

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 19 Issue 1



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FRONT COVER: Andrew Tyson provided the photograph of Times Gate, the former entry to "The Pink House," a Homewood structure now under extensive renovation. tysona@bellsouth.net

BACK COVER: RUSHING WATER photo by Lana Fuller



WISH YOU WERE HERE

24" x 48"

Pallet Knife Painting – Acrylic on Birch panel

Melanie Morris

Melanie Morris loves sharing the happiness she has found in painting and has taught workshops for 15 years. She launched her first online painting course Fearless Florals® in 2020 and Fearless Landscapes™ in 2023. Over 1000 students from more than 30 countries have taken Melanie's online courses. Her contemporary landscapes and florals are in several corporate and private collections including Hilton Hotels, Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine, The Greater Birmingham Convention & Visitors Bureau, and Southern States Bank. melaniemorrisart.com

SUN-DRENCHED

Tina Mozelle Braziel

Please dream me lying
on the sun-drenched boards
of a pier, goose-pimpling
from wind, feeling sun kiss
away the damp lie you do.
I'll conjure you to me. Did I
tell you I love how piers look
like bridges going nowhere?
Isn't that what our life is?
A place we spread quilt, carry
cooler, see sky as ceiling,
a nowhere place we make ourselves
a home. No need for another
shore when all is here, your eyes
shifting from one shade of water
to another, your curls flaring
in the breeze, your lips pursing
into mmmhmm. Oh, how you see me
swimming between sun and water,
unafraid to rise, fall, find
harbor in your open chest.

.....

Tina Mozelle Braziel co-wrote *Glass Cabin* (Pulley Press, 2024) with her husband, James Braziel. She won the Philip Levine Prize for poetry for *Known by Salt* (Anhinga Press, 2019). Learn more about her work at tinamozellebraziel.com

AFTER WORK IN THE LAST WEEK OF JULY

James Braziel

The light comes through brilliant as if each tear in the clouded sky is a place for my hands to swim up and leave this carrying, settling heavy glass into frames. Last night I dreamed snow on the hilltop. The night before I dreamed of a yellow afternoon where trees had been planted and grown full of apples, chairs set next to them, and still no place for me to sit. Tomorrow I will set the day, get more done. Maybe sweat enough to make heat into cold, bring light into me.

.....

James Braziel's most recent book is Glass Cabin (Pulley Press, 2024). Glass Cabin is a collection of poems and essays co-written with his wife, Tina Mozelle Braziel, about the home they are building by hand in rural Alabama. You can find out more about James' novels, stories, and poems at jamesbraziel.com

“Springtime is the land awakening.
The March winds are the morning
yawn.”

—Lewis Grizzard

VIEWPOINT

John Grey

I hold it.
You disagree with it.

Occasionally,
it's the core
of an argument.

But mostly
we bite our tongues.

Of course,
we both know
it's there.

So, there's this
ongoing feud
that's carried out
in silence

by calm demeanors
neutral expressions.

Occasionally,
we kiss and make up.

We pretend
it's just a kiss.

.....

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in NewWorldWriting, North Dakota Quarterly and Lost Pilots. Latest books: Between Two Fires, Covert, and Memory Outside the Head are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in California Quarterly, Seventh Quarry, La Presa and Doubly Mad.

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MAYONNAISE

Robert Boucheron

A cold creamy sauce spread on bread in sandwiches, and served with fish or potato fries, mayonnaise is also used in salads, which can range from boiled egg and potato, to ham, tuna, and vegetables. In the South, anything edible is fair game for salad.

Many people are fiercely loyal to a brand of mayonnaise. That is, if they allow store-bought mayonnaise in the house. It's quick and easy to make, after all, and fresh is always better than bottled, canned, and frozen. You don't have time? Two minutes, that all it takes, and these three ingredients: vegetable oil, egg yolks, and a few drops of vinegar or lemon juice. A pinch of salt is not out of the question. Beat or whisk the oil and egg yolks to make an airy emulsion. About 150 ml or 5 oz per egg yolk.

Other seasonings can include paprika, mustard, pepper, and garlic. This is where tastes differ, and arguments erupt. Purists keep it simple, bland or slightly tart, while others crave sensation.

You have places to go and things to do, and kitchen time is strictly rationed? I hear you.

Most days, I'm with you. So here is a guide to mayonnaise off the shelf, at the supermarket, the deli, and your favorite fast-food joint.

Mayonnaise is ubiquitous, but it's been around for a short time. According to one story, told by the French lexicographer Émile Littré, it was invented in 1756. In April of that year,

the Duke of Richelieu invaded the Spanish island of Menorca, then held by the British, and took the port of Mahon. For the victory feast, his chef used what was on hand, olive oil and eggs, to whip up a new sauce. The duke bragged about it at the court of Louis XV, where the name Mahon generated the adjective mayonnaise, and a trend was born.

Alternate legends are based on geography and linguistics. Bayonne, France could be where it began, and B softened to M. The word *moyen* or "middle" also meant "egg yolk" in French, or the words *magner* and *manier* may have slid into mayonnaise. The fact is, olives and olive oil were common in Spain and southern France, and the emulsion of olive oil and garlic known as *aioli* existed long before. *Remoulade*, based on oil and vinegar, is also very old.

Mayonnaise was first mentioned in print in French in 1806, and in English in 1815. In light of this historical gap, another story puts its origin in the era

of the Napoleonic Wars. Bear in mind the French habit of whipping cream and their obsession with novelty.

In the United States, commercial mayonnaise in glass jars originated in Philadelphia in 1907, when Amelia Schlorer marketed Mrs. Schlorer's Mayonnaise, used in salads sold in her family's delicatessen. Around the same in New York, Richard Hellmann's delicatessen on Columbus Avenue featured his wife Margaret Hellmann's recipe in salads. Using the name Blue Ribbon, Mrs. Hellman's Mayonnaise was mass marketed in 1912, and it is still a national favorite.

Duke's Mayonnaise is a leading rival in the South. Duke's has a story, too. In 1917, Mrs. Eugenia Duke in Greenville, South Carolina made sandwiches with her homemade mayonnaise and sold them to soldiers at nearby Fort Sevier. The sandwiches were wildly popular. She expanded to a tearoom in the Ottaray Hotel in Greenville, then to drugstores and grocery stores. In 1923, she bottled the mayonnaise for sale, and the business took off. In 1929, Mrs. Duke sold it to C. F. Sauer Company in Richmond, Virginia. Along with spices and other sauces, Sauer still produces Duke's, with the slogan "It's got twang!"

While many swear by Hellmann's or Duke's, the South can boast two more brands. Bama mayonnaise started in Birmingham, Alabama about 1913. It has a fan base there, in Mississippi, and according to Mercia Foods, "Bama is the number one mayonnaise in Nigeria." Bama Foods was sold a few times, eventually winding up in the Sauer empire. Blue Plate mayonnaise has been "extra rich and creamy since 1927" in New Orleans. Blue Plate, named for the China pattern called Blue Willow, is now owned by Reily Foods Company.

Mrs. Filbert's Mayonnaise was made in Baltimore using "apple cider vinegar and a collection of imported spices to add special zest and bouquet." The brand was acquired by Sauer, which stopped making it about ten years ago. Some customers still mourn.

Commercial mayonnaise uses soybean, rapeseed, sunflower, and corn oil. Some brands add olive oil for flavor, and some add calcium disodium "to protect flavor."

Specialty products add herbs and spices, capers and gherkins, and so on. A healthy version uses avocado oil. Vegan mayo uses bean protein instead of eggs.

Miracle Whip inspires either fond devotion or savage condemnation, depending on who you talk to. Introduced in 1933 by Kraft Foods as a

cheaper and lighter spread, Miracle Whip is not “real mayonnaise” like Hellmann’s and Duke’s, because it has a lower oil content and added sugar. The label says “salad dressing,” and don’t you forget it!

Of interest to those who are lactose intolerant, meaning they cannot digest dairy products, mayonnaise can be substituted for sour cream in a recipe, dollop for dollop. While mayonnaise is high in calories and saturated fat, it is slightly less bad than butter.

Slather it and savor it, but don’t get carried away.

.....

Robert Boucheron writes in Charlottesville, VA. rboucheron@gmail.com

“I tend to underplay my
exaggerations. But there I go,
exaggerating again.”

—Jim Reed

UNTITLED FIRE

Tara Moyle

Why *not* be utterly changed into fire? It's only the self that burns, that drops from the bone. Decades

of watching for fire, of fumbling in the dark, of refusing
to fumble. The green leaves
of the millet fields, thick and wavy like leaves of corn,
shine in the sun, the stalks numerous and straight. Crickets
click in the weeds.

Why not walk bare boned through the streets? Scroll after scroll of longing, of learning to make it all beautiful, of wearing the bells daily, of performing for the queen, of seeing the mouth in the mirror

but not knowing how
to make it work. When does the believer become a fool? Deep green cypress rise

like columns before cirrus clouds
and cornflower blue sky. In the village, the murmurs of two satisfied doves preening, church bells chiming the noon hour.

Choosing to burn
is not the same as ruin. For each tragedy, its own attendant bird and endless vine. But for fire, only color—utterly.

Not throwing
the match on one's own stake, not finding the leanest of wolves, sharpening their teeth with a file. To burn is not to walk into the duel, to grab the poisonous cup.

It's the fire
that matters, not the form. Fire at the ends
of each stalk, on the tops of the trees, burning in streams
down the fields, the lines of the bricks, on the backs
of the snails, on the tips of swallows' wings.

Tara Moyle is a therapist and educator. She received her MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University and has published poems in publications such as Armchair Shotgun, Confluence, Diode, and AGNI. Twice she was nominated for a

Pushcart Prize. She lives in North Jersey with her husband and three rescue cats and is working on an autobiographical novel, The Effects of Icelandic Volcanoes on American Spinsters. TaraMoyle@gmail.com

I DREAM IN SEASONS

Marcie Flinchum Atkins

I dream about the early morning frost
when I scuttle out of bed
drenched in overnight sweat,
when the humidity hovers in the air,
leaves my hair in shambles.

Heat has always been my preference—
a girl who grew up in the tropics
with its scramble of heat
alleviated slightly by a warm downpour
in the monsoon season.

The seasons are in a scuffle—
cool mornings followed by heavy air
that lures me to my oft-scoffed air-conditioning.
Summer days grow shorter.
I'm not ready for the darkness of the days.

But still I dream of the frost to come.
One day, I'll wake up to a cooled-down
frosted forest
with a stubble of crystals.
And I'll dream of summer again.

.....

Marcie Flinchum Atkins is an elementary teacher-librarian. Her poems appear in several anthologies for children and adults. She writes fiction and nonfiction for children of all ages. Her debut novel-in-verse, One Step Forward, comes out in 2024 (Versify). You can find more poems at www.marcieatkins.com



WAR DESK

Digital Photograph

John Tracy

John Tracy is a former newspaper photographer turned attorney. Most often he takes pictures to better see what things look like.

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SHAME

Wendy Barry

The hot tide of blood in your face and throat
and chest, burning even in your armpits
like red-hot knives, when you remember your
self and everything you've done and said and
every goal you've let pass or hurdle not
overcome, may not drown you, but it will
imprison you forever in a small
hot box, until you shake it off and run
for cooler northern climes, where it will melt
out of you like clumps of snow breaking up.
Outside, clouds are scudding across the
sky, plum-purple and lavender against
the darkness. The grass is growing in the
marshes and the trains are running. You
can hear the distant rumbling, and the sound
of its whistle punctuating the rustling
of the oak leaves in the dark indigo
breeze, and an owl hooting with a subtle
low throb in the crown of a nearby pine
tree. Out in the woods beyond the house, the
voice is patrolling, calling out for you,
calling you by the name it gave you; That
voice reminding you of your silence or
of your foolish hurtful words, is the master
come to find you. Don't let him. Leave him behind.
He doesn't own you.

.....

Wendy Barry is a Connecticut Yankee living in South Carolina. She is the co-editor of The Annotated Anne of Green Gables from Oxford University Press. She is a poet, gardener, jewelry-maker, painter, teacher, and friend to dogs.

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OUTSIDE HARPERSVILLE, A GHOST BICYCLE

Salaam Green

On the road to the old Wallace House Plantation

next to a field is

an old white bicycle

decorated with plastic

flowers, faded now.

A ghost bicycle left

after someone died

riding here.

The bicycle is leaning against

a tree to decorate this ground

as if the ancestors glided

the bicycle down

from heaven and placed it

on this road in Shelby County, Alabama

where all of us passersby would

know that bicycles have wings.

My own red glider—
polka dots and butterfly flaps
flaps made of silk—
that bicycle would pedal me
to a heaven where one tire swing
hangs from a saving grace
tree. Underneath, a place
to park any bicycle and give
it wings, just after it descended
from that same glorious sky.

.....

Salaam Green is the inaugural poet laureate of historic Birmingham, AL, 2024-2025. The prestigious position recognizes Ms. Green's outstanding contributions to the literary arts and her commitment to fostering a deeper appreciation for poetry within the community and Birmingham. She is the 2024 Literary Arts awardee and her works are published in the Alabama Arts Journal, Southern Women's Review and Black Joy Anthology. Salaam is the founder of Literary Healing Arts and is a certified Listener Poet and Artist in Residence with University of Alabama at Birmingham Arts in Medicine. salaamgreen@gmail.com



PARCHED EARTH

Digital Photo
Tom Gordon

While on a recuperative walk, in early August, I came across what once had been a wet patch of rain-deposited mud. Now this small stretch of red clay earth was cracking, flaking and peeling, a mini reminder of the growing number of places around the world that are simply uninhabitable. When places become uninhabitable, environmentally, economically and/or politically, people get desperate and try to go elsewhere.
tomgordon99@gmail.com walk in

A POEM TO TELL

Daniel Barbare

Always
looking
for
a
poem
to
tell

whether
it
is
just
the
dust
mop

or
a
little
light
on
the
tile
that
shines.

.....

Danny P. Barbare works as a custodian at the Greenville County School District. His award-winning poetry has been published locally and abroad.

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SOMEBODY ELSE'S BLOOD

John Alexander

He knew he had lost a goodly amount of blood what with the days of shedding blood clots and results of the surgery--but, they in no way prepared him for what was about to happen next--replacing the blood that he lost with someone else's blood.

A transfusion?

At first, he didn't know what to say, though, he knew clearly- he couldn't say no.

Getting it was a given, but still, he needed time to think. Okay, maybe not "think-think," but at least time to prepare.

Was his situation serious? If it was, how was he supposed to handle "serious?"

This question bedeviled him until he allowed his mind and imagination to run "wild."

"Wild" as in go "crazy?"

No.

"Crazy" was too extreme.

There had to be some middle ground.

"It's got to be stupidly funny," he told himself, "That's the way to do it!"

So, when it came time, he was ready to ask questions.

"Now," he began with the head nurse, "after I get this blood from some unknown donor-and it will be in and part of my body- do I end up turning into a blonde, do I become a Grammy winning rap artist, and am I- all of a sudden- going to be able to speak Portuguese?"

The nurse paused, looked at him and then in complete deadpan said- "I don't think so."

"No chance?" he asked in a different way with a sly smile on his face.

"None," she replied without hesitation and then added, "Are you ready?"

He took a short breath, almost as if he were readying himself and then said,

"Yo!"

Esta Bem!"

"Pode Ser!"

.....

John Alexander writes in Getzville, NewYork. His work continues to appear throughout the internet. www.avowofsilence.net

ANNUAL RINGS

Ash Pierce

The park was always crowded at sunset. Joyful children filled the horizon, many running up and down, letting the wind carry them. The setting sun cast a warm glow behind the woman, reflecting off her auburn hair. Behind her, trees shedding an orange and red coat. A squirrel scurried up one leaving behind a dismantled pile of acorns (later a young boy would take them for himself, draw faces on them and call it a family). The man tugged awkwardly at his jacket sleeve.

“Can we make this quick?” The woman said.

The man checked his watch—7:30. It was a Tuesday. She was never busy on Tuesday nights.

“Oh,” he replied. The woman still appeared just as perfect as autumn. She was fidgeting with something in the palm of her left hand. Her wedding ring, he quickly recalled.

She cleared her throat, “Let’s get this over with, please. I have things to do, I have a life now,” she had always complained about him holding her back. He didn’t see what was so wrong.

He liked staying at home--he liked just being with her. “Here,” she stuck out her arm and opened her hand, the light reflecting off the gold ring stung his eyes. She couldn’t seem to make eye contact with him.

“Right...thanks,” now resting in his hand, he flipped it over and over.

“Yeah, well... have a good night,” With a turn of the heel, she was gone, the man now left alone. He stood there for a while, still flipping the ring in his hand. When he worried people had started staring, he began walking laps around the park. It was growing darker by the minute, but still, he chose to walk in the shadows of the trees.

He stopped for a moment under one tree, seemingly the tallest in the park. Something round pressed into the bottom of his shoe. An acorn. It was, perhaps, a perfect acorn. A soft golden brown—round and uniform at every angle you held it. He picked it up between thumb and forefinger, still holding the ring tightly under the other three. The squirrel he saw earlier would like this acorn. What did squirrels see in acorns anyway?

And children? The man tossed it in the air, and for a moment, he understood the appeal.

A certain curiosity struck him, and he ate it. The first crunch wasn't so bad. It was the ones that followed that gave him trouble. It was earthy (as you'd expect). Not a good kind of earthy. It was dirt and sticks all molded into one.

Bits and pieces found their way into every crevice of his teeth. When he finally swallowed, it made sure to cling to every part of his throat. All he could do was stand there, disgusted.

Sitting with his nausea, a thought came to mind. Something he had learned at a young age. Walking down the aisles of the neighborhood library he stumbled across a children's section on trees. The man (at this age, the boy) picked up one about oak trees. He was fascinated by their branches; tall, twisted things that jutted out from every direction. A web in its own way. In his reading, he discovered a diagram: Acorns: Fruit of the Oak Tree. At the very center, towards the bottom of an acorn, a seed. Now, in the pit of his stomach, lay that seed.

Childish, maybe, but an old fear resurfaced. That seed would grow inside his stomach.

He would soon become home to a giant oak tree. Too aware of himself, any slight movement caused the seed to roll up the walls of his stomach. Stumbling back, he clung to the tree behind him. He slid down slowly, ripping off bark with his back as he went. He could feel it already. Against the grass, his legs began to take a new form. The dirt pulled at them. It wasn't long before the underside of his legs began to sprout. Tiny roots that planted themselves in the rich soil. They spread quickly. It had rained last night, and plenty of water was still there for the taking.

His torso was next. It grew taller, wider, rounder. His jacket and shirt now rough and cracked. Already he could feel ants crawling in the paths this new skin made. He could imagine happy couples carving their love into his side. (Would he be stripped down to nothing?) His hair took on a new color. Green at first, but quickly changed under the circumstances of the weather.

A color so similar to the woman's—he felt closer to her than he had in years. As his eyes slowly closed, he held tightly to an object still pressed into his hand, the ring.

Leaves sprouted and spread until they covered the sky. Finally, his arms. They twisted and bent before shooting out at his fingertips. The ring fell but caught on the edge of his thumb. His growing branches spread wider, taller.

Everything came to a halt. His body was finally still. His bark split into two slits as his eyes forced their way open. Even though the sun was setting everything was suddenly brighter.

He was taller than any other tree in the park. A squirrel scurried up his trunk, down a branch, and jumped. It flew for a moment, arms and legs outstretched in a perfect star.

It landed gracefully on a nearby tree below. Waiting for it, another squirrel. They danced around one another before running off to find a new home. As he watched them go, his eyes began to dim. Bark hardened over him once more, and he slept, calm for just a moment. In the morning, he woke under a tree—normal. There was a strange absence in his hand, and as he stared longer at the tree behind, he noticed a golden ring, hanging from the highest branch.

.....

Ash Pierce is a senior at the Alabama School of Fine Arts in the Creative Writing Department. In 2023, she won first place in fiction in the Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards. pierceao2025@gmail.com

“I merely took the energy it takes
to pout and wrote some blues.”

—Duke Ellington

ELEGY FOR Z

Bill Gottlieb

Z was sparse with words. You couldn't tell what she was thinking. Then without warning she'd hand you a poem she'd written of extraordinary beauty, about the natural world she saw, all material and spiritual things holding hands in confession, nodding in prayer and counting beads.

Z had nothing to say about her poems, ever. She'd given birth, then set the precious things afloat out in the reeds, letting the current take them. Taciturn, observant, reserving judgement. She seemed to have no ambition to further display herself or her artistic gifts.

She shelved books in the stacks of Butler Library on the Upper West Side. I met her after work, and we rode the train downtown together. She got off at Canal. I went on, over the bridge to Brooklyn. As the train rolled above ground past lit up building windows, I imagined Z walking at night, absorbing the movements and expressions of people on the street. I thought of her alone in her apartment, with pen and paper, a desk lamp glowing. What philosophical formula humbles brilliance? What insight makes an unassuming spirit? Z embodied a riddle I hadn't solved. In the midst of the city, life demands engagement.

Residents hit the streets, carrying a warehouse of desires, attitudes, assertions, expectations.

Indignation, pride, envy claim first place and are loaded in their aggression delivery systems.

Don't we nurture those weapons and make them grow? Don't we download the updates? You would think so. But Z kept it all at a distance. What point of view makes a person stop putting themselves forward and taking advantage?

Here's a concrete example. Z had a blood disease and had been in Callini Hospital on a side street in lower Manhattan for a month. Callini was a diminished hospital, a hospital without contributors, starved on a diet of Medicaid reimbursements.

While 16 short blocks uptown glimmered NYU/Langone Med Center, buildings studded with the names of mega-donors, and a comprehensive innovative course of treatment on tap for your disorder, whatever it might be.

Mina had lived with Z in the past. Since the hospitalization, she had been having a recurrent dream of angels flying through the streets of the city every

morning and taking up stations outside the windows of Z's apartment. They waited, with the city's life in suspension, until Z began a new entry in her notes. Then the world was animated again.

But the dreamer was unable to read what was being written.

Mina now visited Z in the hospital, and realized that Callini was not a clean facility, lacked staff and had doctors who seemed content to let Z slip away. She urged Z to take a cab uptown to the NYU ER. But Z stayed where she was. It was her final act of self-abnegation.

When Z died her older sisters got the apartment and, out of the drawers of Z's old schoolteachers' desk, a collection of her notes. These were the notes that angels waited for.

The heirs kept the notes private, so I never saw them. But I have a good idea what they said. There would be no explanation or description of spiritual technique or method. No articulated morality. No pronouncements or prescriptions. The notes would be filled with descriptions of things: a small, jagged piece of broken blue glass placed in the sunlight casts a blue light on the table surface, or, the pen not only makes a mark, it makes an indentation where it travels on the page. Well-cut pieces of a puzzle not put together. Discreet items without independent meaning. The irreplaceable living being, herself the formula and answer to all questions, was gone.

.....

Bill Gottlieb represented people with disabilities in court. Before that he was a union organizer and New York City bus driver. His work has appeared in Brilliant Flash Fiction and other literary magazines. wpgottlieb@gmail.com

“If you're not the lead dog, the scenery never changes.”

—Mike Peters

LESSON

Sally Murphy

On Tuesday
I float above a ray
as she dances
and dips.
A graceful dancer
not caring
who sees.
No need for a partner
a witness
or even a tune
played
anywhere but inside her.
On Friday
I watch dancers
at my nephew's wedding
and
when I am drawn onto the floor
feel momentarily awkward.
I don't know the steps
or the tune.
But as I move
I feel the joy
of being alive
and think
for a moment
of my ray.

.....

Sally Murphy is an Australian author, poet and academic who loves the sea almost as much as she loves reading, writing and spreading a joy for both. Her published works include award-winning verse novels for children, Pearl Verses the World and Toppling. She can be found online at www.sallymurphy.com.au

THE GARDEN

Noelle Shoemate

We planted during the month of June. I never wanted that yellow cottage next to Montauk pond, this birthday surprise from your great-aunt Malila. I wish you'd given it to your sister Annie and her three Siamese cats. I insisted we plant a garden to add balance to the bleak A-frame. I bought two pairs of gardening gloves from a dollar bin at a cheap variety shop and sang off-key to the roses every day of the week. I told you about my wish—that we would be smothered with flowers, stems winding around our toes, rose scents finding us as we traveled in our dreams.

*

When we were a little younger, we met on the New Jersey boardwalk and shared a Cinnabon, taking shy bites. You licked frosting off my neck with only the flick of your tongue. I noticed the snake tattoo that wound around your arm, your hair bleached carelessly. I was cured from the buttoned-up shirts, the hair kept neat for office work. In the House of Mirrors, I saw your face reflected in the cracked carnival glass. Nothing was more perfect—I decided then that I would turn you mine. Outside, you bought a pink carnation from a mime who pretended it was too heavy to hold, his back bent. You said, “Someday we’ll have as many flowers as you can name.”

*

The roses grew thorns and refused to let me pass. My jeans ripped around the knees, and you said my legs looked just this side of fat. I had bought the wrong gloves—meant for children, so they always hurt. The sun lightened our hair, and sea salt coated our backs.

The call of the seagull we named Ben woke us every day at five. We made something beautiful, sure, but then your toes stepped on mine when we danced to Carly Simon, and one morning after we drank three cups of tea from my grandmother’s blue china cups, I couldn’t find your lips: a broken kiss, dissolving into dust.

*

We used to spin my plastic globe, fingers sticky from eating Skippy because it was so cheap. I’d spin the globe one way, and you would jam it to a stop with greasy fingertips.

Often your finger pointed to a place we’d have no courage to stay: Antarctica, or deserts so vast—we shook our heads and promised we’d find our home the very next week.

Now, I gasp at how our rose garden cannot remember the shape of my face, or my code for cradling the seeds before giving them a place deep in the earth. The scratches on my legs; ripped jeans—there’s nothing I can do about a locked garden that never gave me a key.

*

I imagine you now, having lunch with your sister in the garden, how my smell is there among the thorned roses, our blended molecules clustered by the sea. Or maybe one day you’ll notice someone with hair lightened by the sun, carrying a pink carnation.

Maybe you’ll remember me.

.....

Noelle Shoemate is published in Bellingham Review, The Courtship of Winds, ellipsis... literature; art, Five on the Fifth, Night Picnic, Packingtown Review, Pennsylvania Literary Journal, Sierra Nevada Review, The Thieving Magpie, and Umbrella Factory.
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“We are confronted with
insurmountable opportunities.”

—Walt Kelly

CULT LIFE

Paul Luikart

I joined a cult and, after a little trial period, where I helped with the dishes and tried to learn the way they held their hands when they prayed, they let me move into the house.

The House. It was a converted radio-parts warehouse, and we'd find transceivers and screens for speakers every now and then, and this made the jumpier ones in our midst freak out. "I knew they were listening!" The "they", however, was always a bit of a question mark.

They changed my name from Mike to Mike-Friend and we called our god-man The Big Guy because his true name—hung in the firmament and shining with glory—was unpronounceable in any human tongue. If we ever did hear it, they told me, our heads would instantly burst into flame.

The Big Guy lived in a furnished shack on the roof and stayed up there most of the time.

Our days were spent singing and reading—the same things over and over again, so at a certain point, "singing and reading" became "memorizing." Yes, there was sex, and some of it weird.

Yes, there was weed. But you might be surprised to learn that sometimes we talked baseball, the stock market, the shape and texture of our daily poops. "Like a capital C this morning."

"Really?"

"What's it mean?"

"Flax, baby. It means I'm hitting the flax hard from here on out."

One evening, Luna-Sis, The Big Guy's right-hand woman, descended from on high, down from the shack, the holiest of holies. She told us The Big Guy was now casting a serious eye on the idea of human sacrifice.

"Who?" Joel-Pal, the loudmouth, spoke up first. Luna-Sis looked at him like she would've literally eaten him if the rest of us hadn't been sitting there.

"Me," Tina-Ma said, resigned. Tina-Ma who always raised her hand at Thursday Sacred Thoughts Talks, even when what she had to share was tantamount to bull.

"I'll do it," Bart-Buddy the former trucker, who'd lost his wife and son in a housefire when he was hauling basketball shoes to Helena.

"No. He wants you. Mike-Friend." Luna-Sis stabbed her finger right at me.

"You won't believe this next part. You just won't believe it."

At the end of ten seconds or so of ensuing silence, as my heart pounded up my throat, the ATF—all of one smashing, crashing, flash-banging accord—came busting through the windows. Glass everywhere.

I was deaf for days. As it turned out, we had guns. I guess we had Tovex too. And hockey bags full of bullets in huge, buried safes outside in the lawn.

I avoided doing any time. Mostly, because I was the new guy. Now I'm an adjunct at a community college. Early American history, but just the basics. They let me eat in the cafeteria for free. Sometimes at night when I can't sleep, which is every night, I head up to the roof of my apartment building. I stand with my toes over the edge and listen.

Horns, chimes, the stripped strains of rock n' roll from somewhere.

The Big Guy is up for parole next month. I wonder if he'll try to start up a new thing when he gets out. I wonder if he'll come looking for me. For any of us. But, mostly for me.

Amongst other things, I've wondered whether or not I'd make a decent human sacrifice.

Appeased appropriately. I bet you'd know in an instant. Like, right when the knife goes in.

.....

Paul Luikart is the author of a number of short story collections. He serves as an adjunct professor of fiction writing at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia. He and his family live in Chattanooga, Tennessee. pluikart@gmail.com

“You can fool too many of the
people too much of the time.”

—James Thurber

TALE OF THE BONGO UNDIES

Jim Reed

I trudge toward the double-times-double doors of K-Mart (Big K to you), intent upon purchasing some underwear to replace the raggedy ones remaining in the underwear drawer at home.

One of the doors dutifully opens when I push it inward, and I descend into Stuff Heaven, relieved that the official greeter in the pastel vest is looking the other way.

My stomach always tenses when I go into one of these stores, because I know that I am going to exit having purchased more than I intend to purchase.

What will distract me this time? Is there any possible way I can escape from K-Mart with just the underwear?

I meander toward the Men's clothing area, but a lot of false stops chew up my shopping time. Boy Clothing looks about the same as Man Clothing, so I wonder why the clothes look so small—or have I gained more girth than I have noticed lately? OK--there must be clothes for bigger guys.

I weave a trail past women's bras and come to guy things—shirts and pants hanging under sales signs, only these items look too big for me. Have I lost weight? Nope, this is the Big Guy department, and the sizes look like XXX, instead of the XL I seek.

Finally, the Men's department for regular guys. I am looking for black underwear, only it is impossible to purchase black underwear without coming home with purple or red or puce underwear, too, because the underwear is packaged 2 or 3 pairs to a sealed container.

As I leave with my booty, I remember that my socks are more ragged than my underwear, and nobody darns socks anymore. You have to replace them and throw away the old ones.

I grab for the first socks I see, because my endurance is flagging—I've noticed through the years that being in K-Mart sucks energy out of my body at about two and a half times the normal rate.

I start swimming toward what I think may be the front doors, when I see a small boy standing in front of a display of canned coffee containers with their removable-replaceable plastic lids inviting him to take action.

He does something perfectly logical, something I, too, would do if I were short enough so that this display of big cans was at waist level: He begins to play them like bongo drums.

Suddenly, his feet are dancing while his body stays enough in one place so that he can beat those bongos, first one, then another, then three at once.

Part of me decides to get down there, on the other side facing him, and tap out my own bongo tunes and make my own archless feet feel light as marshmallows.

Of course, I don't do it in body, only in spirit.

My flabby body has too much momentum, and it just keeps heading for the cash registers on its way home with new underwear and new socks.

But part of me is still back there playing the bongos with this small kid and having the time of my life.

Not until I get my new underwear unwrapped at home do I realize that this underwear that I purchased is not the kind of underwear I have been purchasing for thirty years—it looks like briefs, but it has long clinging legs, too. It looks just plain silly, but the dread of having to go back to K-Mart (Big K to you) and risk this time having to face the official greeter who might not be distracted is too great a dread.

I am just learning to wear funny-looking, funny-feeling underwear that is one day black, one day red, one day some color that is hard to define. On my black-underwear days I do OK, though, and this is one of those days.

I used to keep bongos around the house. Maybe, when nobody is looking, I'll don my off-color underpants and pound out some joyful bongo noise

.....

Octogenarian Jim Reed owns an old bookshop in Downtown Birmingham, Alabama. And when nobody's looking, he... www.jimreedbooks.com

“Did you know that at one
time, each of us weighed 17
pounds?”

—Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding

BIG ROCK

Richard Raybon

Beyond my grandparents' pasture was a shallow canyon of hardwood trees. The woods were open and mostly clear of underbrush. The high canopy filtered the sun into dappled shade along the forest floor. The small spring originating under the towering tulip tree back in the pasture became a small tributary feeding into a larger creek. The path along the small stream led us to our favorite summer destination. It was a bend in that larger creek where a massive boulder jutted out from the steep, west side, forcing the water to curl around, forming a deeper pool, carved into the opposite shoreline.

The trees were back away from the creek bank and allowed a steady dose of midday sun to beam down on that huge, grey stone. We simply called the location "Big Rock."

I'm sure the creek was no more than four feet in depth at its deepest point, and it quickly came up to a wider, rocky shoal that was merely inches deep. But you could climb down onto the rock to sit in the sun, or fish for palm-sized bream. Palm-sized for an eight-year-old. Or look under rocks for crawfish. But we would mostly splash around in the shallower, waist-high water, a cool down for a sweltering Alabama day. We stacked rocks along the downstream shoal to deepen and widen our wading area.

I was not supposed to come home with wet clothes, but I oftentimes "fell accidentally" into the creek. My mother never seemed to frown too harshly. So, I think she just went along with the "boys will be boys" reality of those times.

And the summer of 1961 was a splendid time to be one of those boys.

.....

Richard Lee Raybon, Jr. grew up in what was the small rural city of Gardendale, Alabama. "I've always loved the outdoors, so most of my writing and painting have had nature as a backdrop. I've been writing for decades and painting for just a few years but love them both." rlraybon@icloud.com

MAYBE IF

Donna Thomas

It had been thirty-six years since I killed my grandmother.

I confess on a summer day in my parent's kitchen.

The morning sun pours through the window making the pastels of the room ripe for revelation. My mother stands at the sink with her back to me. I can hear the water splash against the breakfast dishes. Her body is comfortable in the knee-length, blue house duster she wears. Her hair is still in tight uncombed curls. Their freedom depends on the time of day the errands start. I don't know why we're alone. Where are my kids? Where's Daddy? It seems all other memories of the morning have been erased. You know, like a movie when all the insignificant characters are edited out of the scene.

I sit at the kitchen table.

I face my mother.

I notice her legs.

They're pale and beige with skinny ankles. Her shins and calves are not much bigger. I notice because she regularly says my legs are much prettier than hers. Remnants of sleep still linger in her voice. She tells me about an old family friend who died earlier in the week. She plans to go to the funeral later in the morning.

I tell her to give my condolences.

Truth is, I didn't remember the neighbor, or I just conveniently forgot, a bad habit I am trying to deal with.

Ma explained that she and Ruth were childhood friends. They lived next door to each other. Her mother and my grandmother were good friends. As she speaks, I can still hear the water splashing around in the sink.

When I was a child, I became friends with repression. It just seemed easier to keep things inside.

Like the time the boy next door lured me to his basement with promises of banana flavored Now or Later candy.

He asked me to pull down my pants.

I said no.

He lunged towards me.

I swung my right leg as hard as I could.

My foot connected with his left knee.

He yelled like a little girl.

I ran to the safety of home.

When I came through the front door, my brother shouted.

I said—nothing—and went to my room.

I never told.

That boy continued to come over to our house and hang with my brother as if everything was normal. Besides, if I told my brother, he and that boy would've fought. I didn't want him to get in trouble. He was already on punishment for accidentally shooting another boy with a BB gun.

There's also the time I peeked through Mrs. Peterson's bedroom window to see if Maryann was home. I'd found her there many times trying on her mother's clothes. Her mother was so stylish. She always seemed to have the latest fashion.

I'd knock on the window. Maryann would let me in through the kitchen door so I could try on some clothes too. However, on a Spring day in April, Mrs. Peterson was in the bedroom with the vacuum cleaner salesman, Mr. Mathison.

I never told.

I didn't want to hurt Mr. Peterson.

I really liked him.

He was a very nice man.

As I get older, memories start to seep through. You know, like when you squeeze a bottle of detangling shampoo and the liquid oozes into your hands. My friendship with repression wanes. Things I had hidden for years are now eager to merge.

So now, at the age of forty-six,
I confess.

I loved my grandmother. She was soft and kind, and perfect in every way. Whenever I spent the night, I slept in the same bed with her. There was an extra bedroom, but I preferred the smell of Alberta VO5 hair grease and Camay soap to anything else in the world.

This night my aunt and baby cousin were over, so they slept in the other bedroom. I slept with the assurance of safety as I always did at her home. In the morning, when I awoke, she was not in bed which wasn't unusual. I assumed she was in the kitchen mixing flour and buttermilk to make her homemade biscuits.

When I walked out of the bedroom into the living area, she was seated in the faded gold chair staring into the abyss.

I tried to get her attention,

Grandma, Grandma, Grandma.

But she was stiff and pale.

My aunt said I would have to stay with my cousin because Grandma had to go to the hospital.

I kept trying to get her attention,

Grandma,

Grandma,

Grandma.

Wherever she was, I slowly realized I couldn't go.

I heard my aunt on the phone, "I heard her calling Jessica to get her medicine."

Those words broke me for thirty-six years, "I heard her calling Jessica to get her medicine."

I didn't wake up.

I didn't wipe the heaviness of sleep from my eyes.

I didn't answer her call.

I didn't save my grandmother.

I killed her.

These sentiments splashed around inside me. For years I thought...

Maybe if I had heard her.

Maybe if I had gotten the medicine?

Maybe if I had just opened my eyes.

The water is calm. My mom didn't turn around. Her blue duster never shows their buttons.

I Cry

Cry

Cry.

She never comes to hug me or tell me it's okay.

When I finish crying, I wipe my eyes and leave.

.....

Donna Gossom Thomas is an author, instructor and editor. She earned a master's degree in creative writing from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Her short stories have been published in PMS Magazine and The Birmingham News.

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THE FINCHES

Eva Skrande

Today a beggar was selling large, fake sunflowers
in the middle of the road for a living

Today, I was born among the mercy of finches.
Today, thanks to the wind, the compass

of my heart led my right-hand east toward Jerusalem.
Today, my daughters—

my tulips and shoes—will be happy.
So, the river promised the beehive of my soul.

Today I will want old shoes to join me in singing. Today,
despite what hurts the earth's limbs,

it's time to sweep the mangroves of sadness from the shores of life.
Today, the black ship of days will fill their hollows

with gentleness.
Already, empty mouths fill with honey and hope.

.....

Eva Skrande's third book, The Boat that Brought Sadness into the World, will be available in June from Finishing Line Press. Most recently her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Collidescope, SuperPresent, SurVision, Another Chicago Magazine, i-70 Review, Plant Quarterly and elsewhere.

egskrande@gmail.com



SLIPPING AWAY

4" x 6"

Digital Art

Khushi Jain

Khushi Jain is a second-year philosophy student in India. She has been creating art as a means of self-expression for almost eight years. She is an introverted person and finds the areas of philosophy and expression especially fascinating. She lives in Sonapat, Haryana, India. She found out about the Journal through the Internet. "I had been looking for opportunities to share my art and your esteemed journal seemed like the best one.

WHIRLWIND YEAR

Gary Duehr

Crossword Guy is missing. Every morning at six he's at Cafe Nero with four papers piled up on the chair next to him—The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Boston Globe, Boston Herald. From my laptop, I watch as he methodically works through each crossword with a pencil stub, only pausing to grab a smoke outside or make long, energetic calls in some other language to what sounds like a business client.

Ali, the other point of our morning-coffee triangle, notices too. He's a young guy with a Castro beard who wears camouflage shorts even in the winter. Usually, it's just the three of us at our usual tables while joggers in track suits and office assistants in sneakers swoop in for their mobile orders. The bandanaed, nose-studded baristas nod hi, the espresso machine hissing.

"Hey bro," says Ali, "our friend is gone. He hasn't been here in a week."

"I know. I don't even know his name."

"I think it's Earl."

"Maybe he's on vacation."

"Could be. I'm worried, though. What if he's sick?"

The days pass with Earl's window seat vacant. Ali nurses his coffee at his perch by the back door. I sift through email at a big round table.

On his way out, Ali stops by. "No sign yet."

"Yeah."

"I asked at the counter, and they don't know his last name. I think Earl mentioned he lives in Medford."

"I know he has a deal with that cigar shop on Main Street to pick up the papers from the front door each morning at 5:30 and pay for them later."

"At least that's something"

"I could check it out."

Once this guy told me his great-great uncle fought in the Revolutionary War. On a kick I went out to Lexington to the museum there and looked in the archives. They actually had the roster with his uncle's name on it. I snapped a photo and sent it to him. I love that kind of thing."

"That's cool."

"Alright, brother," Ali says, slapping me on the shoulder. "Enjoy the day."

The next morning, I leave home early while it's still dark out and head for the cigar shop.

I park across the street with the heat running and wait. The shop is squeezed between High and Dry laundromat and Al's Liquor. Right before 5:30 a big green van rumbles up, and a skinny guy dumps some bundles of newspapers on the stoop. They catch the red of the neon OPEN sign in the window. I wait, half-listening to the mumble of morning news on NPR. Something about another trial, another protest. A few cars shush past. The orange streetlights blink off. I don't think Earl's coming. On a whim, I hop out and cross the street. I pull at the twine on the stack of Times and slip out the top copy, then do the same with the other three papers. I look around, and nobody's on the street, just a black Cherokee Jeep idling outside Patsy's Pies half a block down. When I get back in the car and twist the headlights on, I can see the Jeep in the rearview ease away from the curb.

"I gotta pull a permit at city hall this morning. I'm moving my mom in with me and my girl, so I have to add a half-bath. They're gonna charge me more taxes for that."

Ali is standing over my table jabbing at the air. "I guess I'm a bit of an anarchist. I should be able to do what I want with my own house, right, man? Keep the feds out of it."

"I know what you mean." I open my laptop and press my fingertip to the on button. It chimes.

"Sorry to interrupt, bro. I just thought you should know."

"No worries, thanks."

He takes a seat across from me. "You hear they're closing this place next week?"

"No, why?"

"Suzie at the register said they're going to renovate. I hope they don't ruin it. I like the scenery through the big plate-glass windows."

"Yeah, it's nice."

"Progress sucks. I just hope Earl comes back before then. Where you gonna go?"

"I don't know. Maybe Tatte."

"The thing is, they don't open till 8, those bourgeois a-holes. All the construction around here, luxury condos going up, and the workers get here at five with no place for coffee. All that money pouring right down the drain." He stands up and pulls a knit cap over his ponytail. As he goes out, he flashes a V with his right hand. "Peace, brother."

I slide the four papers from my bag and set them on the table with a thwack. I flip through the Times to the crossword. 21down has already been

filled out in blue ink, EROSION. I look at the clue: “Bank worry.” I check the crossword in the Journal, and one answer is there too, GERALD for “70s Ford,” likewise one answer each in the Globe and Herald: EGO for “Napolean had a large one” and CREW for “Shell company.

“It’s weird. The answers don’t fit together, but maybe there’s some kind of code.

Outside, a pair of geese lift off from the Mystic, water cascading from their outspread wings. Pat Sajack is clasping his hands as Kate, the winning Wheel contestant, goes for the bonus round. The category is THING. So far she has ___ _ RL _ _ ND _ E _ R. I’m sitting on the couch eating some leftover Pad Thai from lunch at work. My wife Mia is down in Connecticut to see her mom, who just got out of the hospital.

Kate has used up her extra letters DMGO, and she’s trying to sound it out. Pat wishes her good luck. “Wonderland Year? Favorite Year? Wonderful Year?” The buzzer goes off, and the audience applauds. Pat tells she was close, that she gave it her best shot. The answer is “Whirlwind Year.” I turn off the TV. The house is quiet except for the burbles of the radiator. I miss Mia, but I like the feeling of being alone in an empty house. I imagine it as a bubble, a closed-off zone in the row of houses on the dark street. Right now, nobody knows I exist, I think. I could be anyone, anywhere. In the morning the four papers are missing. I’m sure I left them there on the front seat of my Honda. I wipe the frost off the windshield and stare down at the empty vinyl cushion. This doesn’t make sense.

I unlock the door and slide behind the wheel. No sign of forced entry. The windows are rolled up, intact. Whoever did this knows what they are doing. Pros. Somebody who wanted to send me a warning. The dirty tactics of the FBI, CIA, KGB float through my mind. All the secret acronyms. I look down the street, still dark beyond the orange glow of the streetlight. The useless little terrier next door yaps. A few blocks away a train shuttles past like an exhaled breath. At the corner a black Cherokee Jeep switches its headlights on and slowly drives off. I feel a shiver.

A week later, I drop by Lowe’s to pick up some curtain rods. Across the big parking lot, it looks like Cafe Nero is already closed; there are no cars in front. I haven’t seen Ali the last few mornings. I only stop by to grab a latte; I’m too nervous to stay longer. Construction cranes punctuate the gray sky, and a piledriver is pummeling the ground. Behind a ring of chain link fence, workers in orange vests swarm a vast ruin of rebar and concrete chunks. Over by the highway, tall glossy buildings sparkle like glass shards in the sun. I

don't recognize the city any longer. I have no idea where to go for coffee in the morning, where Ali ended up, what happened to Crossword Guy. I need somebody to help me fill in the blanks.

.....

Gary Duehr is a longtime creative writing teacher. His work has appeared in many journals, and he has authored a number of books. He writes in Somerville, MA
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“The book above all others in the world which should be forbidden is a catalogue of forbidden books.”

—Lichtenberg

THE RABBI

Sharon Cook

He was an old man. A very old man, wrinkled and stooped with a long, grey beard. He was a rabbi living in Brooklyn. But he wasn't living any more. His heart had just stopped. The stopping of his heart wasn't painful but had startled him into a state of profound consciousness.

It had begun a few hours ago after morning prayers in his synagogue with sweating and feeling "oh so very tired." His hand had hugged his old, familiar seat, clutching it tightly for balance. His prayer shawl felt too warm. Blue stripes on white silk with tassels on both ends given to him by his grandfather so many years ago. In years now passed, his grandchildren had twirled their fingers through those tassels when they accompanied him to prayers. The prayer shawl slipped to the ground. His yarmulke had become damp and he pulled it off his head. Then, he had had a clutching feeling in his chest and breathing became difficult. He dropped startled to his old seat, the one he sat in at every service, every time he came into the sanctuary to pray.

Thoughts raced. He knew he was dying. "Had he fulfilled what God wanted of him in life? Had he said every prayer that should have been said? Did he remember every Sabbath? Did he do all that was required at every Jewish holiday? Had he fulfilled all the requirements and taught them to his students and congregation?"

He had just unwound his tefillin, the leather straps tying the tiny black boxes that held tiny scrolls with critical verses from the Torah: (1) The duty of the Jewish people to remember the redemption from Egyptian bondage and the obligation of every Jew to educate his children about this and about all of God's commandments. (2) the Shema, watchword of the Faith, "Hear, Oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." These boxes are bound between the eyes and on the wrist during morning prayers. But, had he wrapped them the way he should? He had wrapped them so many times, many thousands of times, every day since his bar mitzvah on his 13th birthday.

His mind raced back to the day when he became a bar mitzvah. When he accepted the burdens and joys of carrying out the Jewish laws. Then his life as a responsible human being had begun. After that, he had just kept doing what was expected of him, as a son, a husband, a father, and a rabbi. But now, so many years later, the tying on of the Tefillin had become rote not requiring conscious thought. Had he followed all that was required of him as he should have? It all came down to this question: "Was he a righteous man?" And what

did that even mean? This thought floated ... as his mind succumbed to change... to drifting, ... to going wherever we go as we die.

The cells in his body became sluggish, changed their flow, and slowly re-arranged. Deep in his human flesh the very smallest fundamental elements, the quarks, were sparkling, waking in a very new way, different, as they turned in unison, not toward Jerusalem, but toward the Sun...

.....

Sharon Cook is a psychologist living in Blount County, AL with her husband, a very clever dog and a 3-legged cat. Since she's retired, she has been busy in the garden, doing artwork and now trying to write. otebear2@gmail.com

“I would like to take you seriously
but to do so would affront your
intelligence.”

—William F. Buckley Jr.

HOW I BECAME A STORYTELLER

Joey McClure

Well, so, I have been very fortunate in my first life. I was born into an honest, hardworking, Godfearing family. I was born in the United States of America. I was born in The South, Coosa County, Alabama, to be exact. And finally, I was raised among an abundance of marvelous stories, folklore, and great storytellers, who, by the way, were referred to around where I lived as liars. This moniker followed them regardless of the fact that many of their stories were based on truth. However, few if any of their true stories were ever told unembellished.

Therefore, it has become my greatest fortune to have heard, told, and retold, an untold number of wonderful stories throughout my entire existence. Thus, I began spinning my own tall tales at a very young age. Most of my first tales were to explain why to some “in-charge” adult, just how a certain calamity or mishap that had all appearances for which I might have been the culprit, when in actuality, it had been the result of misconduct by some animal (usually the dog), or some other person such as a child younger than me who was not yet as fluent in the explanation of things as I. There was always the slightest chance of being taken at my word, therefore avoiding punishment. Seldom, if ever did it work.

When I began the first grade, our teacher, Miss Logan, told the class that on Fridays after lunch there would be show and tell. She explained that this would provide students an opportunity to bring to school something from home to show, then tell the class about the item, or share with the class some unique experience they had encountered. After each child finished their presentation, the rest of the class could ask the presenter questions regarding their item or story.

When Friday came, I was found in the back of the class frantically waving my outstretched hand high over my head, standing on my knees in the seat of my desk (stay in your seat, Joey) so my hand would be higher than everyone else’s. For once in my life, my reputation had not preceded me so Miss Logan called on me first (see, getting my hand the highest did work). I proceeded to tell the story about balling up into a tight ball in the hole of an old car tire and rolling down a steep hill, which was much fun until I hit a tree. I then exclaimed loudly to the class the exact resulting words that came forth from my mouth after almost breaking my neck. That’s when I learned you should never use the s**t word in class.

But I also had discovered my greatest pleasure in life, as my classmates roared with laughter. From that moment on, my one goal, really my purpose in life was to bring fun and laughter to all those around me. Each Friday, I would have ready a new tale to share with the class; that is, until I ran out of calamities from my short life about which to tell. So, I learned to make them up. I had learned from listening to countless stories that were told by my daddy, uncles, and family friends, that every good story began with “Well,” or “So,” and thereafter, so did mine as well.

I made up a story about me and my monkey Chi-Chi, riding on my go-kart around our huge yard and down the old dirt roads and paths that ran through the forests around my house. It would actually be another year before Santa delivered to me the greatest Christmas present I would ever receive: a real motorized go-kart. But my monkey Chi-Chi only existed in my young creative mind. I would make up stories about some mischief in a tree, or us messing with the neighbor’s chickens, or just wallowing in some mudhole. Everyone in class would howl with laughter. After that, my many stories were generally well received but the class favorites, the ones most requested, were always those about me, Chi-Chi and the go-kart.

My story telling went along just fine until Mrs. Mckewen’s fourth grade class when a few days before Halloween, she assigned those of us who would participate in show and tell that week to make it related to Halloween. The story I told went something like this:

“Well, so, one day, it was just before Halloween, I was heading home just before dusk from Tommy Patterson’s house several miles away. Since I was running late, I took a short-cut I knew through the woods. It was a well-worn path that went through Mr. Ferral’s land and cut off a big corner of maybe a half mile or so where Satin’s Creek Road made a T at Brown’s Chappel Road. I knew it well.

“Daylight was rapidly fading into the west, dancing shadows of giant trees swaying in an ambivalent breeze, loomed long and dark as nighttime pursued me. I hurried along, bouncing across the steppingstones that traversed Satin’s Creek. Then, just a little further down the trail, I was crossing over an old dried-up branch of the creek that only ran during the rainy season then started to climb up the far side bank.

“Suddenly, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye that startled me. There in the dimming light, I could barely make-out the form of an animal moving slowly around just up the dry gully of the creek bed to my right. Since it appeared to be too small for a dog or something that might

attack me, I sneaked cautiously up on it then recognized by its big bushy tail, it was a raccoon. It appeared to be feasting on something which I figured would be a dead dog or deer, so I decided to have a closer look. As I slowly approached, the coon turned, hissed viciously at me, then scampered away into the forest.

“As long as I may live, I’ll never erase the picture from my mind of what I saw lying there in that ditch. On its back not more than ten feet away was a deteriorating dead body. I stood there paralyzed, feeling sick to my stomach by the stench of death and the ghoulish, gruesome sight.

“It was a small person I took to be a young boy from his short dark hair, ragged blue jeans and T-shirt. He looked to be about my age. I could see the place where the raccoon had been gnawing away the cheek. The lips were totally gone, leaving the bare teeth in a nasty, snarling grin. The white glazed-over left eye was opened wide as if it was staring up to the sky waiting for something. But the other eye had fallen out of its socket and was lying there on the corpse’s cheek and jawbone where the flesh had been devoured right down to the bones.

“At the end of the only arm I could see, the flesh on the hand and fingers had rotted or had also been gnawed away exposing its bare, white-knuckle bones that glistened in the fading light. The ground around the corpse was dark brown and red, that I surmised to be from dried blood that had some time ago drained from the body.

“Being entranced, something intriguing, or maybe just my sick curiosity drew me closer for a better view. My hands, knees, my entire body shook as if it had just emerged from a freezing cold pond. Still, I took a couple of steps forward, though my every thought was screaming for me to turn and run! Run as fast as I could, as far away from there as I could get.

“That’s when the head slowly began to rise-up, then turn slightly toward me until the one eye looked squarely into my eyes. Suddenly, the neck cracked sickly as the head became detached and rolled into the ditch and away from the torso down the slight incline of the creek bed toward me then stopped about four feet away, facing me, taunting me. But the dislodged eyeball that had been on the cheek bone, kept rolling until it stopped at my feet, staring up at me.

“That’s when I saw another raccoon crawl out from under the back of the chest area and scamper off into the forest as the body that had been lying on the ‘coon sank back into the trench. This shocked me back to my senses as

I screamed bloody murder and lit out down the trail as fast as my nine-year-old legs could take me.

“When I arrived home, I told my mother and daddy what I had encountered, and Daddy called the sheriff. There were several men from the sheriff’s office carrying big flashlights that followed daddy and me back along the path that night. When we arrived at the branch where I had seen the corpse, it was gone. Nothing was there except the big splotch of red and brown blood where the boy had been lying. Nothing else was discovered except prints of a young boy’s bare feet in the sandy dirt walking up the dry creek bed.”

You know after that, for reasons I could never understand, none of my teachers ever let me do show and tell again.

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“There are worse crimes than
burning books. One of them is not
reading them.”

—Ray Bradbury



FRIENDS FOREVER

Graphite on Paper

11" x 14"

Andrew Tyson

Andrew Tyson is an oft-published, self-taught artist for BAJ.
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CALL THEM BY THEIR NAMES

Susan Fox

The small delivery van, a sickly, faded green, jogged to a stop across from a wooden building that would have been unremarkable if it hadn't had racks of electrified barbed wire spinning out from both sides of it. Sabine leaned back in the driver's seat and closed her eyes. She was vibrating from the trip, and from nervousness. The longer she sat, the more she felt the vibration. Abruptly, she swung open the door and got out. It was a dismal day, cold and dark, not so much raining as oozing some clammy unbreathable mixture of water and air. She was glad for her gabardine cape and the heavy Red Cross veil that reached to her waist. Her uniform, her refuge. Gripping her nurse's bag, she turned and crossed the road.

Inside the Agde guardhouse three uniformed French cops were playing cards by an iron stove. A fourth sat at the long counter that divided the room, filling out papers. The space was warm and bright, but Sabine pulled her cape closer around her. The card players went back to their game as soon as they checked her out. The guard at the counter shot her a look of hostile inquiry. These men were used to social workers.

Self-righteous interfering fools, butting in with their demands, making as much trouble as they could, and for what? What did they really think they were accomplishing in a place like this? They ought to be looking to their own safety, these people. They were most of them Jews, weren't they? Sabine stood at the door, meeting their contempt with cold disdain. She'd expected to be afraid, but their hostility aroused such rebellious strength in her that she felt—her small body squared off in its massive cape and her face set vigilant—as if she were in command in this room full of French military police. She waited. And waited.

Yes? said the man at the counter finally, his eyes narrowing. She waited another moment, then crossed to him. Without looking or fumbling, she took a sheaf of papers out of her bag and set them on the counter just far enough from the guard that he had to reach for them. One of the card players rose from his game and came over.

"The Prefecture sent me," Sabine said, her heavy Polish accent rounding out her words and giving them weight. "I work with the OSE."

The guard on duty read the top paper. "Five of them," he said to his colleague. "What a prize."

"Five less to bury," the card player smirked, and went back to his game.

Sabine, impassive, waited. The duty guard played with the papers, shuffled them officiously, pretended to challenge their validity. A little theater on this boring day. He read mockingly. “Sabine Zlatin. What kind of name is that?”

“It is the name of a citizen of France.” All the men laughed. Let them. Miron’s success on the farm had won the Zlatins their citizenship papers, for all that was worth now. She was, technically, as French as these ignorant provincials. “And your name is?” she asked.

“My name is none of your business,” the guard growled, turning back to her papers. He set aside every other page, stamped each of the remaining ones with a brisk punch and handed them back to her. “Through there.” He gestured to the back door and turned away.

Sabine checked the papers one by one, slowly, and put them into her bag. “Thank you,” she said with a parody of politeness. In her own good time, she crossed the room and went out. The sleety cold was disorienting after the light and heat of the guardhouse. The scene before her was more disorienting still. Fifty makeshift wooden barracks, in groups of five, stretched across acres of half-frozen mud. The only signs of life were a single smoking chimney in the central group, and the distant form of a skeletal young woman struggling across the field with a bucket. From the way she tried to hold the bucket away from her, tried to avoid being splashed by its contents (and failed, she was so thin and weak), Sabine guessed what she was doing. Step by laborious step the woman made her way to an isolated shack. When she went through the door, Sabine, a hundred yards away and transfixed by the struggle, thought she could smell the latrine. Nothing else moved. There were no sounds. Five thousand people lived in the Agde barracks, but the camp, except for one active chimney and one valiant wraith, looked deserted, unreal. Sabine pulled herself together. She had work to do.

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Susan Fox’s CALL THEM BY THEIR NAMES is an excerpt from the full-length novel of the same name, winner of the 2023 Hackney Literary Awards best-novel prize.

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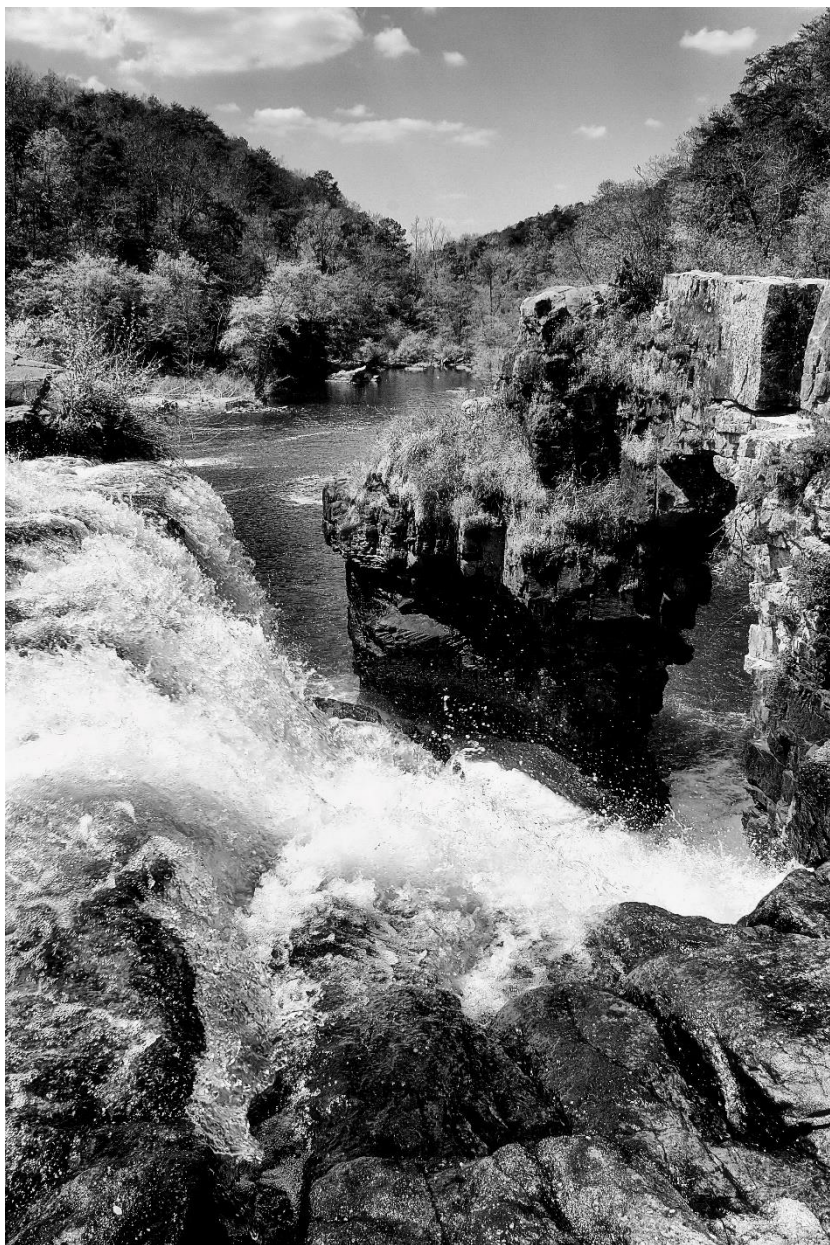
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