glass coke bottle caked with brown dirt. Give the bottle to Stephen and step back. He's going to try to smash it against the iron sides of a tilted birch tree.

He'll count 1, 2, 3, and throw it hard. The bottle will bounce, fly over his shoulder, and hit your knee. Fall to the ground, but don't cry more than a few tears. He'll help you up and, if you promise not to tell Mamma, he'll let you hit a golf ball he's just found with the baseball bat. You try but no matter how hard you swing, the ball will never go as far as it does when Stephen hits it.

As you start to head home, it's important that you continue to limp. Otherwise, Stephen will go into the house to cool off instead of stopping in the shade of the mulberry tree. Once you've all arrived, the low branches will compel Stephen to start climbing. As he vanishes above the canopy of heart-shaped leaves, take a stick from the ground and divert the

line of ants crawling up the tree, scrape away a few layers of bark, throw the stick in the ditch.

Then, when Stephen finishes doing whatever big brothers do in the heights, we little brothers and sisters will never reach, he'll jump down cradling a tiny harvest in his cupped hand as if it's a living thing. When he extends his fingers to share what he holds in his purple-stained palm, pinch the mulberry by the stem. Hold it up to the light. Notice how the berry changes from deep purple at the tip to bursts of bitter red closer to the stem. Then, before you take a single step away, take a bite. Taste the day's heat and fading sweetness. When you finish sucking the microscopic pits from your teeth, Debbie's car will come hollering, once again, over the hill. As she passes, she'll throw one arm out the window and toot the horn with the other. When you see her, throw your hand up and wave back with all you've got.

Say hey, because it might be goodbye.

.....

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

“It is by logic you prove, but intuition that you discover.”

—Henri Poincaré, Mathematicia

IN THE GARDEN: A PRAYER

Gage Crowder

Tabernacle of tomatoes,
cloister of cucumbers,
monastery of melons—
I bless you earthchurch
for these your sweet,
suspicious miracles that
perennial patterns make
us forget. Here, at the
foliar font, I pledge myself
to you again—beneath
your unfolding flowers,
crucified on their trellises,
whispering of resurrection.

.....
Gage Crowder is a divinity student, working and living in North Alabama. Though mostly content with the difficult art of the theological essay or sermon, he occasionally stumbles onto a poem. His previous prose and poetry have appeared in Panoply, The Fountains, and The West Florida Legend. gage.crowder@yahoo.com

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings; nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine into flowers; the winds will blow their freshness into you and the storms their energy; and cares will drop off like autumn leaves.”

—John Muir, Naturalist

stacks, scabs, and bruises

Dan Jacoby

memories and thoughts of people
like dusty stacks of books
can make someone a page
sometimes a chapter
rarely an entire work
our memories encourage us
to peek at these books
to gaze at what once was
to poke an old scab
either real or imagined
some never close
these envoys to our past
we read the fine print closely
some are sealed permanently
though still a burden
and those closed on us
still have bookmarks in them
for those are the hardest to forget

.....

*Dan Jacoby is a graduate of Fenwick High School, St. Louis University, Chicago State University, and Governors State University. He has published poetry in several fine publications. He is a former educator, steel worker, and counterintelligence agent. He was born in 1947 on the second floor of a cold water flat at 55th and Halsted, Chicago. He has been writing poetry since 1967 and his work is influenced by John Knoepfle, Al Montesi, Dobby and John Logan to name a few. He has been nominated in 2020 and 2021 for a Pushcart and Best of the Net in 2021. He is the author of the book Blue Jeaned Dan Buddhists. **djacoby105@aol.com***

WALKER

Jennifer Horne

She reads, “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil.”

And so she walks. The verse becomes her marching song: YEA though I WALK through the VALley of the SHADow of DEATH I shall FEAR no EVil. She walks over the viaduct, chanting the verse to herself. Down below, in the valley of the shadow of death, the white men in white robes gathered at night, ash flakes fluttering in the darkness. Her mother called her home, and she fled. There had been children, too, in their own little robes and masks, like on Halloween.

Walking past the used car lot where the German shepherd guards the cars at night, she and the dog exchange a glance of understanding. “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.” In this way He lets her know that she is taken care of.

On Wednesdays the imposter who looks like her aunt picks her up and takes her to the clinic. At first, she hid and would not go, but they always found her, and the hiding took time away from her walking, so now she just goes. The social worker asks if she’s been taking her meds every day. Yes, she says. Say it out loud, says the social worker. YES, she says, loudly, though her ears surprise her by hearing a whisper. This makes her laugh—her volume controls are messed up again. What’s funny? says the social worker. She can’t explain. Humor is like that. Either you get it or you don’t. The social worker sighs, checks his watch. Okay, then, we’ll see you next week, same time? Same time same time same time.

At the stoplight she gets out of the car, resumes her route. She has her work to do, and He is watching.

.....

Jennifer Horne is a former Poet Laureate of Alabama. The author of several collections of poems and a collection of short stories, she has edited or co-edited volumes of poetry, essays, and stories. She resides in Cottondale, AL. hornejw@yahoo.com

centerfold

centerfold

UP IN MÜRREN

Tim J. Hunter

His sinuses were swollen, and his mouth hid a plaque smothered tongue. Eyelids sensed light and opened to a headache and an empty bed. He rolled to the middle and a dog-eared comforter slid off his shirtless torso. The room smelled like laundry, spruce, and gin. He dressed and walked to the sink where he found a used women's razor, wet it, then dragged it across his jaw and upper lip. A washrag hung on a leaky spout, he dampened it and wiped chin to cheek to forehead to cheek. Tobacco colored eyes and a cleanshaven face reflected at him. He sighed and ran his right hand through a medium length shag. Shaggy, but tame. He walked his throbbing head out of the room and down carpeted u-shaped stairs. He stopped short of the dining area, a buffet of eggs, cured meats, cheese, bread, and fruit. His eyes rested on a chestnut bun seated at a square table that held a mug and an empty plate. She was absorbed in a dated phone, scrolling through a world built just for her.

"Where was she studyin' again? Dublin? No... Glasgow." He remembered her harsh accent and it irritated him. Her accent was loaded with "oi" sounds, and she spoke assumptively in clipped words like "uni" and "innit". The more she drank last night, the more she spoke slang he didn't know but pretended to like. *The hell does "slag" even mean?* He thought of talking to her but didn't want to be stuck.

A graying woman approached, "Morgen," then said something in Swiss. "Nein danke," even though he was thirsty. He looked back to the table, at crooked teeth and a figure that'd be called plump back home. Enough thoughts, he walked off.

He paused on a wraparound porch thinking of a route out of the valley and up the mountain range to his hotel. On the sidewalk there was an unmanned bike stand with free rentals for hotel guests. He was technically a guest for the night, and since no one was there to confirm, he'd just take a bike and leave it at the gondola. He reasoned someone would ride it back. The door behind him opened and a red shirted guy smiled and bounced to the stand. New plan. He'd walk. It was about a 20-minute walk to the Gimmelwald gondola. He stopped at a street fountain decorated like a dream, spewing water to the edge. He held a plastic bottle underwater until full then swallowed it, swearing he felt water splash in his empty stomach. It

was refreshing. He refilled the bottle and started walking. This would be his last trip to the Bernese Oberland and he knew it.

Through town, almost every window had flower boxes full of red blooms. The energy was slow, as it was early. A few people walked to work, a tourist couple strolled an unhappy kid, and a woman smoked under an Intersport sign with her boot propped against the shop. He walked until the town thinned into fields sprinkled with barns, cattle, hay bales, and evergreens. Clouds like cotton blooms glided in the foreground of an endless blue sky. A gas-powered glider whirred above him, riding a current that blew down from the snowcapped Alps. He watched for a minute and remembered flying one the last time he was here.

At the station, a gondola swayed lightly on a cable that spun up to the next tier of the range like a single web. There was no line. He flashed a rail pass to a young attendant and boarded. There were a handful of locals and a small group of Asian tourists onboard. A stray wirehaired dog panted by an empty seat. He noticed the dog and did a double take. The dog turned its head and looked directly at him, drool fell to the floor, then it turned away. The other riders didn't seem to notice the wirehair. The doors closed and the gondola was lifted soundlessly out of the valley. The view was stunning, and everyone admired it in their own way. Some stared, others took selfies, others videoed. He stood and glanced out the window as they drifted over a sheet of limestone and a waterfall that misted out of sight. The gondola floated to a stop near the edge of Gimmelwald, a small wooden town perched cliffside of the range. The riders exited the gondola down wood stairs, dispersing like ripples, the wirehair last to exit.

The cleanshaven man strolled through town with buildings no more than a few stories tall with that signature Swiss panel design. The crisp air unswelled his sinuses and he felt better. He walked to Hotel Mittaghorn, his cabin-like hotel that spilled a tabled patio onto a clean sidewalk. A bearded man wearing sunglasses sat with a half-full pilsner and an empty plate, his right ankle resting on his left knee. At a glance he seemed careless, but he was just confidently abiding. His rust-brown beard was thick. Thick, but tame. The bearded man had been in the Bernese Oberland for a month, maybe more, and a tight backpack carrying a chute lay dormant under his chair. He smirked a half smile as the cleanshaven man approached and sat down.

“Knew you’d oversleep,” said the bearded man in a strong voice.

The cleanshaven man paused, then smiled.

“Didn’t sleep much.”

“You’re welcome,” with a nod. “Try the rösti, it’s still delicious.”

The cleanshaven wouldn’t order it because he felt queasy, and this was understood without a response.

A yellow-haired waitress appeared, “Bonjour, café?” to the cleanshaven.

“Ja... or-uh... Oui merci.” The waitress smiled and strolled inside.

“Never know if it’s French or German ‘round here.”

“Who cares? They know English. I jus’ talk like I’m back home,” said the beard.

German was fresh to the cleanshaven since he’d just come from Düsseldorf, and he thought Swiss folks understood it better than English. He couldn’t speak much German, and if someone spoke too much German to him, he’d parrot – *Ich verstehe ein bisschen Deutsch* – from the German Made Easy™ podcast.

The waitress returned with coffee and sparkling water then disappeared. The cleanshaven sipped, staring at the beard’s sunglasses. The beard pushed his sunglasses to the top of his head, revealing a pair of tobacco eyes; his hair clipper-short, which he liked because he could cut it himself. There was an unspoken tension between them, and the cleanshaven felt this sensed tension wasn’t worth talking about. But the beard, being a direct and subtlety free breed, said in a provocative tone,

“Where’s June buried?”

The cleanshaven lifted his half-empty mug and swallowed the rest of his coffee. It was too hot to drink, but he didn’t care. He hoped it would burn his throat so he couldn’t speak. It didn’t work. After enough silence,

“She didn’t wanna’ be buried... But her folks got involved... Somewhere outside Fairhope.”

“So you’ve become a pushover.”

He didn’t answer but sighed irritably. He sat back in his chair, dragging his arms off the table. Then, “Took the jet ski to the Coosa River. We rented a cabin for the night... right on the water.” He paused. “Shouldn’t have taken it out that night.” He remembered black wake and a roaring throttle. Then nothing. “Shouldn’t have let her drive.”

“You came out alright,” said the beard.

“Don’t know how.”

The cleanshaven hopped the pond a week after it happened and hadn't talked about it until now. He looked away and noticed the wirehair panting by slowly, sniffing here and there, overgrown nails clicking the pavement. Across the street, a woman in a giftshop set down a bowl of water then turned back inside. The wirehair strode over and licked furiously, stopped, then rose its head. Water and drool poured out its mouth like a faucet then slowed to nothing. It started in one direction, then looked toward another and trotted that way instead. It looked adrift among the great current. The beard smirked and said, "You're in a dark place."

He looked back to the beard and changed the subject, "Where you jumpin'?"

"Up in Mürren. Doin' it this time?" He uncrossed his legs, then gulped the rest of the pilsner.

A nervous laugh leaked from the cleanshaven's nose then, "Still debating... been a while."

"Ain't much to think on, jus' don't mess up. Or you're dead." He spread francs on the table, then grabbed his chute. "How much I owe for coffee?"

"She didn't charge you. Plus, it's all the same anyway." The beard half smiled; eyes slightly squinted. The cleanshaven ran fingers through his rust-brown mane and turned to look at the waitress. She set down plates to a couple a few tables away. Their eyes met and she looked away quickly. The men looked at each other, then stood in sync and walked to the gondola.

It was a short ride up to the next rocky-meadowed tier of the range. They floated to a stop and a small goat herd moved lazily through the station. The men walked in stride through town at a leisurely pace. They strolled by the square where the wirehair was drinking from a stone fountain. It must've hopped another gondola the cleanshaven thought. A smart little beast. They came to the rental shop.

"Here's the shop. What's the verdict?" said the beard.

"I'm out. There's a 13:20 to Montreux, rather than waitin' 'til tonight... But I'll walk withya'."

"Right. 'Lemme grab a drink first."

The closest spot was a hotel called the Eiger Swiss, built in true chalet style with large windows capturing the view of Jungfrauoch. Whenever clouds allowed, of course. They entered an empty lobby and moved to a side room with tables and a bar.

"One bourbon," bellowed the beard, holding up a finger.

A four-top holding two old couples stopped their game of Jass and looked up. An old woman stood, then hobbled behind the bar. She looked confused. She had no bourbon, just Irish whiskey. She pulled down a bottle and showed it as if saying, ok?

“That’ll do,” said the beard. Pour ‘er up.”

“Make it two,” said the cleanshaven. Then interrupting himself, “Zwei, bitte. Danke.”

She poured two small glasses with a wobbly hand and set them in front of her guests. She spilled nothing. They were the only guests in the room.

“Whatta we drink to?” said the cleanshaven placing 10 francs on the bar.

“Pleasure and pain.” They drank.

“Mercy, that’s smooth! The Irish don’t bite back like they do in Kentucky.” Pause.

“Where you headed after Montreux?”

“The Germans lent me their place in Nice, right on the Riviera. But I’m not sure,” said the cleanshaven. “Maybe Montreux has somethin’ to offer.

“Hope your French’s better than your German,” said the beard. He waved to the moaning card table who didn’t notice except for the woman who served them. She nodded.

They walked on a street that rose steadily until they came to three staggered houses at the corner of a switchback. The houses looked like someone had shoved them sideways into the slope of the mountain. The beard turned, leading them down a narrow path that descended through tall spruce and thick larch. The path opened to a damp pasture, home to grazing goats. They cut through the pasture unnoticed, then walked sideways down a steep decline and stopped at cliff’s edge. The sound of a nearby waterfall rushed off the mountainside and mist blew out like sheer drapes. The sun beamed across the valley and reflected off snowcapped peaks. The reflected beams warmed their faces. They gazed down at the valley and it looked like an enormous footprint with shades of green – light, medium, and dark. Surrounding the valley were massive limestone walls, jagged and smooth. The walls came together at the southern end of the valley and cradled a sleepy glacier under a cloudless sky.

“Right,” said the beard, and he double checked that his chute was torso tight. They shook hands.

“G’bye, then.”

“Tschüss.”

The cleanshaven didn't need to watch. He started up the path back to town and smirked a familiar half smile. He found a shop near the square where he sat at an outdoor table and ordered espresso. Most town windows held red flowers, a nice accent to the canvas of snowy peaks brushed with limestone, meadows dusted with evergreens, and charcoaled switchback roads. A tractor pattered by, smelling of diesel, and the smell was soon replaced by fresh cut hay and espresso. In the square, a group of alphorn players stood in a quarter moon. The wooden horns sat on the ground and extended some ten feet to the player's mouths. Some horns were decorated in ornamental floral style. A woman wearing a flap hat waved her arm, and the horns blended in amateur harmony. On the outside wall of the shop was a memorial to dead jumpers. There was a row of framed photos, and a half row underneath. Some jumpers were pictured with loved ones, some alone, some in freefall. He looked around for the wirehair. It was gone. He looked at his watch. It was nearly 13:00.

.....

*T. J. Hunter is a recipient of the Hackney Literary Award and has been nominated for the Best of the Net. His stories have appeared in The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, the Birmingham Arts Journal, and others. His poetry has appeared in the Stillwater Review. He studied at the University of Montevallo and lives in Birmingham, AL. **TimJ.Hunter@msn.com***

“Not everyone grows up as they age.”

—Tom Nichols



SUNDAY BRUNCH QUARTET

Ahmad Austin
Acrylic on Canvas
12" x 9"

Ahmad Austin creates music-inspired and heavily textured paintings to the sounds of music. Many of his paintings feature musicians. He also teaches art in Birmingham AL area schools. aaustinart@yahoo.com www.aaustinart.com

*“If you have a skeleton in your closet,
take it out and dance with it.”*

—Carolyn MacKenzie

WINTER FIELD

Norbert Kovacs

An insecure heart drove the man outdoors in mid-winter. He went alone through the woods to the great field, where the pale grass spread far on every side towards the hills. The overcast sky promised no sun to warm him. A somber place, he considered. He bowed his head and plodded into the field. He passed streams, iron gray and frozen, then trees, limbless and dead. His steps went through the few patches of old snow, and their cold seeped into his boots. In mid-field, he stopped. He raised his head and looked over the grass tops as an uneasy tremor moved him.

"So?" the man quietly asked the scene. He believed the place would understand his question and speak; the sober quality of the field made him trust it could. If anything or anyone could give an answer, this place must, he told himself. And he thought the question too deep and often put to be misread. He became still and listened now to the great silence that reigned over the dead trees, the grass, the hills, and the sky.

A hollow opened in him as the words the field might have spoken did not come. Silence, he realized. Thought ceased, and the man found himself standing alone in the cold. This hard, stark consciousness made an end of his day's search, but he sensed it was enough. The silence showed every sign it would hold. It might last more than anything else, he thought, surveying the pale grass. The idea made gave him a peculiar sense of assurance, his first that day.

.....

Norbert Kovacs lives and writes in Hartford, Connecticut. He has published microfiction in Blink-Ink, Nanoism, The Dribble Drabble Review, Birmingham Arts Journal and 101 Words. www.norbertkovacs.net

THE ELEPHANT BOX

Russell Working – Hackney Literary Award – 1st Place Novel

An excerpt.

In 1918 Oliver Saxe-Coburg—a twelve-year-old sideshow prodigy who has memorized the entire encyclopedia—has become separated from his circus after a train wreck near Chicago. Desperate to catch up with the show, he is rowing down the Illinois River with Talitha, an eighteen-year-old hobo girl. And now she has fallen ill as the Spanish influenza pandemic rages. Here he stops in Peru, Illinois, to scrounge for food.

Ollie stepped barefoot into cold water kaleidoscopic with oil in the late afternoon slant of the October sun. The johnboat floated free, and the current pulled her parallel to the shore. He secured her to a tree trunk. As soon as he let go his knot fell apart in spaghetti loops. The Encyclopedia Americana offered no help. *The timber hitch is useful for tying a line to a spar or a stone, and the clove hitch is invaluable for many purposes. It is very simple and cannot slip (vol. XVI, p. 492).* The entry KNOTTING AND SPLICING seemed unrelated to the physical world, to the wet scratchy rope in his hands, blistered from rowing and wrapped in rags. He said, “Bugger,” a very bad word. Maybe the rope would hold if he tied it several times, this way and that—a Gordian knot. It did.

Talitha lay inert, rasping as if taking sand and not air into her bronchioles. Should he leave her a note? She had a pencil in her knapsack, but she was slumped against it, and besides, any paper they might have was probably soggy. She lay motionless, head tilted back, mouth agape. Her fingertips, clutching her bosom, were bluish, so were her lips, puffy and cracked. Was she breathing? *Please, God!* As if in answer, she coughed. *Thank you, Lord.* He touched her shoulder gently.

“Talitha?”

“Mmmm?”

“I’m going to find a doctor. And ding us some food and water.”

Her puffy eyelids split open. She coughed so hard he was afraid she would spit out a lung. “Oh, I’m covered in blood,” she said. “Am I all bloody, Ollie?”

“Just your sleeves. I washed your face. With a clean rag. Do you mind if I go?”

"I don't underst—should I wash my face?"

"No, I just did."

Her eyes closed. Removing hand wraps, he set off. He was afraid the Colt .45 she had given him for safekeeping might go off on its own. He opened the cylinder, emptied the bullets into his left pocket, and jammed the firearm in his right.

He cut along through a muddy wood on the riverbank at the bottom of the bluff, the light mottled green and yellow and red under the canopy. The revolver thumped against his thigh. He emerged along double railroad tracks separated by a stand of trees. He was afraid a train would come, but he had no choice but to walk on the tracks, as there was no road. From here he could see that the barges blocking the waterfront were tied up along an industrial yard filled with mountains of gravel piled beside conveyer loaders. Just as he came to a road up the bluff, he encountered a hobo in rags.

The 'bo wore a flatcap, the dirty coveralls of a mechanic, a patched suitcoat, and a rag for a scarf. Wrinkly skin like raw turkey flesh hung under his chin, and his jaundiced, troll-like face was beardless but nicked, as if he'd just come from the circus barber. His eyes were yellow where they were supposed to be white. He seemed to recognize in Ollie a fellow vagabond.

"A runaway we got here, eh?"

"No, sir." Ollie halted as the man came forward. "I'm with my friend Talitha. She's in the boat."

The hobo offered a yeggish grin. "In the boat, huh? Well."

"I'm getting food. And a doctor."

"Say, pal, you want to throw in for dinner, me and you? Easier for you to panhandle, being a youngster. Whereas I can help—"

"No, thanks."

"Love this guy. 'No, thanks.' Who needs the wisdom and experience of years on the road, right?" He tapped on his temple to indicate braininess.

"Go it alone! Smart move!"

"Yeah."

"Damn straight." He edged closer. Ollie wished he hadn't unloaded the gun.

"So, what you want a doctor for? I know a bit of medicine."

"My friend has the influenza."

The boy's face took this in. He moved off the railroad ties to the weeds sprouting through the gravel. "Well, go on, damn you!"

Ollie walked straight on past him. He was afraid the man would grab him from behind, but the 'bo even stepped further down the embankment to give Ollie room.

Ollie turned left up a dirt road to top of the bluff. The incline rose steeply through the woods and, when frame houses began appearing, the road changed from gravel to a potholed asphalt. Several houses were in mourning, their front doors were decorated in those gray or black ribbons and wreaths. The sign ENTERING PERU recalled last winter's port o' call in PERU, REPUBLIC OF, *pop. (est.) 4,574,608 ... copper, petroleum, silver, vanadium, gold, tungsten ore, etc. (vol. XXI, p. 645)*. This was after the death of July. He remembered hillside shantytowns, balconied colonial villas, bony dogs gagging down trash, and llamas with the long-lashed eyes of bally girls.

Ollie passed a paddock where a mare and her curious little colt whinnied and approached the fence, but he had no sugar to offer. The mare reminded him of his equestrian Mother's horse, Raconteuse, and he stood for a moment breathing the horsiness, nostalgic for the livery and menagerie, for Mother and Dad. He remembered bringing July the Elephant sugarcane outside Lake Charles, La. *Saccharum officinarum*. July's big eye had watched him and his friends Little Joe and Renato—but the thought of friends who died in the wreck filled Ollie's ears with memories of screams and the roar of burning bulkheads and mattresses and oil and human beings.

Ollie gripped a fencepost. Slowly, slowly, the horror—the sickness and tunnel vision of black particles—disintegrated, leaving him weak. In time the hysterics relented.

Cresting the hill, he turned right on Fourth Street into a Middle Western main stem of two- and three-story brick buildings. Was it Sunday? No, that's right: Tuesday. It seemed so quiet, entirely without traffic.

Ollie came to a corner barbershop with plate-glass windows and glass bricks above. A second-floor window was lettered in gold, DR. HIRAM LYNN ~ GENERAL & FAMILY MEDICINE.

The barber sat in the chair reading a newspaper as he awaited customers, a tie-on flu mask hanging around his neck. The door leading up to the doctor's office was locked. Ollie gritted his teeth in frustration.

Horsedroppings! Buttplaces! Very bad words!

A paperboy in long pants and a Cubs ballcap walked by with a canvas Tribune sack hanging by a strap around his neck. He appeared to be maybe thirteen or fourteen, and he stopped and wiped his nose with his knuckle.

"Hi, Ollie."

"Hi."

"I knew it was you. I seen you guys perform in Joliet last year."

"Huh. Yeah."

"You really memorize the whole encyclopedia? My brother says no way, but I say he's just sore 'cause the emcee didn't call on him."

"What was his question?"

"Something about Pickles Dillhoefer."

Pickles???

"You don't know Pickles Dillhoefer?"

"Somebody in sports?" Ollie said.

"Oh, my gosh! The Cubs, dummy! My brother woulda won five bucks."

"Pickles Dillhoefer isn't in the encyclopedia, so no, he wouldn't."

"Gee willikers! What you doing in Peru?"

"Trying to catch up with the circus. By boat."

The grin on the paperboy's face stiffened and gave way to an expression of concern. "Looking for Dr. Lynn? You and everybody's uncle. He's gone."

"Gone! Did he die?"

"No, he's abroad all over the county in his flivver." The paperboy swept an arm to represent the Illinois landscape. "Folks're dropping like flies. Of the flu."

"The doctor in Morris died. Upriver."

The paperboy's face tightened. "My sister, we couldn't find Dr. Lynn in time." As he went on, two snail paths meandered from his eyes to his jaw line. "Me and my dad came down here with guns to force him up to our place, but he was out. Mother wrapped Agatha in blankets to burn out the fever, but it didn't work."

"My friend Talitha's sick."

“Join the club.” The boy wiped his face in the crook of his elbow. “What you got in your pocket?”

“Nothing.”

“That a gun?”

Ollie raised his hands and let them fall. *Nolo contendere*. “It’s just for shooting birds.” A habit of truthfulness compelled him to add: “And criminals.”

“Birds and criminals. Right. Let me see it.”

Ollie hesitated but decided the kid’s face was trustworthy enough. Besides, the townner was big enough to take the six-shooter if he wanted to. Ollie handed it over.

“Ka-pwekh!” The paperboy pretended to shoot a pigeon on a line. “My uncle’s got one of these. Dad and me, ours are Springfields.” He clicked the cylinder open, then closed it with a snap of the wrist. “Well, that’s brilliant. How you gonna shoot birds and bad guys without bullets?”

The boy aimed at a sign, DR. HIRAM LYNN, then handed the gun back. Ollie crammed it in his pocket.

“Whelp,” the boy said. “Gotta go.” He hurried on.

Only then did it occur that Ollie had forgotten to ask him for food.

.....

Russell Working won the 2021 Hackney Award Novel contest. His work has appeared previously in the Birmingham Arts Journal. He lives and writes in Oak Park, IL. russellworking@gmail.com

“In certain trying circumstances,
urgent circumstances, desperate
circumstances, profanity furnishes
a relief denied even to prayer.”

—Mark Twain

SUCCESSION

Catherine Flynn

Today's hymn is
a decaying leaf

stripped of its
lamina, transformed

into a transparent
filigree of fibers

tucked into
a house finch's nest

cushioning speckled
eggs, tiny as thimbles.

Drained of chlorophyll,
brown as the dirt

it will soon become, the leaf
tumbles on a gust of wind

to the ground
 where earthworms

will burrow and nibble
 away at the remnants

of once sturdy xylem,
 casting its remains

aside. Now decomposed into soil,
 it waits, silent and still,

for heart roots to
absorb its nutrients,

sustaining a stand of beeches,
powering hungry new leaves.

.....

*Catherine Flynn is a teacher and poet whose work has appeared in several anthologies. She lives in northwestern Connecticut where she loves to hike, garden, read, and knit for family and friends. **cwflynn60@gmail.com***

REUNION

John Zedolik

This gap of fifteen months has
re-stranged the familiar
re-spiced the paths
that had lost all their salt
stinging the interest of the treader
upon the usual route
re-spangled in the new now
that splashes with re-found
fresh paint unnoticed in the beige
of an epoch's comfort
before the deadly, brilliant
break.

.....

John Zedolik is an adjunct English professor in Pittsburgh. He has published poems in journals around the world, and in 2019 published a full-length collection, titled Salient Points and Sharp Angles (CW Books). He is currently working on a collection of spiritually themed poems. principium14@gmail.com

*“Droning on and on, she found herself
at a loss for silence.”*

—Jim Reed



COLORS

Beth Conklin

Digital Collage

12" x 18"

Beth Conklin is a photographer and digital artist from Birmingham, AL, primarily self-taught in the area of digital collage. She shows work locally at Magic City Art Connection and Moss Rock Festival. Her work has been featured several times in the magazine Somerset Digital Studio. Her blog, Here on Earth, showcases her work and has been featured in Artful Blogging magazine.

www.bethconklin.blogspot.com

TO RILKE

Seth Tanner

When the cherry laurels fell full of white flowers
I moaned for the beekeeper and the bees.
The neighbor helping me cut the branches said,
“You have something for those animals.”
—almost sarcastic with a drip of derision.
But I am proud that I love both
the bee and the beekeeper
And that it is a love that she cannot name.

.....

Seth Tanner lives and writes in Talladega, AL. He is a member of Birmingham's Big Table Poets. His poetry has been published in Birmingham Arts Journal, Whatever Remembers Us: An Anthology of Alabama Poetry, Poem, and Einstein at the Odeon Café. sethtanner23@gmail.com

*“Suppose your dreams could socialize
with my dreams. Suppose your
imaginary friends met my imaginary
friends. Suppose your shadow could
dance with my shadow. Just suppose.”*

—Jim Reed

I DREAM THESE WORDS HAVE ENTERED HOSPICE

Mike Foster

The Hospice Association of America announced today that the words bigotry, hatred, prejudice, and racism, have entered hospice and are not expected to survive. The groups that have supported them are considering disbanding, and those against them, are going to wait and see. There will be no memorial services. They will be cremated.

.....

Mike Foster was born and raised in California. He served 21 years in the US Air Force. He has lived in England and Italy and has kissed the Blarney Stone. He is married, a father and grandfather, and lives in Montana.

sprtsfan8@gmail.com

“The teacher who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind.”

—Kahlil Gibran

LEAVING, OR COMING BACK

Charlie Peters -- Hackney Literary Awards - 3rd Place National Story

An excerpt.

One evening in October, Parker found himself out by the old farms. On a rise overlooking the land, there stood the big sycamore tree where he sometimes stopped.

His walks had taken him this way a few times before, where the narrow road winds back into the woods. He walked over the hill and continued down the narrow road. The roads were wet from days of rain, and it was cold.

There weren't many houses out this way, and the few he had seen were set back from the road behind low stone walls. Grass and weeds grew over the shoulder, brushing him as he walked. He passed a tangle of weeds and brambles that hid a crooked, rusted mailbox that he once or twice pegged with rocks.

His footsteps crunched the asphalt. As he came around the bend in the road, he saw someone up ahead. A bearded man with a broom was sweeping wet leaves from the road. The man wore faded and stained overalls. The broom had a short handle, like a child's broom, so he was bent over. Parker thought of people who lived on city streets, of the way loners occupy themselves with inscrutable routine. It had been a long time since he'd encountered another person, a stranger.

He approached the man, maintaining the safe distance. He nodded in a casual way, his mouth pursed into a shape that he meant to be dismissive. The man watched him closely. As Parker passed, the crunch of the gravel seemed very loud.

The man spoke from behind. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Parker was startled but continued walking. He has often pretended not to hear someone to avoid an interaction.

"Do you live around here?" the man asked.

Parker stopped. Wind moved through the branches overhead. Rainwater shook from the leaves. He smelled burning wood. He told the man he was just passing through, that he lived nearby. He nodded in the direction from which he came.

The man studied him. Parker couldn't see the man's eyes beneath the brows. "I have seen you before," he said. "There's nothing for you back here. Private property."

He stuck his hand in a pocket, and keys or coins jangled.

Parker saw the big sycamore on the hill. Off in the distance, a train whistled as it came through town. He apologized and could think of nothing to do but turn around.

The man nodded and said, "Take good care."

Parker rounded the bend in the road. He felt followed. His back was wet with sweat. He sped up. When he was out from under the shadow of the trees, he glanced back and did not see the man. As he continued up the hill, Parker heard the sweep of the broom again.

That night, he searched the satellite map. He scrolled to where he'd been on his walk and zoomed in. Near the place where he encountered the man, he saw the thin line of the road disappear into the greenish brown of the woods. He zoomed, looking for a house, until the image pixelated, and he could go no further. For a moment, he couldn't say where he was.

• • •

Parker saw the old man again. It was early on a Saturday morning, frost on the grass. He had not slept the night before. He arrived at a park near the train tracks feeling the familiar numbness of a long walk. He sat at a bench and took a book from his bag. He read distractedly. He enjoyed the way a phrase lingered with significance as he looked up and considered a mostly bare tree, the large fountain with bronze birds spouting water in the cold breeze. Off some ways, there was a train whistle.

The man approached from the opposite end of the park, initially just another thing his gaze happened upon. The man moved with a hunched purpose. Parker recognized him. He shoved his book in his bag, then decided not to draw attention to himself. He sat still. As the man neared the fountain, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of something. Coins, Parker figured. He stopped at the fountain and cast them into the shallow pool. With concern or sorrow, the man considered the water and his empty hand and then turned to walk away.

The train whistle blared again, and the old man headed toward the tracks. Parker put it together: the coins, the sorrowful look, the rusted

mailbox, an oncoming train. He stood up—the only person around—and was keenly aware of his requirement to intervene. He ran, but the train was there already and whatever he was shouting was lost to the sound of the engine.

As the train roared through, he watched where it would plow full speed into the man, but what he thought would happen did not happen. The man was not harmed. He stood by the tracks, looking back and forth at the train as it barreled past very close to him. After a while, he looked like he was enjoying a good memory.

When the train passed, the man stepped across the tracks. He walked to the intersection where the road met the highway. From where Parker stood, it seemed the man was hovering inches above the ground. Cars drove past. Then the man wasn't there.

.....

*Charlie Peters is a graduate of Birmingham-Southern College and lives in Cullman, AL, with his wife and son. **charliescottpeters@gmail.com***

*“How dull it is to pause, to make
an end, To rust unburnished,
not to shine in use!”*

—Tennyson

THE OG MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

Barry Curtis

The OG MAN sat in his chair with his feet propped on the window ledge and the cool rain breeze coming into his second-floor apartment. It was a heavy rain that contained a lightness as opposed to the kind of rain that pounds the ground as if the weather itself was a kind of untranslated message.

The OG MAN was lost in a midday reverie.

Midday reveries are the best kind.

The OG MAN lived alone because he was at a stage in his life where he was afraid of humankind, unwilling to look human nature in the eye.

Let's define an OG MAN as someone who crossed a line that he never expected to cross when he was younger. OG MAN believed this about all OG MEN, no matter what they said about how they felt.

The sense of a bridge having been crossed and knowing that there was no turning back.

The echo of Moses.

The dream of a Promised Land.

The OG MAN laughed.

The OG MAN cackled.

A world where everything is one last time.

He finished his Camel and took another sip of his Miller High Life. The rain outside continued its music. Perhaps it was a conversation with God.

No, strike that last paragraph. He took another toké and took another sip of his Miller High Life and admitted to himself that he carried in his being the essence of the most extreme form of laziness that is known to civilization.

The Curse of the Daydream Believer.

The OG MAN laughed.

The OG MAN cackled.

On the wall was a beautiful full reproduction open to a kitchen table with a newspaper in a well-lit room and outside the window the blue light of evening with a tree and a streetlamp. All of this done in the Cubist style of Juan Gris.

The OG MAN smiled with the love of paint. Smiled at the thought of new beginnings.

He listened as the thunder shook the sky and the rain held steady its calm unending release of the infinite tears of the living and the dead.

He imagined himself the OG MAN of the Mountain.

The OG MAN hadn't felt this impassioned in a long, long time.

One last time, one last time. One last poem. The OG MAN slowly pecking the keyboard, typing out the words as if he were saying a prayer.

An offering to the Huntress Diana.

He took another sip of his Miller High Life and tossed the words into the air.

They floated through the air like a young couple lying beneath a lifeboat in the sand on a beach one cool summer night several lifetimes ago.

They were those kinds of words.

The fall of the rain grew heavier, more insistent, like the second section of a symphony, the bass lines guiding the rest for the dramatic hooks...

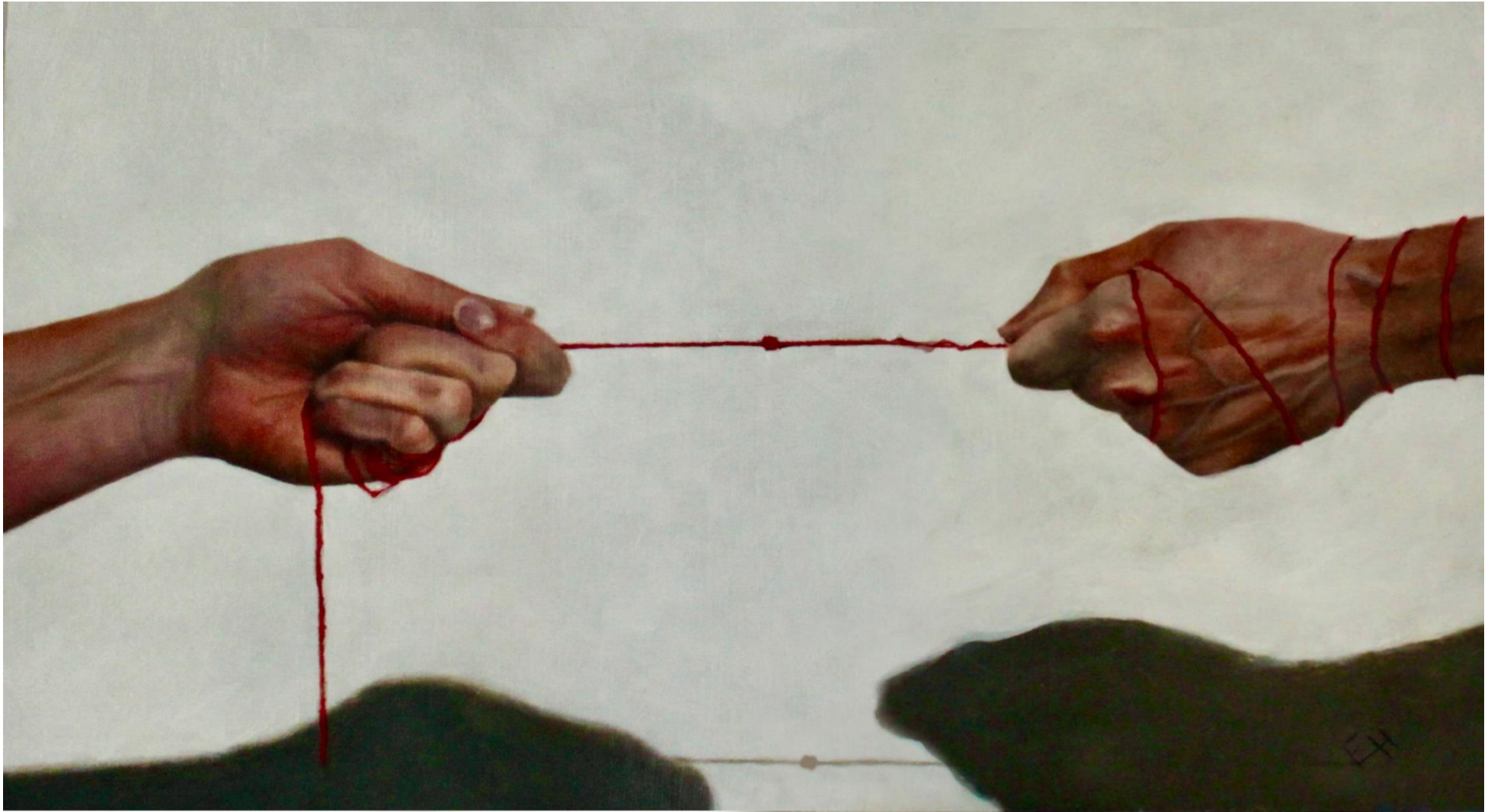
.....

Barry Curtis has lived in Oklahoma and New Jersey. He writes "endlessly" in Birmingham, AL, and is a widely published author and poet.

Okiepoetcreek53@Yahoo.com

"A boaster boasted boastfully he
could do this and that; his friends
then said: "Sir Boaster, pray stop
your silly chat! If you can do these
marvels all, no need to talk, my
man; just do for us these wondrous
things that now you say you can!"

—Aesop



Erin Hardin's background is in psychotherapy. She earned a master's degree in community counseling. After an internship at Family Guidance Center in Homewood, she began working as a behavioral therapist with children with autism and Asperger's Syndrome.

TUG OF LOVE

Oil on Canvas
22" x 32"
Erin Hardin

After taking a class in anatomy she developed a series of paintings that arose from her passion for art, anatomy, and psychotherapy. Her work has been published previously in Birmingham Arts Journal.

erin.hardin@gmail.com



The non-profit Birmingham Arts Journal is sustained by its editors, donors, and readers, with additional support from

Hackney Literary Awards Committee

www.hackneyliteraryawards.org

Irene Latham

www.IreneLatham.com

The Museum of Fond Memories at Reed Books

www.jimreedbooks.com

Blue Rooster Press

www.bluroosterpress.com

In-kind support comes from

Leeds Arts Council

www.leedsartscouncil.org

SUPPORT BIRMINGHAM ARTS JOURNAL, Inc.

Donate \$30 or more (individual membership) or \$100 or more (company membership) and receive the next four issues as a special gift.

Donate online: birminghamartsjournal.com or send check to Birmingham Arts Journal, 1410 17th Street South, Birmingham, AL 35205

Name:
Email:
Mailing address:
Donation amount:

Birmingham Arts Journal, Inc. • 1410 17th Street South • Birmingham AL 35205

©2023 A.D. Birmingham Arts Journal, Inc., a 501(c)3 organization.

Submissions of art, photography, poetry, and prose are welcome.

See guidelines at our website or contact us: editor@birminghamartsjournal.com

Editor: Jim Reed • Poetry Editor: Irene Latham • Art Editor: Liz Reed
Membership Manager: Beverly Radford • Event Manager: Joan Dawson

www.birminghamartsjournal.com

Birmingham Arts Journal



V. MARTIN

birminghamartsjournal.com