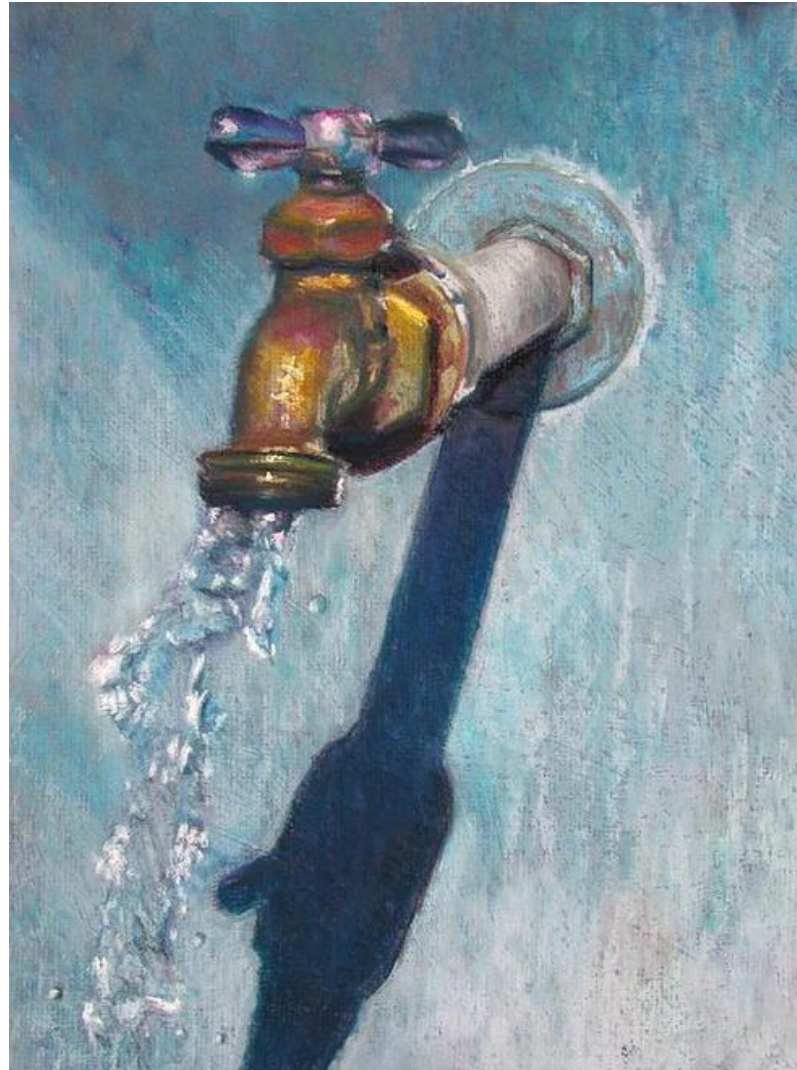


# Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 15 Issue 1



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

\$6.00

# Birmingham Arts Journal

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**Front Cover: CRYSTAL CLEAR** – 12” x 16” – Pastel – *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](mailto:cynansam@att.net)

**Back Cover: ASHVAMEDHA** – 36” x 48” – Acrylic on Canvas -- *Ashvamedha represents a historic ritual to gain power in the kingdom of India and to increase respect for the king. A horse was freed to roam for one year, accompanied by the king's warriors. The artist, Niranjan Gowda, was born and raised in India but now calls Alabama home. He is a dentist, epidemiologist, and artist. His passion for art is driven by the world that surrounds us and the simple things in life. He seeks to capture beauty and express his feelings through his work.* [niranjan.gwd@gmail.com](mailto:niranjan.gwd@gmail.com)

## RIVER OF FORGETTING

Cary Groner – 1<sup>st</sup> Place Novel – 2017 Hackney Literary Awards – Excerpt from EXILES

### PROLOGUE

The girl is leaving the house and her father has turned away from her so that she cannot see his face. She wants to go to him, but someone is pulling her by the hand, a woman she doesn't know, a woman whose hand is so much bigger than hers that her own hand nearly disappears inside its great fingery mass of calloused flesh. The woman's hips move at eye level ahead of the girl, rolling full inside a rustling dark dress, as she is tugged along out of the smoky house into cold, bright morning. She walks as quickly as she can to keep up, and she is crying, she realizes now, as the air chills her tears against the raw skin of her face and her eyes sting from it.

There is a car, she is in a car, and she watches out the back window as her house shrinks and shrinks until the dust from the road erases it, as if the house has dissolved into the red dust that blows across the fields. She is still crying, and the woman tells her that's enough, enough now, and even though the girl understands what's expected of her, she can't stop. The woman smells of cooked onions and sweat and something rank the girl doesn't know, smells so vile that the girl feels nausea stirring her guts. She fears that if she vomits the woman will toss her from the car, so she fights it down, breathes through her mouth so she doesn't have to smell, trains her eyes on the mountains outside the window and takes deep, gulping breaths. The breaths beat back the sickness in her stomach and after a while she stops crying.

Later, they are on wooden seats, surrounded by metal and glass, in some kind of compartment that rocks along as the land outside rolls by. There are children screaming, grownups shouting, and sudden eruptions of laughter, the deep barking laughter of men and the shrieking howl of women. Eventually, these die down and there is more shouting, then after a time there is silence. The woman who pulled her out of her house sits next to her, doing something with her hands, two shiny sticks and yarn. She is knitting, that's the word, the girl knows the word, a ridiculous word. The woman smells the same as ever and the girl wonders again if she will be sick. She finds that she can slide the window open a little, so she does. She's afraid the woman will stop her, but the woman says nothing, just keeps knitting.

At night, the lights of towns pass in the distance and the woman snores, there in her hard seat beside the girl, emitting her smells of onions and rankness. Occasionally the woman farts without even waking, and the girl briefly fears she might die from the gas like the soldiers in the war, before the smell blows out the window. She wishes she had her knife; if she did, she'd stab this woman, but it's not

in her pocket. She doesn't sleep; she watches the towns, wonders who lives in them, wonders if she's being taken to such a place, little lights amid great vast darkness.

The moon rises, first the color of blood, later the color of bone.

At dawn she can't watch anymore, and the land outside and the inside of the train merge and grow dim and dissolve, and finally she sleeps. Later, when she awakens, she lies slumped oddly on the hard seat, her head against the wall of the train car, her neck stiff and sore. A small blanket has been placed over her and the window is shut. The woman has gone, and for a moment the girl wonders if she can escape the train and walk home. She has some idea of how many hours they've traveled but no sense of the distance crossed. She stirs, finds her shoes, pulls down her coat from the overhead, but then she's frightened at the prospect of such a long journey alone, afraid too of the braying adults on the train, and so even though she doesn't know the woman and hates all her smells, she sits frozen in fear on the seat, wishing the woman would come back. Soon enough she does and sees that the girl is awake. Look here, she says, and she has rolls and butter and jam wrapped in paper. She unfolds the paper on the wooden seat between them and lays everything out. She produces a small knife and carves off butter and spreads it on the bread, then dips the knife into the jam so that some butter is now in the jam, then she lifts it all out and spreads the jam too, and they eat. The girl is ravenous, the sickness in her stomach has been routed by hunger pangs, and she eats greedily, licking butter and jam from her fingers.

The food gives her courage, and she finally asks the woman who she is. The woman smiles and says it doesn't matter, you won't know me very long, you'll forget me the way you forget a dog in the road, and the girl nearly smiles but won't allow herself to. Where are we going? she asks, and the woman says nothing at first because she is chewing. When she has swallowed, the girl asks again, and the woman says, "You won't mind it much, I don't imagine, given what you've left behind," and the girl has no idea what she means and says she wants to go home. That's where I'm taking you, says the woman, and then she finishes her part of the bread, leaving the girl a little. The girl is still hungry, so she finishes her bread and butter and jam, and even though she doesn't understand the woman, doesn't see how you can be taken from home and go home at the same time, she is tired again, she has barely slept, and she's sick of asking questions that get answers she can't comprehend. She asks if there is a toilet and the woman says yes, then the woman takes her by the hand and shows her where it is. Inside the small room of the toilet it smells even worse than the woman smells, and there is no window.

Another day passes like this, another night, and then as the sun rises the train crosses a broad brown river on a bridge of interwoven steel bars painted the bright

green of lichen. A blinding orange band from the sun seems to ignite the water and the girl blinks and looks away. There now, says the woman, best to forget everything and start fresh, if I was young that's what I'd do. They enter a city where tall brick buildings puff steam into the pale morning air. The train slows on its clacking tracks and pulls into a great stone station, jerks to a halt, hisses like the huge hinged snake it is. The woman takes the girl's hand again and leads her out of the compartment and down the aisle.

Now you'll see, she says, but the girl can tell this isn't home, it's too warm even in the morning and the air is thick and moist, and she begins to cry again, and the woman, who has slept almost as little as the girl, whose patience has grown thin, tells her to be quiet if she knows what's good for her. The girl just cries harder, though, because she doesn't know what this means, she doesn't know what's good for her, she never has. The woman pulls her along and they step off the train into the warm light and there are people there the girl doesn't know. Everything stops for a moment as she looks at the couple and they look at her, and then it starts again when the woman tugs her forward, leads her to them.

There, she's yours now, she's cried herself dry as a stick, and best of luck to you, the woman says, and the man gives her money.

.....

*Cary Groner's debut novel, Exiles, was a Chicago Tribune "best book" of 2011. His short stories have won numerous awards Cary received his MFA degree from the University of Arizona in 2009. He lives and teaches in the San Francisco Bay area. [carygroner@gmail.com](mailto:carygroner@gmail.com)*

*"I lived half my life in the atmosphere driven by Soviet propaganda. The golden principle was: If you repeat a lie a hundred times it becomes the truth."*

—Vera Jourova

## **A DEER KILL**

Gordon Ommen

Heart pounding, I shoot  
and feel the deep thud.

I move to where she lies,  
eject the spent cartridge

and rest my gun  
on her panting belly.

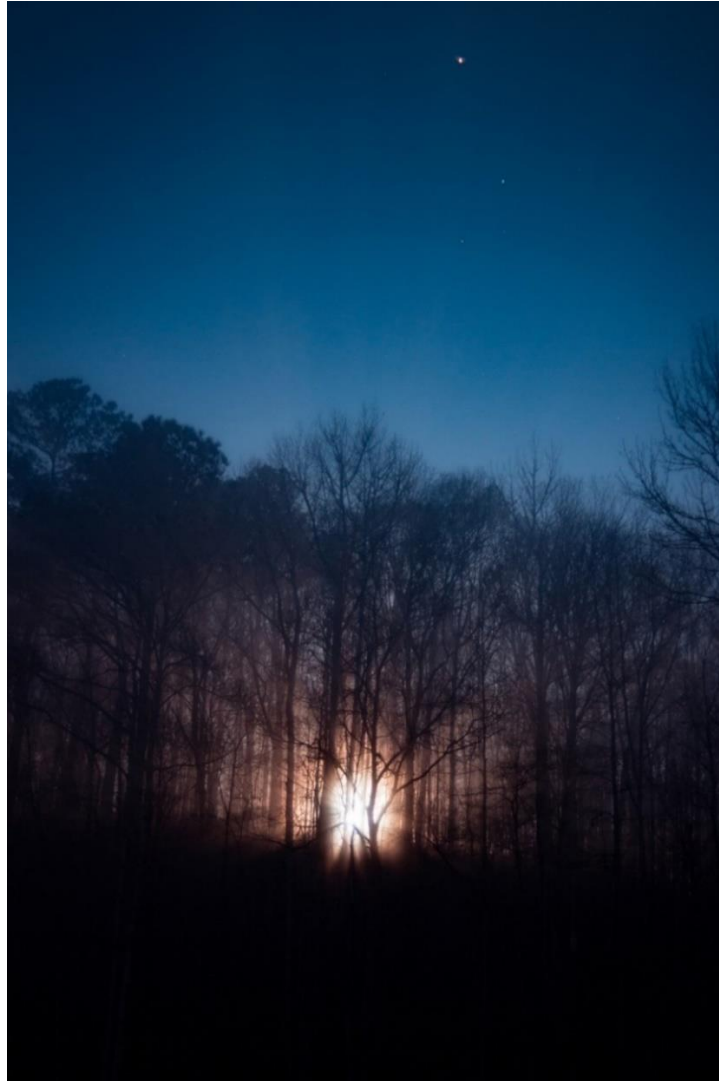
We're both quiet.  
And near-to-still.

I watch as her blood drains;  
time and place become life –

taken back and released,  
it finds an unspoken space

inside me  
and I grow stronger.  
.....

*Gordon Ommen, a finalist for the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2007, is currently working on his first full-length collection. He lives with his wife and two dogs in Bear Lake, MN. [ommengordan@gmail.com](mailto:ommengordan@gmail.com)*



## MOONSET

Josh Thompson

Digital Photography

Photo taken in Delta, AL

*Josh Thompson is a long-time videographer and photographer based in Oxford, AL. His mission is to Explore the Universe, One Frame at a Time, with travel all over the world.*

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## CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Michael A. Calvert

Blackboards were black, chalk was white, and ink pens did not hold ink, at least not until the metal nibs attached to wood holders were dipped into ink wells. Green blackboards, yellow chalk, and ballpoint pens were still years in the future when I was in the second grade in 1950.

Rows of heavily varnished desks were mounted on black cast iron frames replete with curlicues. Students from prior decades had gained limited immortality by scratching their initials into desktops. Their gouges made it difficult to copy the flowing cursive letters that marched across the front of the room above the blackboard. Floors reflected sunlight from tall windows and emitted the smell of layers of wax applied since the High Victorian structure was built in 1903.

When we filed into our classroom at St. Leo's in the morning, Donnie McDermott stood knee deep in trash in the metal waste basket. His face was just inches from the corner of the classroom and his head was bowed, but he cut his eyes toward us and offered a smirk as we passed by him

From across the room Sister Ignatius said, "You're right where you belong Donnie McDermott. I should tell Mr. Scoggins to take you out to the dumpster with the trash. When your father brought you in early, he said he gave you a good taste of his belt last night and well he should've."

The blackboard was filled with repetitions of Donnie's promise, I will not harm my neighbor. His lines began from as high as he could reach down to the chalk tray. When Elga Kramer took her seat, Pete and I noticed that that both of her braids were two inches shorter. We exchanged knowing glances with slight nods. In our minds, we replayed Donnie's crime. We dared not look at each other lest we dissolve in giggles.

On the previous afternoon, Donnie, who sat between Pete and me in the back of the room, had deftly grasped one of Elga Kramer's long blonde braids, unbeknownst to her. He looked at each of us with a conspiratorial grin spread across his freckled face. Then he suspended the end of the braid over his inkwell and looked at each of us. Pete and I both frowned, shook our heads and mouthed "No," but Donnie nodded slowly and dipped the blonde braid into the black ink. When it stopped dripping, he gently placed it on the back of Elga's navy blue jumper.

Donnie turned slowly, looked at Pete and then me, and grinned mischievously. Pete and I raised our eyebrows, clamped hands over our mouths, and unsuccessfully tried to stifle laughter. Fortunately, the lunch bell drowned out our snickering, and saved us from Sister Ignatius' wrath. We speculated about his punishment as we tromped down the stairs. The next morning, we found him in the trash can.



After lunch, Donnie had been released from the waste can, and we began practicing our letters. Donnie erased his pledges of good behavior, and Sister demonstrated these curves with a sweeping arm movement and covered the blackboard with large cursive letters. We dipped our nibs in inkwells in the corner of our desks, and Sister Ignatius told us repeatedly to move our entire arms to make capital A's and O's in the form of large circles on our lined paper.

"Put on your thinking caps, children," said Sister. "Now we'll see who practiced the sums assigned for homework last night." She held up a beige flash card with two numbers, one above the other, and a plus sign. Mike O'Brien repeatedly thrust his raised hand forward. Sister called his name, and he leapt to his feet and shouted out the answer.

"Correct," Sister affirmed as she flipped the card and revealed the answer. "Here's another one," as she held up another flashcard.

"Sister, Sister," John Bauman said, insistently waving his hand high. Sister pointed at him, and he stood and delivered the right sum.

This continued until Sister said, "OK. Now I want to hear from the 'turtles' and turned toward the kids seated by the windows." The best students, the "rabbits," sat near the hallway. When she flashed the next card toward the turtles, Donnie's hand shot up. Although she seemed a bit surprised, Sister nodded to him.

"Can I be excused?"

"Oh, Donnie, I thought you had studied your sums last night. And, as I have told you children many times before, I can excuse you, but what you should ask is 'May I be excused.' Anyway, you may go to the boys' room."

Donnie bolted toward the hallway with apparent urgency. I suspected that he just wanted to escape his boredom and roam the halls. The turtles' mostly incorrect guesses and unknowing shrugs confirmed Sister's expectation that most of the them had not studied their sums.

Sister moved on to the next subject, spelling. After a flurry of activity to locate our spelling books on the shelf beneath our seats and open them on our desks, we reviewed last week's new words, spelling each one aloud following Sister's exaggerated pronunciation of each syllable.

"Now, children, one of our new words is 'receive' and there's a rule for it and words like it."

She wrote the word and the rule on the blackboard. "Receive, i before e, except after c." She underlined the two letters. "Let's say that over and over." Our singsong recitation was devoid of enthusiasm, but Sister seemed pleased with the lesson.

Mike O'Brien's hand flagged Sister until she asked, "What is it, Mike?"

“What about science? It has e before i after a c?”

“Oh, Mike, every rule has an exception. Just remember the rule. OK?”

“Yes, Sister. Can I erase the board for you?” She nodded.

Donnie casually strolled in the back door with a smile on his face and hands in his pocket. Sister Ignatius scowled at him. He had been gone a long time. Maybe she was irritated because she had forgotten about him and his mocking smile.

As he walked past me, he deftly slipped a note on my desk as he looked forward.

Then Sister rose up to her full height, pointed to my desk, and said “I saw that note, Donnie McDermott. Michael, please share Donnie’s note with the class.”

I quickly glanced at it, and said “Do I have to?” I really didn’t want to. “Please?” I implored.

“Just read it, Michael. Now!”

“Well, OK, but I didn’t write this. It says, ‘Sister Ignatius has an ugly horse face.’”

“You’re in for it now, Mr. McDermott. So disrespectful! You’re getting the ruler. Get up here.”

She grabbed the thick pine ruler from her desk drawer. Donnie turned to face us and stood next to Sister. He was still smiling. For once, we were all paying attention.

“Hold out your hands, knuckles up. I don’t want to hear a whimper out of you. Do you understand?”

The ruler flashed down onto his knuckles. Sister repositioned her punishment instrument, and the ruler came down three more times. We gasped with each blow. Donnie silently winced and jerked each time the ruler fell, but he managed a slight smile for us as he walked to his seat rubbing his red knuckles.

“That was awful,” I said with a shudder at recess.

“Yeah, but he didn’t cry,” Pete replied. “He wasn’t even ashamed of himself. Donnie lives across the street from us. He’s always in trouble.”

“Is it his idea of fun? Doesn’t he care if he gets punished?” I asked, my face scrunched in disbelief.

“My Dad says Donnie will end up in the state penitentiary,” said Pete.

.....

*Michael A. Calvert, a native of Ohio, is a retired urban planner in Birmingham, AL. He is pursuing memoir and short-story writing and has been published previously in the Birmingham Arts Journal. [michaelalancalvert@yahoo.com](mailto:michaelalancalvert@yahoo.com)*

## THE LIGHT WILL BRING YOU HOME

Bruce Alford

It's raining and it's dark outside today. Branches fat with wet crash in sandy mud beside this house in Mobile Alabama, the rainiest place in the nation.

We know why they are sleepless in Seattle, Eves sobbing Adam saying lord so much incest and rain making dead wood more than dead I open blinds. Rain slaps windows. Sirens all over the city.

Where is the one I love? "She floated by," wrote Tennyson—His poem, The Lady of Shalott, would probably be too accentual today—like the engine of my car.

*Your love left for work before light and will be gone for hours so try to forget the weather, take breakfast with calm this close-curtained morning, eat scrambled eggs and drink your coffee.*

In Spain, some woman turns a thousand candles then watches a romance and enjoys a conversation with her love over a glass of wine. She goes out for a walk. Holding his hand, she feels the rain.

I am afraid of mosquitoes, loose limbs, faithlessness

And that cloud. That cloud was full of darkness, but it gave light.

.....

*Bruce Alford lived in Mobile, AL in 2007, when Mobile was the rainiest place in the U.S.*

**bruceealford@gmail.com**

## LUCILLE ENJOYED PLAYING THE GUITAR

David Flynn

Lucille enjoyed playing the guitar, although she only knew three chords: G, C and D. She would sit on her balcony diddling with the notes for an hour at a time. G, C, D; G, C, D.

Until there was a knock on her door.

“Can’t you play something else?” the man asked. He didn’t even introduce himself. “G, C, D; G, C, D. I know what you’re doing.”

“That’s all I know,” she told the beefy faced, middle-aged, surprisingly tall man in the blue jeans and cowboy shirt.

“Can’t you at least try D, C, G; D, C, G. It’s driving me nuts. I live next door.”

“Oh, you’re the one that plays his damn keyboard day and night. Fiddle, fiddle, fiddle. I don’t think you know any chords. I don’t think you know any songs.”

“Is that so? I’m a professional musician. You’ve got . . .”

Lucille slammed the door on him. She clomped out to the balcony, sat on the lawn chair and played her guitar: G, C, D; D, C, G; C, G, D; G, D, C; every combination she could think of. She played loud as she could too.

Through her living room wall came random notes on a keyboard, then more random notes at a much higher volume.

“Froggy went a courting! He did ride, uh huh!” She made sure her voice screeched loud as it could. Lucille knew she couldn’t hit a note with her voice. One night at karaoke in the Broken Spoke bar the manager asked her to stop singing “Crazy.”

That shut him up.

A knock at the door.

“You have got the worse voice I have ever heard,” the same man said. “I am going to call the police.”

“Call whoever you want,” she said. “You have less talent than a frog.”

“Damn. If you weren’t good looking, you’d be against the law.”

“Damn. If you weren’t a type I like, big and tall, I’d punch you in the mouth.”

And a year and a half later at their wedding, they stood at the altar, she in a burgundy cocktail dress and he in a gray business suit, because they both

were way past white, and after the I do's, and after the crowd of friends and job acquaintances in the church applauded, he sat at the church organ, and she picked up her guitar.

“I love you truly, truly dear!” she screeched, playing G, C, D.

He fiddled with the notes because he never bothered to learn the tune.

They smiled at each other, deeply in love.

.....

David Flynn's literary publications total more than two hundred. His background includes reporter for a daily newspaper, editor of a commercial magazine, and teacher. [www.davidflynnbooks.com](http://www.davidflynnbooks.com)

[david.flynn.writer@hushmail.com](mailto:david.flynn.writer@hushmail.com)



## ILLNESS

Carey Link

In my country of colorless labyrinths there are no windows or doors.

The ground shifts without warning.

Language is a code of syllables without strings.

The promise of a moment is intertwined with poison.

.....

*Carey Link is a retired Alabama civil servant, currently working toward a Masters' Degree in Counseling at Faulkner University. Carey's poetry has previously appeared in POEM and the BIRMINGHAM POETRY REVIEW among other publications. She has published two books, WHAT IT MEANS TO CLIMB A TREE (Finishing Line Press) and AWAKENING TO HOLES IN THE ARC OF SUN (Mule on a Ferris Wheel). [careylpoet@icloud.com](mailto:careylpoet@icloud.com)*

## GOING TO CHURCH

Stephen House

I am trying to explain to the policeman what happened in the church a few minutes ago, and it is so difficult to get across to him what I actually mean.

“Don’t you understand me? I didn’t do anything wrong, so why are you still picking on me?” He looks at me.

“So?” I ask. No reply.

Ok. I decide that I’ll dance; freak him out a bit, but then I think that it’s probably in my best interest to stand still, breathe, lean against the wall, blank it out like I’ve learnt to do, and give the dance thing a big miss.

“I have not slept since I was last here by the church. That’s why all that happened in there,” I tell the cop. “Not a single wink.”

“Why?” he asks me.

“Why? Because I haven’t got anywhere to sleep; that’s why! The hip hop boys disappeared when you came along here, didn’t they; with their music; my music too. But the old lady with her boxes and bags didn’t. No way! She just stays outside the bank with all her stuff, begging from these pretty passing people.”

The cop looks over to her. “Yes, that’s where she lives. I bet she got thrown out of her room too. You guys have got no compassion; not a pinch of it.” He stares at me, and I go silent.

The father has come out of the church now, in his white robes and all.

“Hey father, I’ve never seen you in the real before; outside of your holy shell,” I shout over to him.

And now my policeman is over there talking to him about me; having a major conference about my low-life existence and nothing future... I bet.

I think about the just gone incident; go through it in my mind step by step. All I did in that church was copy what a woman was doing. I sat next to her, prayed like her, and followed her worship routine.

“If she can do it, then why can’t I?” I call to the father and cop.

My policeman comes back to me and starts to give me the rules.

“It’s a bloody church,” I say, as he begins to lecture me. “I only have a few places that I can go to, to get off the street and escape the cold for a while, and this beautiful, old church is one of them. It’s for everyone, apparently; Christians and loonies and those guys living under the bridge, and the girls standing in the lane behind the pub; all of us doing life as tough as can be. And you too! It must be. Isn’t going to church for all of us, mate?”

The father smiles over to me. I know he somehow knows what I yell is true. I wave, and he waves back, and then he calls my cop away from me. Here they go again!

And I stand here like a hopeless, old loser with no say in the world at all, waiting for my sentence from them; knocked down even lower than I am (if that is possible), by this situation. I'm no guiltier than you guys!

Where's my bag gone? Whew! It's here next to me, and my pills and bottle of port are still in it, and thank God for that, for I need some relief from this ongoing, homeless caper, that no matter what that judgmental dude in a suit said to me yesterday, I do not believe I entirely brought upon myself. Ill health and a run of bad luck had something to do with it.

The cop comes back to me. He tells me that the father says that I can go in there again, and that if I need to eat there is a bus at the back of the church at 6 o' clock, and that he can arrange a shower for me.

"Do I stink?" I ask. No answer, which I'm assuming means yes. He says that it's ok to sleep outside the church, if I have nowhere else to go, but I must roll up my blankets and move on in the morning. (And where am I meant to move on to?) And if I want to start going to church to pray, I have to watch my behavior in there.

"I will, father. I promise," I shout over to him.

"Not scare people," the policeman says.

"I won't!"

"Not copy what other people do and keep away from that woman if she's in there. You need to behave properly," he says to me.

"Yeah, well she terrified me too, screaming out like that, when I did absolutely nothing at all to harm her. I'm a friendly man, honestly. Go and ask that guy over there in the cheese shop. He thinks I'm ok! He sometimes gives me out of date cheese to eat."

The cop nods, walks away and leaves me alone.

"Bye," I call out. No reply.

A bloke I know and the old lady are curled around each other, fast asleep outside the bank, and so I slip away quickly. (They've been causing me big problems lately.).

I leave them both there and walk towards the river to look for a place to drink my bottle; maybe take a pill and have a sleep under the bridge, if there aren't any violent crazies or addicts there.

But I'll be back this way later. I like going to church, and the father said that I can. Maybe it will help me—somehow. And who knows, the kind father might help me too. I trust him. I wish someone would give me a hand.

I might be in a total mess right now, and be viewed as hopeless, but I'm not an idiot. There are some things I am aware of. And I definitely know that if my situation doesn't improve soon—I'm not long left for this world.

.....

*Stephen has won many awards for his stories and performances. He lives in Australia.*

**stephenjeffreyhouse@gmail.com**



## **SUMMER CYCLE - A PROSE POEM OF 24 HOURS**

*Laine Cunningham - 2017 Hackney Literary Award - 2nd Place National Poetry*

The sticky scent of cherry blossoms along the Potomac River. Picnic pests struggling,  
enshrined,

beneath plastic wrap. An allowance spent on sidewalk entrepreneurial schemes. The  
dull electric

sting of catfish whiskers before a fresh-caught meal. Mosquito welts, rosy. Crickets  
chipping

away the dusk. Bath time shrieking and suds. Aloe to cool the sunlight enshrined  
beneath the

skin. Desperate birdsong signaling the new dawn.

.....

*Laine Cunningham spurs readers to consider their place in the world and the changes they can enact.*

*Her novels received the Hackney Literary Award, the James Jones Literary Society Fellowship,*

*Writer's Digest's 2016 Ebook award, and honors from national and international art councils. She*

*has received many other awards for her work. **tlcnine@gmail.com***



## SUPERHEROES

Brenda Burton

Fate whispers to the warrior  
“You cannot withstand the storm.”  
And the warrior whispers back  
“I am the storm.”

Jake Remington

“Come In,” the sign on the door read, “It’s Cool Inside.”

The drug store *cum* soda fountain in our small farming town was the only business in town with air conditioning and, after walking a mile or so in the relentless Georgia sun, it was a welcome respite.

My brother and sister would head immediately for the stools at the soda fountain, eternally optimistic that our mother would allow us to have a cherry Coke. We had stern injunctions not to ask for anything before we even crossed the threshold, but my younger siblings operated on the premise if they were perched atop a stool, looking thirsty and behaving themselves, she’d relent.

I was much too mature for that childish strategy. I was ten and, as the eldest child, had more experience with our mother. She was no pushover, and particularly skeptical of any sudden good manners or camaraderie between the three of us children. It was best to pretend indifference.

It wasn’t hard for me to ignore the temptations of the soda fountain. My real interest was in the rotating rack of comic books near the front door and given a choice I’d opt for a comic.

I’d saunter up to the rack and lackadaisically turn it, but not too quickly, so it wouldn’t screech, and peruse the comic books at my eye level. Little Lulu, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Blondie and Dagwood. I liked them all, but a little higher up, just high enough that I had to stand on tiptoe, were the comic books I was really interested in.

The Superheroes—Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash.

Most of my pocket money came from change I found in my grandmother’s settee. She allowed me to keep all I found, blessed saint that she was. Usually it was only pennies or a nickel, but occasionally I’d get lucky and find a dime. Tough luck for my uncles who found themselves short of change.

A nickel was enough to buy a single monthly issue, but each nickel was hard-won, and I had to choose carefully. The latest Superman edition came first, then Wonder

Woman, then Batman. Even then I sensed something dark and moody about Batman, while Superman was ever noble and uncomplicated.

Inevitably, I'd forego the cherry Coke and buy the comic, even if I had to use my own money.

I read them over and over, careful never to tear or crease a page. I'd read them to my brother and sister and show them the pictures, but they weren't allowed to hold them in their grubby little hands. And I stacked the comics up on my bedside table, so I could see them all at a glance. The birth of a bibliomaniac.

I made sure the comic books were safely hidden away underneath my bed when my best friend, Sandra, came for a sleepover. Superhero comics were what the cootie-ridden boys read, not girls, and Sandra was a girly-girl, blonde and pink and cupcakey. I was more like a corn muffin. She came with her pajamas, toothbrush, and dolls packed neatly into a child-sized pink suitcase; I put my pajamas in a paper grocery bag when I went to her house. She would have never understood that someone had to keep the world safe while she went about her girly business.

We played with dolls whenever she was around, and I morphed into my alias as a ten-year-old girl to be a part of her world, concerned with which ballgown her Revlon doll would wear or if Tiny Tears needed a diaper change. As soon as she left, I resumed my true identity and abandoned my dolls to their own devices. Out came my stack of comics and I returned to my secret world of issues and struggles bigger than my little world. After all, I'd read Heidi, so I knew there was a place called Switzerland, far away and very different from Georgia, and who was to say there hadn't been another place far away and called Krypton? The universe was a big place!

But now, years after my secret hoard of comic books has turned to dust, the big screen has come alive with the exploits of Superman, Ironman, Batman, Black Panther and Wonder Woman, and the evil-doings of Lex Luthor, Joker, Killmonger, Ares, and Zod. Ka-boom! and Pow! have been replaced with computer-generated chases through Gotham City or Metropolis, mega-explosions, and gadgets that even Batman never imagined. The comics writ large and loud and in HD.

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Brenda Burton works in a 9' x 10' room analyzing data for an insurance company and writing. She says she "doesn't get out much." In Hoover, AL, she spends spare time discussing Angry Birds and Spiderman with her grandsons. **moosie40@yahoo.com**

## SWINGING IN SAPLING PINES

Jeremy L. Hitt

My father would tell my brother and me  
How he used to swing in sapling pines  
To think of him as a child at play  
Is now a thought hard to think  
He'd play all day and away he would roam  
To some forested place far from his home  
Making his ascent to top of tree boughs  
He'd sway back and forth touching the ground  
Back, forth, back and forth  
Stretching the sapling like bending a bow  
Back, forth, back and forth  
Swaying and bending as far as could go  
Then as the bough would bend from ground to sky  
He would swoosh from low back up to high  
And jumping real hard from his tree to next  
An exchange was made like a bird to nest  
But as times change and as trees do grow  
Our father was now bent like a bow  
Older than then now slower and frail  
It captivated our minds how he once did sail  
From tree to tree a child at play  
Not a care in the world but free each day  
To think of him swinging through sky so high  
Now slower still than days gone by  
My father would tell my brother and me  
How he once swung high in sapling pines

.....

*Jeremy Hitt is a husband and father to four beautiful children. He loves nothing more than to be outdoors hiking, biking, or just sitting around a fire pit with his family. They make their home smack dab in the middle between Tuscaloosa and Birmingham in the little community of Lake View.*

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## I OFTEN MISS MY OTHER SELF

Atraxura

Digitally Manipulated Photo

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

## THE HARRIED WRITING TEACHER

Kem Roper

Every day I feast on the literary equivalent of hot dogs and *Mountain Dew*—Freshman Comp and World Lit essays. They are as devoid of style, energy, passion, and insight as the former are lacking in nutrition and substance. My own writing sensibilities are dulled by the daily onslaught of sentences ravished by ill-placed punctuation, awkward phrases and words that don't exist. I spend hours poring over nonsense, trying to make two cents into enough sense to justify a passing score, until my brain goes numb, my eyes blur and I stumble to bed exhausted. I try to thumb through something that resembles real literature—I long for the beauty of Angelou, Morrison, Marquez or the smooth flow of non-fiction from any published author whose works stand at the ready on my nightstand: Brené Brown, Chrystal Evans Hurst, Valorie Burton. How I need their encouraging words to propel me forward, to tell me I can reach the goals I've set for myself.

But, alas! My eyelids are heavy, weighed down by a full day of catastrophes with apostrophes, and students stuck in stubborn lethargy. When I'm not navigating the murky waters of pathetic prose, there are plenty of pathetic people at my door, pedaling stories of far off lands to which they must travel and miss the quiz I'm giving in class tomorrow, or telling tales of sick relatives who passed away last week, which explains why they missed the paper that was due, not to mention the power outage which prevented them from turning in today's assignment, but not to worry if the pitiful pass on! The powers-that-be pass down their decrees for meetings before, during, and after classes, and if you can't make it your name is added to the dreaded "list".

So, here I stand, a writer teaching writing with my nose pressed against the glass, watching writers who write skipping happily through the lush landscape of publications and possibilities. "Look at them" I say to myself. "They're so happy—so *free*." Then the old saying comes to mind "those who can, do. Those who can't teach," and I wonder...

But, the truth is, we can't *because* we teach! And by the time we get to the end of the day and try to put two coherent words together, the only ones that come to mind are—*good night*.

.....

*Kem Roper, Assistant Professor of English at Oakwood University in Huntsville, AL, has worked in public relations, editing, and publishing. Her true love is writing and she's most passionate about expanding her writing career, starting with her blog, Books&Coffee, "a site for writers and wordies."*  
**booksandcoffee1.com kroper@oakwood.edu via myou.onmicrosoft.com**

**iii.**

Megan Beam

I speak the assembly of my flesh  
    into new  
    into the next degree of glory  
    into command of my world  
        mastery of my heart  
        benevolent sovereignty of my eye-expanding existence

Behold, O Western Ideal:  
    Your daughters, whom you have exiled  
        And who will be exiled no more

Behold, O Space,  
    Matter  
and Time:  
    Your beloved outlaws  
        Who will bow no more to your trickery

You may demand reign  
    over the conscience of creation

But

there exists a cavernous kingdom  
    betwixt limb and bone  
    into which your voice is compressed to naught but a hiss  
        absorbed into the swaying half moons  
        of my walking away

Protect your fragile tyranny  
    from the strength of my thighs  
    the curve of my silhouette  
    the roll and wave of my back

The boundary of your empire ends  
at the tenderness of my defense  
and the rage of my grace

I intend to last forever.

From within this pantheon  
I insulate your noise

And yet

beneath my skin remains porous  
so that light may pierce  
my coming  
and my going

The space I take up is my own  
to consume as I deem needed  
to relent as I deem time

I deserve to exist  
as I am.

.....

*Megan Beam is the founder of Birmingham-based writers workshop Les Conteurs, and adjunct instructor of both English and Religion classes at Gadsden State Community College in Gadsden, AL. She is currently working on the third installment of a six-book adventure series, The Last Beholder. [megan@vivelesconteurs.com](mailto:megan@vivelesconteurs.com)*

*"I just hope my epitaph isn't: She did the bare minimum."*

—Paula Poundstone

## ODE TO MY FALLEN ROOMMATE

Briana Marshall

She was sitting crisscross-applesauce on the floor in the small elementary school where I spent most of my childhood when I first I saw her. She had long curly brown hair, brown skin and an infectious smile. She talked a lot and used her hands every time she spoke. When she opened her mouth, the room fell silent to hear her latest story. She went by a name that was not her own, Ozzy. Ozzy introduced herself and I knew we were complete opposites. She was the color of sugar cookies and the butterscotch candies your grandma keeps in her purse. I, the color of cocoa with long black braids. I would have never known that from that moment on we would become sisters. Her home became my second place of residence and we began to speak a language only we could understand. We spent weekends at the mall and week days harassing classmates and rolling our eyes at homework assignments.

Years passed, and she dropped the nickname, cut her hair and made new friends. I changed my hair, learned to love and dove into my academics. High school came, and we hung out less and less, her friends were too loud for my liking and my friends were too uppity for hers. During our freshman year we made a vow to be roommates in college regardless of where the next four years would take us. We played volleyball together and roomed together at every tournament. We found that our similarities made it easy for us to live together. During high school, I was learning what it truly meant to have a sister. I, technically, do have a half-sister but all I ever learned from her is that absence speaks just as loudly as the words you keep in your throat.

Ozzy now went by Elizabeth and we reveled in the moments we spent together. We'd see each other in the hallways and after school at basketball games, she on the bleachers glowing with sisterly pride as I did cheer leading stunts on the gym floor. She was the sister I always prayed for but had to wait eleven years to receive and I was grateful for all that I was learning from our bond. Senior year came, and it was time to transition into the next part of our lives—College. She wanted to go to a school in Atlanta, I had decided on a small university in Alabama. The school she desired to go to didn't have my major and she wanted to live in the big city. As the summer after our senior year came to a close, I drove to her house often, helping her pack and plan out the design for her dorm room. On the last day of summer, we said our goodbyes, wiped the tears from our eyes and parted ways.

During Orientation Week, we called each other religiously, to talk about boys, classes, and all the new friends we were making. Our weekly phone-call dates turned



into monthly phone call dates as classes became harder, maintaining new friendships became taxing and the boys in our lives began to require more attention.

I never felt our relationship shift, just the circumstances surrounding our personal lives. The conversations became shorter and less frequent as our monthly phone call dates began to occur once every 3-4 months in between short “I miss you” text messages. She found a Southern man with a thick accent who took her out dancing and rubbed her feet in-between her political science classes. I found a Southern man with a thick accent who let me eat off his plate and sleep in his bed. She and I laughed at their similarities while admiring their differences. She was still my butterscotch queen, I remained her sweet chocolate bar.

The summer came, and I found myself in the Southern heat as I stayed in Alabama to work. She went back home to Maryland to work and spend time with her family. We talked less during the summer since we had to keep up with our men and the friends we made at school. Daily, my mom would ask how she was and it became harder to remember as we talked less and less. Days turned into weeks, before we knew it, it had been three months and we had only spoken a handful of times.

The week before we both started our Sophomore year of college she called me crying. The relationship she had with the man she loved had ended and I was the only person she knew to call. What do you do when your sister’s world is falling apart? What do you do when the person you lean on is falling? You book the first flight home. You bring chocolates and roses to their front door. You buy the largest stuffed bear you can find, and you keep extra tissues in your pockets. Even though we barely talked all summer and I hadn’t seen her in over a year, she taught me what sisterly love is and it has nothing to do with the frequency of your conversations or the distance between your two bodies.

Sisterly love is persistent, binding, and life altering. We talked for days and watched the mornings turn to nights. We counted the sunsets and talked about how much we missed each other. We fantasized about forcing our future husbands to allow us to live next to each other and raise our kids together, she is already Aunty Lizzy to my unborn children and I am Aunty Bri to hers. The week came to an end and we had to say goodbye again, we held each other as we cried and promised to never let a week pass without speaking again.

.....

*Briana Marshall attends Oakwood University in Huntsville AL, where she pursues both an Applied Mathematics and a Civil Engineering degree. Her grandfather was an English and Language professor who fueled her love for the English language and writing.*

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## BARN IN RAIN

Digital Photograph  
Virginia Gilbert

*Virginia Gilbert writes poetry and haiku from her home in Madison, AL. She graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Ph.D. program in creative writing/English.*

*Her publications include New Voices in American Poetry, Prairie Schooner, North American Review, and Poem.*

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## TRAVELER OF SPACE

Keith Burkholder

Noah is a space traveler. He has traveled far and wide in the solar system. He even has planets that are his favorite to travel to.

The universe is a vast place. Noah understands this concept well in his travels. He is from Earth and has traveled millions of miles over in space.

The friendliest planet in the solar system is Jupiter. The people there care about one another and wars do not take place on that planet.

He has traveled far and wide in his space pod. He has loved his travels so much that he has put off marriage and having a family.

The solar system is so massive that it feels like you are totally alone while in space. Noah understands this concept very well in his travels.

There are people who love to travel in space and others who do not. Traveling in space as Noah does is very risky. He has the chance of running into black holes or vacuums.

He came close one time when he almost went into a black hole but got out of it unscathed. That experience really woke him to how unpredictable traveling space can be.

He has really few friends in life. They are mostly acquaintances. This is how he prefers to live his life.

He has never really needed friends. This is how he prefers to live his life and it doesn't bother him whatsoever.

There are people with a lot of friends and others with a few and others with none. This is just the way it goes for people on Earth at least.

He loves his home planet a lot but loves to travel to Jupiter as much as he can. He loves the whole friendly feeling of that world. As of recently, there have never been any wars there.

Noah loves to travel around Earth as well. He has traveled to a lot of countries and has experienced many different cultures as well.

The traveling he has done has really made him happy. He likes to experience life as he knows it by traveling wherever he can in life.

The solar system will always fascinate him. He loves it a lot and knows that he can meet all kinds of people no matter where he goes.

He has met a lot of people in his life but has no friends that he can call true to him. He travels too much to really want any in general.

I wish him well as he travels in space. He knows this domain so well and he is happy with his life as a space traveler.

All he can do is what makes him happy. His life will continue to be great and I hope he continues to meet other people and just enjoy the solar system with the passion he truly has now and until he dies many, many years from now.

.....

*Keith Burkholder has been published in Creative Juices, Sol Magazine, Trellis Magazine, Foliate Oak Literary Journal, New Delta Review, Poetry Quarterly, and Scarlet Leaf Review. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in statistics and mathematics from SUNY at Buffalo.*  
**kkbmathdude@aol.com**

## **HIGHWAY 78 (NOCTURNE)**

Paul Pruitt, Jr.

West of Lincoln Diner north  
Of Vincent's store, the trucks  
Must stop—the brakes squealing  
Music through air thick scented

With snowball and peach blooms.  
Pouring over fields onto my sill,  
Brake-sounds color the home noises  
Of a nighttime world—cicadas buzzing,

Joists creaking, leaves brushing screens,  
Soft thuds of footfalls, steady humming  
Of the Frigidaire—ripples of tranquility,  
Unnoticed melodies of sleep.

A moment's break, then the big dance  
Of shifting gears: louder-then-lower,  
Faster-and-prouder, as the trucks take  
The blacktop climb to Birmingham.

.....

*Paul Pruitt, Jr. has been writing poetry "a long time." He has contributed poetry to student magazines at Jacksonville State and William and Mary, and to a 1980-volume titled 3 O'clock at the Pines, a collection of works by former students of JSU's Dr. William J. Calvert, as well as other anthologies. Paul is a librarian at the University of Alabama School of Law. ppruitt@law.ua.edu*

## STEPPING OUT - THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

Aerin Briscoe - 2018 Winner - Glenn Feldman Historical Essay Competition

“Annie, please take this plate over to Mr. Raymond,” my mom said as she started getting my little brother, Joey, ready for a bath. Turns out our neighbor, Mrs. Rosa Parks, was arrested on her way home from work that night. My mother gave up part of her dinner to make sure our neighbor had a hot meal. Those of us who lived in Cleveland Court watched out for each other. We were like a big family. Black neighborhoods are like that, because if we don’t take of one another no one else will!

That was a Thursday. On Sunday our pastor called a special meeting. It was on December 4, 1955. I was excited because I thought it was going to be the “Hanging of the Greens” where we decorate the church for Christmas. Instead it was a long, boring meeting for grownups about a city-wide protest against what happened to our neighbor. Everyone agreed to boycott the busses in Montgomery. By not riding the busses, we could try to change the way white people treated us.

On the first day of the boycott, it was raining hard. My mother had to get up and leave very early because she had to walk four miles to the Air Force base where she worked in the commissary. Our dad was away, too. He worked for the L&N as a Pullman Porter and rode the train for days at a time. With mom and dad gone, I had to make my own breakfast. When my mother makes cinnamon toast it looks so easy, but it’s hard for me. I have trouble spreading the butter out. My big sister, Mary, and I also had to get our little brother ready for school, and make his breakfast and lunch, too. We walked to school as usual, but it was strange without saying good-bye to mom.

That became our new routine. The boycott had started out as one day only, but then it kept going. Mom had to keep getting up early and got home late. Mary and I had to do the things our mom used to do. We had to walk to the grocery store and do the shopping. We also had to take care of Joey. I helped him with his homework, while our sister started dinner or cleaned house.

When Christmas came I was so happy! Dad was home for a whole week, so we didn’t have to work as hard. I got new shoes for Christmas, which was exciting, but since we had to walk to church they gave me blisters.

The boycott went on past winter and into the spring. I thought walking to church was bad at Christmas but now it was hot, too. On Easter Sunday, I had a pretty dress. My mom said I looked nice, but I didn't feel pretty. I was all hot and sweaty.

Something funny happened, though, as we walked the two miles to Dexter Avenue Church. Everyone was walking to church in their best clothes. It was like an Easter parade. We all waved to the empty city busses as they went by! The boycott was hard on everyone. It lasted 381 days, but because we did it together I think it made my family and community stronger.

.....

*Aerin Briscoe is a fourth-grade student at Southminster Day School in Vestavia Hills, AL. The Dr. Glenn Feldman Historical Essay Competition is dedicated to the memory of its namesake, a professor of History at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.*



## **OLD STREET**

Lisa Oestreich  
Digital Photograph

*Lisa Oestreich, a recently retired physician, is exploring her creative side, pursuing her passion of documenting light, form, and texture in various artistic expressions.*

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## A PRECIPICE

Ben Johnson

A black abyss yawns beneath me  
I step closer, slipping  
I look back at the cliff, there's nothing to hold on to.

A middle-aged goofball with gray hair walks my way, unafraid.  
He stops to make a stupid gay joke before moving on  
I want to slap him, but God help me, I'm laughing!

A woman with a garden-spade in one hand and a notebook in the other, says she's  
not worried, that I'll be OK. I feel myself being pulled over the edge but for a  
moment, I believe her.

I think of the gentlest cynic I know,  
he once told me "Sadness is the water to grow your tree."  
I wonder, maybe he's right.

I see a girl who looks like she can fly,  
she puts her hand on my shoulder, I sense a firm resolve.  
"You are loved" she tells me, her face is filled with conviction.

I hear the voices of a British lady who can never remember song lyrics and an old  
southerner who pretends to be a 19th century Bavarian noble. God, they're  
annoying, but filled with the promise of love and security.

I close my eyes  
and feel all of these people surrounding me.

I step back from the edge.

.....

*Benjamin Ross (Ben) Johnson was born in Birmingham, AL., where he lived until the age of ten. He is now a filmmaker living in Seattle, WA, where he and his partner, Alexander Sylvester, have an independent film production company. [www.freshcupfilms.com](http://www.freshcupfilms.com)*



### **SERVING GIRL**

Pamela Copeland  
Oil on Gallery-Wrapped Canvas  
24" 30"

*Pamela Wesley Copeland relies on expressive brushstrokes and bold color to capture her experiences. In 2014, her work was selected to be included in the MAG Regions Bank Show, Red Clay Survey, LaGrange National XXVIII, Energen Art Show, SAAG National Juried Show, ArtsRevive Roots and Wings Show, and AWF Flora and Fauna Show. She exhibits at Gallery One in Montgomery, AL.*  
**pamcope@yahoo.com**



## QUEEN

Sage Webb – 2<sup>nd</sup> Place - Hackney Literary Awards - National Story

Our building sits on Randolph Street, so cabs are never in short supply, but Yvonne's recent love affair with Lyft has left me standing outside the building, staring at my phone, watching the little car icon that represents Daniyal in a blue Nissan Versa. It creeps toward me and makes a stiff perfectly ninety-degree left turn. He's getting close. The little icon exhumes some lost, superannuated memory. As I stare at that tiny car, I'm fifteen again and from beneath the Christmas tree I pull a bright red package with a green bow, white, hand-cut snowflakes tied to and hanging from it. After tearing away the paper, I realize my father has made me the first boy in the neighborhood to own Pong. I am happy in a way I have not been happy in a long, long time. And then I am not. Then I am simply on Randolph Street again.

"Where are you going, sir?" Daniyal asks after the icon arrives in front of my building and I open the door to the Versa.

"251 East Huron. Northwestern Memorial. I thought the phone told you that. It doesn't tell you that?"

"Oh, it tells me. I just like to double check. Make sure we're all on the same page."

"Oh. Makes sense."

I fumble to buckle the seatbelt in a backseat too small to accommodate any properly nourished adult.

"It's my first time trying this. Lyft. My wife told me to try it since it's such a short trip. She loves this stuff and keeps pushing me to learn to use it—says I'll save a fortune."

"Perhaps." He looks at me in the rearview mirror.

"Would you like music?" He reaches toward the stereo. "What do you like?"

"Oh, I'm fine without it. A little quiet is OK." I inhale canned pine forest and the solitude I interrupted when I slid into the vehicle.

The light turns red and we sit in the blue car in the darkness. Daniyal stares straight out the windshield, his hands at ten and two. I watch a woman on a bike rock back and forth beside my window, her bright red jacket pricking my eyes but also taking me back to that wrapping paper and Pong all those long, long, lost and gone years ago.

The light changes and Daniyal pulls across the intersection. I shift in my confines.

Yvonne has texted: "You make it into a Lyft." When she texts, she feels she can omit punctuation. That bothers me.

"Yes," I reply. I add, "Very small car." I want her to know I'm OK for now.

A black hatchback has replaced the bike. In its back window, it has a sticker that reads “Crazy Cat Lady.” I am relieved that silent Daniyal picked me up and not someone with a sticker like that.

“Is the temperature OK? Would you like some more heat?” Daniyal glances up at the mirror again.

“Oh, no. Not at all. Perfectly fine back here. Thank you.”

The river gets closer. It should take only three or four minutes to get to the hospital. If everything goes as the doctor said, I should be home by eight. Yvonne will have some wine for me. Maybe she’ll let me nip at the Macallan. That nice 21 Marcus gave me for my birthday. I’ll feel better after a drink or two.

“Where are you from, Daniyal?” My voice lifts the weight of the car’s interior off me a little.

“Did you grow up in the city?”

“Oh, no. I’m from Sidon. Lebanon.”

“Sidon? I was in Beirut in ’82.”

Another memory uncurls from its place of slumber.

“Just a wet-behind-the-ears second lieutenant out of Annapolis.” I shake my head at this second bit of detritus for the evening.

“It was a bad time,” Daniyal says.

Daniyal turns right and we stop. We are sitting in a pool of darkness with red brake-light water lilies all around us.

“I’m sorry. The bridge is up.”

“It appears so, doesn’t it? Is it supposed to be up at this hour?”

“I don’t think so. I haven’t seen it up like this at night, at least not this time of year, that I can remember.”

Maybe I should have put some of that Macallan in a flask, but I certainly wasn’t expecting this.

“There were things I liked about it over there,” I say to the window, watching a pair of women on the sidewalk with shopping bags in their hands and a boy about ten walking between them. “I liked the music. I listened to a lot of the local music, bought records and brought them back with me. It was good stuff.”

Beside us, on the sidewalk, sits a row of dark cubes topped by a sign that reads “Newspapers.” I can’t remember the last time I held an actual newspaper. Oh, the terror Pong kicked off.

“I remember listening to a woman singer,” I say, trying to remember the name. “Her name was something like Fairuz. I liked her. A lot. Very pretty voice.”

“You know Fairuz?” Daniyal’s eyes look back from the mirror again.

“Yes. I liked her. I remember a song--” I have to stop and think, as with recalling the woman singer’s name.

I turn from the window and the landscape of the obsolete newspaper rack to place my hand against my jaw and temple.

“It was called--” It takes me a minute. At first, I can only see that circle bouncing back and forth between the Pong paddles. Then I am outside a bar in the hinterlands of Anne Arundel County. And then I remember.

“It was called ‘*Habaytak Bisayf*.’ Am I saying that right?”

“‘*Habaytak Bisayf*? Yes, perfectly. That is one of my favorite songs. They say she has the voice of an angel.” Now, it’s Daniyal’s smile that fills the mirror.

“Yes, that song is very beautiful.”

This was supposed to be a five-minute ride. Yet somehow, it has taken me back to Lebanon and I am a twenty-two-year-old kid again, and it’s all so, so far back: back before all the nonsense, the anger, the infidelities big and small on both sides; long before Yvonne and the occasional description of “second wife.” Back before what they call success, and long, long before unrecognized, undiagnosed anything lying in wait in brain tissue and heartbreaks. Back closer to the happiness of Pong and love songs and memories of home. I am newly wed to Margaret—azure-eyed Margaret of quick temper and languid seduction—and full of hope and plans.

Outside the Versa, a young man balances on one of those so-called hoverboards, bags of what I think are groceries slung over his shoulders. I remember how I thought it romantic and gallant to carry Margaret’s picture in my pocket through Beirut, how that first kiss tingled and breathed when I returned home, how I told her she had seen the Levant from my pocket.

“What other music do you listen to?” I ask Daniyal.

“Queen. I love Queen. We will rock you!”

“Freddie Mercury. He was talented. Creative.”

“Oh, yes,” Daniyal says.

“I should have listened to more Queen in the eighties. It’s good stuff.” I sigh. “Would’ve been better than all that Lebanese music I brought back. My daughter got old enough to put those records on and now she dances at restaurants down in South Bend. If it’d been Queen, maybe she would’ve played volleyball or tennis.”

“Your daughter dances to Lebanese music?”

“Yes.” I sigh a second time and shake my head. “She performs dinner shows at Middle Eastern restaurants. She’s going to school down there but spends all my money on custom-made costumes from Turkey and traveling all over to take dance workshops. She dances to that woman Fairuz’s songs. I’ve seen her, but I don’t like it. Something about it makes me uncomfortable. Her stepmom loves it. Sabrina—my daughter—she didn’t get along with Yvonne—my wife—at first. Sabrina was upset I’d remarried. But it was time. Now the two

of them are right as rain. Yvonne drives down there and takes the dance workshops Sabrina teaches. Yvonne's all into the whole silly thing too."

I hear Daniyal chuckle.

"Would you like to hear '*Habaytak Bisayf*'? I have it here." He touches his phone.

"Sure."

"*Be ayam el bard, be ayam el sheti.*" That voice fills the Versa. "*We el raseef bohayra, we el sharea gharee'a.*"

"I know it's a love song," I say. "Someone told me once what it means, but I don't remember. What does it mean?"

"It's winter. Cold. And the sidewalks are flooded like a lake," Daniyal answers. "This girl is waiting for him. He told her to wait, but he has gone away. He's forgotten her, but she is pining for him. She loved him in the summer and waited for him in the winter. His eyes are summer. Hers are winter. And their reunion, 'oh my love,' is beyond summer and beyond winter."

He clears his throat.

"A stranger passes and gives her a message," he continues translating. Then another cough. "The boy wrote it with his tears. The message, the letters of it, were lost. The days passed. The years made them strangers. And winter erased the letters in the message."

He tries to clear his throat yet again, blows his nose on a tissue from the colored, patterned box sitting on the passenger seat, and then lifts a bottle of water from that seat. The voice from the phone fades and then rises again in a new rhythm with a new story.

"Sad," I say.

"Yes, very sad."

"It sounds sad even just listening to it—not knowing the words."

"It was my wife's favorite song," Daniyal says. "She sang along, and I always had to tell her to stop—that I would never leave her or write her messages without letters in them. But she would laugh and keep singing and dance in circles. Not like your daughter," he tries to laugh, "just in our home."

He pauses, takes another sip of water from the bottle. "But once she danced on the beach. Did you ever go to Sidon?"

"Yes, actually, I did once."

"You saw the castle on the sea?"

"Yes, the crusaders' fortress. Yes, I remember that." I see myself a young Marine officer watching the sun set behind a medieval castle on the Mediterranean, Margaret's picture in my pocket.

"You know what, Daniyal, would you mind putting on a little more heat back here now?"

“Of course.”

“Thank you.”

“The castle is beautiful, is it not?” Daniyal’s hands rub up and down the steering wheel, fingers flexing in and out.

“Yes, very impressive.”

“We were there one evening when we were kids. Just married. Young and happy and she danced and sang. She danced on the sand. She had her arms flung out.” Daniyal imitates a gesture of abandon.

He takes another drink of water.

“She—my wife—had long black hair, like the sky over the sea at night.”

I see him turn and look at the walk along the river and at the bridge. I know he sees his wife dancing on the beach some long-lost night ago. He wheezes against the nagging grip on his throat and blows his nose again. I pretend not to notice why.

“We—we had the *Ginnaz*, the prayers, and then the bread forty days after that,” he says, eyes and attention on the other side of the window, of the world. “I pray she is with our Holy Mother now.”

The Versa has warmed up, perhaps too much now, and the only thing I can say is, “I’m sorry for your loss.” The tone of my voice is too low.

“Oh no. This is life. Death is a part of life.”

“She was very young?” I don’t know why I ask.

“Twenty when she was struck and went into the coma,” he replies. “We had gone to Beirut because she was having some sickness we could not explain. We thought we could do better at a hospital in Beirut and my uncle told us to come stay with his family there. But then the Israeli bombing started. You know how it was. You were there. And she was walking one day....”

He robs the box of another of its white squares of Kleenex.

“Excuse me.”

“Oh, no. And you don’t have to--”

“No, it is good to remember,” he insists. “She had just turned twenty-two when she left us. I sat with her every day. We read together: poems and Scripture and stories. She loved to read.”

He smiles into that mirror.

“And I sang to her. I sang her Fairuz. Every day we were together. My uncle took care of me, and I went to the hospital every day.”

The block has returned to his throat.

“She never woke up after the bomb. But it didn’t matter. I just wanted to sit beside her. The last day, that afternoon, I was reading to her, and you know,” he looks at me in the mirror, waits to catch my eyes with his, “she squeezed my hand. Truly. I was holding her hand and she squeezed mine tightly then and then she was gone. I pray God lets me take that memory to my own deathbed.”

He crosses himself, touching his right shoulder and then his left.

The Nissan is quiet.

Outside the windows, we see the bridge start to lower.

“Yvonne is Catholic,” I blurt out. “I will tell her to say a prayer. It is good to pray for the dead. What was your wife’s name?”

“Marina.” He inhales and exhales a few times. “Thank you.”

“Yvonne will light a candle on Sunday.”

“Thank you.”

The bridge finds its mate from the other side of the river and the traffic loosens, the knot of cars released to flow and rediscover their rhythm.

From the river, it is only a few minutes to the hospital. Daniyal pulls up in front of the doors to which I direct him.

“Wait,” he says as I begin to thank him for the ride. “Are you ill? Are you here because you are ill? I’ll park and walk in with you.”

He presses the button on his dash to activate his hazard lights.

“You shouldn’t go in alone. No one should go to a hospital alone.” He turns the car off and opens his door.

“Oh, no, thank you, but I’m only going in to attend to some paperwork,” I tell him. “No need to worry, but I do appreciate your kindness. Thank you.”

“OK then. Good luck and listen to Fairuz once in a while, and then to Freddie Mercury and Queen.” He smiles into the mirror a last time and I catch him catching something in my face.

“Here, sir.” He reaches for his box and hands me a tissue I hadn’t realized I needed. He keeps looking. “Here,” he repeats and hands me the box.

“Thank you.” I grope to connect with the box and take it from him without looking up from my other hand resting on the inside of the door of the Versa. “Thank you for the ride. And the music.”

I shut the door of the Nissan and approach the hospital entrance, the windows in the gray building amber in the night. I haven't been here in a long time and maybe the light of the windows isn't amber. Maybe it's marigold or saffron. Regardless, it's the color of a world I have avoided for a long, long time. But this is the last time.

On the other side of the windows, I follow the doctor's white coat down a hallway. Margaret lies in the bed as she has for nineteen months. The ball of the world has bounced back and forth between the paddles of man's machinations, but nothing true or real has altered the monochrome, the antiseptic scent of affliction, the simple shapes on the screen of existence. The ventilator makes Margaret's chest rise and fall. The doctor hands me a clipboard and I nod and sign. The Kleenex box dangles in my left hand as I pass the board back; I don't want to use the tissues, so I don't try to speak. I am sure I am gone and out of the building before Margaret is gone. It is very dark now and I walk toward St. Clair Street.

On Sunday, I'll ask Yvonne to light two candles. She'll understand.

On St. Clair, I flag down a cab for the trip home.

.....

*A former attorney, Sage Webb is now a novelist and award-winning writer of short stories. She writes in Kemah, TX. [www.sagewebb.com](http://www.sagewebb.com)*

*“There is a big difference between being ignorant  
and being stupid.”*

—Sonia Sotomayor

## CHASING DEER

Scott T. Hutchinson

The white flags of tail flare up  
from tawny winter bodies, startled  
at the edge of field and the blossom  
of balsam that marks the forest's beginning.  
My voice-trained retriever stays on command  
but her eyes beg. Her heart still listens  
to old hunger, to origins deeper  
than domesticity. But, she chooses me  
as pack leader, alpha, even though  
I have dressed her in a coat  
of hunter orange to protect her  
from the triggers of random human impulse  
while we're about on our woodland stroll. Still,  
even I can sniff at the air, catch the musk of fear  
bounding through the cold, a contagion of  
instinct that whimpers for release. She is  
my packmate. We have come far. But today  
there are traces of snow cradling hoof prints,  
the red squirrels bark at the passing  
beneath their beechnut and birch, and with love  
I toss aside my holding stare and tear away  
that synthetic madness assaulting the eyes and landscape,  
we shift and pitch the human world behind us, our voices  
in duet howl as we race into the balsam  
trying to catch that wild dash of freedom  
diminishing over the hill.

.....

*Scott T. Hutchinson's work has appeared in The Chattahoochee Review, The Southern Review, and The Georgia Review. New work is forthcoming in Kestrel, Louisiana Literature, On the Veranda, Cumberland River Review, and Split Rock Review.*

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## LAMB

Rebecca Lee

It was like a dead piece of meat. The most natural thing in the world, they said.  
Under-cooked lamb.

At first, I tried not to think about it. It was too small to notice and for a while, no one did. Life was ordinary. Days were filled with a kind of normal that didn't need to be scheduled. I had lunch at the sandwich shop just below my office. I went to the movies. I went on dates.

“What do you do for a living?” They always asked first.

“Marketing.” They'd nod.

And then it started to grow. It wasn't all at once and it didn't set off alarms. I was the right age. It was natural. ‘Stomach’ became ‘belly’ and tank tops became layered. I felt myself starting to spoil.

I smiled at my current date sitting across the table. He quickly uncorked the wine.

“Have you always lived here?” He poured two glasses.

My mother told me I was the best thing that ever happened to her. My best friend's mother said the same to her. I wanted to know where the other mothers lived. Did they all live in faraway towns where rural schools only taught abstinence? Did they live here? In Trumbull?

“No,” I took a large gulp. “Not always.”

I ached for the days when all my clothing fit. When my chest could disappear into sports bras. You'll get to the glowing stage. Women gave advice in public bathrooms. It's instinctual.

“Where did you grow up?” My date perused the menu, but only for a second. His mind was made up from the start.

“Here and there. We moved around a lot.”

In the upstairs hall closet of my mother's old house, there was a cardboard box filled with photographs. People I had never met mixed with people I had known my whole life, piled on top of one another. A photograph of my parents standing in front of their garden always sifted to the top. My mother wore a house dress, her large belly protruding. My father gazed lovingly at the car.

“That must be hard on a kid.” My date looked at me for a long time.

“I didn't mind so much. There were always new kids to make friends with.”

It's different when it's your child. The second-time mothers at the prenatal yoga studio reassured me. Your kid isn't like the others. I knew I was supposed to love it immediately. It was a gift. A person. I stared at our closed menus.

"Can I take your order?" A waitress in her twenties smiled with the kind of enthusiasm that only looks right on college kids. She pocketed both menus in her apron. My date ordered right away. I never bothered to look at the list.

"Are you still deciding?" The waitress hesitated.

"No." I felt my stomach start to churn. Something was growling. Immediately I placed both hands around my middle and sighed with relief. It was only hunger pains.

"I'll have the lamb."

.....

*Rebecca Lee has published in a variety of magazines and journals such as Able Muse, The British Medical Journal, Adbusters. She resides in Charlottesville, VA.*

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*"An actual physical object is worthy of preservation because it is there to remind us of what happened when, what happened where, and what when and where felt like in the palm of a hand."*

—Jim Reed

## DEAD WEATHER

Ethan Bethune

The strangeness  
Of watching  
The towns you grew up in  
Slowly age  
Like dead weather  
Coming up in your lungs  
The colors fade  
Like winter  
Always dragging  
The streets down  
No one ever gets ahead  
No one ever gets out  
You wear it  
Like leather  
And you age with it  
Maybe our stories  
Are all tied together  
Maybe this really is the winter of our discontent  
Did you drink it away  
Did you kill it away  
Did you find your way  
Somewhere  
you find your shelter  
You survive another day

Small towns with big hearts  
Big eyes  
Watching the world burn  
Living on the ashes  
Calling it welfare  
Believing it can build a future  
—  
Still I sit down  
I write anyway

.....

*Ethan is a 28-year-old writer of essays, poetry, and short stories. He lives in Alabama with his wife and their two shelter dogs, Simon and Garfunkel. Where they enjoy cooking, Netflix, and Jazz records. For more of his work go to **Regardingsamuel.com** **esbethune@gmail.com***

*“No occurrence is sole and solitary but is merely a repetition of a thing which has happened before, and perhaps often.”*

—Mark Twain



### **SPRING SUNSET**

Pastel on Sanded Wallis Paper

30" x 24"

*Lydia Randolph, a member of the Alabama Pastel Society, is a full-time artist and musician from North Alabama, where she lives, plays and works. [layaga@bellsouth.net](mailto:layaga@bellsouth.net)*

## CHANGING THINGS TO KEEP THEM FROM CHANGING

**Jim Reed**

Most mornings of my life are astoundingly similar. Even though each day is new and filled with discovery, chocked full of wonder and challenge, grimace and grin...each day is remarkably like each previous day.

I skim my right hand down the wrought iron banister of home front, left hand swinging bag and baggage of stuff to take to work. Upon the sidewalk or lawn or atop a bush is the morning paper, all snuggled up inside a clear sleeve, freshly pecked at by dew-dropped critters.

I pick up the package with now-freed right hand, stuff it under left arm, pull open the gate of our white picket fence. Only the gate does not want to open—I'm stating this as if the gate has free will and consciousness. Can gates decide whether to open?

On dry, rainless mornings, the gate swings free. Given an hour or two of precipitation, the wood expands just enough to make it stick. Grumbling and forcible exit follow.

Later in the day, at the shop, the tall wooden front door, itself a victim of humidity, groans and creaks quite loudly and hauntingly. This makes me grin and feel right at home. It causes customers to laugh or register alarm or give me free advice about how to fix creaking doors or preach to me about how I should get that thing fixed. Some customers even rush back to the door and force it closed in order to silence it.

I pretty much react the same each time, "You know, if that door ever stopped making that great sound, I would rig it to play a recording of the noise whenever opened. It has become part of the shop's ambience."

I make this statement just to test the customer's flexibility of attitude. Usually, the effect is, the customer looks again at the creaking door, relaxes and laughs, gives up worrying about something beyond all personal control, and decides to embrace the shop and its idiosyncrasies...thus returning to browsing and rumination.

The stubborn gate and protesting door serve to snap me out of my doldrums, force me to chuckle or snipe, jump-start me into the day's activities, be they excruciatingly routine or off-balancing wondrous.

One of my favorite books is *The Leopard*. One of my favorite quotes from the book sticks with me and guides me to this day, making me appreciate sameness and change with equal zeal.

"If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

—Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

*Jim Reed writes a weekly column/blog at [www.redclaydiary.com](http://www.redclaydiary.com) and produces a weekly podcast of his stories. He resides in Birmingham, AL. [jim@jimreedbooks.com](mailto:jim@jimreedbooks.com)*

## WHAT THE HOROSCOPE DIDN'T REVEAL

Richard Weaver

A time for beginnings, it said  
like a fortune cookie bursting forth  
with a stale prophecy. A period  
of excitement. A time to mull over  
the past. As if mulling  
was a pastime beyond apples.

Our mutual prediction leaves everything  
to be desired. It asks the obvious  
to support the miraculous.  
It promises us eclipse  
but illuminates nothing.  
Had it read:

You will meet a man whose lips  
will light fires to dwarf the sun.  
Your green eyes will see beyond  
the scattered stars in his.  
Each orbit will bring you closer.  
Each revolution will sing  
the endless story of your heart in his.

Or, today will be a good day to make  
promises your heart can keep.  
Do not venture further  
than the conjugation of Cupid and Psyche.  
Accept the stars as they evaporate  
into myth.

Or, a mutual friend will introduce you  
to the mirror of yourself.  
Remain calm. Don't assume  
that your body hasn't always known  
what his love reveals.  
The hand that reached  
across a table  
now rests like your heart  
in the fierce emptiness of the sky.

Richard Weaver resides in Baltimore's Inner Harbor where he volunteers with the Maryland Book Bank, acts as the archivist-at-large for a Jesuit college, and is a seasonal snowflake counter (unofficially). Recent poems have appeared in OxMag, Red Eft Review, Crack the Spine, Juxtaprose, Misfit, and Conjunctions. Forthcoming work in Clade Song, Dead Mule, & Magnolia Review. [whelkstar@gmail.com](mailto:whelkstar@gmail.com)

*“The more we erode language, the more we  
erode complex thought and the easier we are  
to control.”*

—Ramin Bahrani



## THE GULF EATS A RIVERKEEPER

Cheyenne Taylor – 2017 Hackney Literary Award – 2<sup>nd</sup> Place State Poetry

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

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

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

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

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

.....

*Cheyenne Taylor received her BA and MA degrees in English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and has worked as a public librarian, university writing tutor, and freelancer for the past two years. Her poems and reviews have appeared in The Cincinnati Review, Waccamaw, Southern Women's Journal, and Birmingham Poetry Review. [cheydaytaylor@gmail.com](mailto:cheydaytaylor@gmail.com)*



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