

# Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 15 Issue 2



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

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# Birmingham Arts Journal

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**Front Cover: SMOKEY MOUNTAIN CASCADE.** Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, Gatlinburg, TN. Digital Photograph  
*Ty Evans lives in Birmingham, AL, and enjoys taking pictures in his spare time. His other interests include collecting antique books, playing the guitar, and traveling.*

### **Back Cover: VINCENT VAN GOGH AT AGE 13**

Acrylic on Paper - *Ramey Channell began drawing, painting, creating folk art and crafts, as well as writing poetry and fiction, in her early teens. She works in oils, pastels, colored pencil, and mixed media, drawing inspiration from the rich and unique environment and heritage of her childhood. Her artist statement: "I want people to have a deep and pleasurable response to my work: a response of the mind and heart."* [ramey2001@aol.com](mailto:ramey2001@aol.com)

# CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER

Stephen R. Edmondson - 1<sup>st</sup> Place, Short Story - 2017 - Hackney Literary Awards

I'm no lawyer, never have been. Still, I've worked alongside some of the best. Nor am I a true Bible student, but I have read therein the story of "Climbing Jacob's Ladder." Between these two areas of my knowledge, there is a tale to be told. I suppose there's a moral to all of it. I just don't know yet.

I was going with attorney Rip Stone on my first assignment with him as his court reporter. We arrived in Lawrenceville 45 minutes early, time to grab a quick breakfast at the local Omelet Shoppe. We had left early, too early, being cautious to arrive on time for the out-of-town job. On the way up Rip had studied a sheaf of papers and notes, occasionally trying a question on me and then asking for my opinion. He was a brand-new attorney, fresh out of law school, with a bit of clerking with a Federal judge. Now this morning he was using my years of paralegal experience to hone his questions. They needed it.

Breakfast finished, we rose to leave.

"Rhett, we'll need to split this bill. must never give the appearance of favoritism in my legal practice nor my personal life." I thought, knew this to be a bit naive, yet refreshing. I nodded my agreement. After ten years of being a court reporter, I probably knew his upcoming duty better than he did. Still, I needed to be gentle with him, keep his confidence up.

Little did I ever expect to go where this little act, this little breakfast, led us. No one, absolutely no one, could have predicted its trajectory, its final mention, even that it would be a bit part of modern history.

I had met Rip some weeks back, by introduction from another lawyer in his firm that had been a client of mine for several years. I suppose asking for me to be assigned to his deposition gave him a bit of confidence. I was ten years older than Rip, less educated, more experienced, and perhaps more cynical about the law.

The deposition went well, and we chatted easily on the way home, now under no pressure of an impending assignment. In the coming months we did several depositions, finding it easy to work together. Sometimes we would meet for lunch the day of or an hour before a deposition, and he would have questions for me.

One of those days, weeks later, we were waiting for a witness to arrive. As usual, Rip was studying his notes, his outline for the deposition. Suddenly he looked up and straight at me. "How do I handle an irate farmer, trying to collect on his homeowner's insurance for a tractor accident?"

"Well, Rip, you have to respect him from word one and gain his confidence. Talk to him about the hard times farmers have these days of rising prices,

government intrusion, bad weather. Try to see it through his eyes first. Tell him you understand. You're a likeable sort for your age, be friends with him."

Rip rolled his eyes. "Me be friends with a 63-year-old farmer? Me, a city boy from Mobile?"

"Well, show him some respect at least. He's due that much."

The day's deposition went well, as well as could be expected. I had the thought as I sat there writing, here I am, with a young man that looks straight out of *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, with a farmer that appears to be from a Grant Wood painting. Going to be hard to bridge this, build trust here.

We did a debriefing on the way home. I suppose half of what I told him was confidence building stuff, to help him next time.

As the months went by, Rip and I became pretty good friends. One late fall day he asked me if I could come over on a Saturday morning to help him rebuild a stoop for the back door of his house. The morning came soon, and I showed up at his place. His pert but warmly intelligent wife Belinda had coffee, pastries, and fresh fruit waiting for us. The little house was immaculate, as was the yard. I figured the house to be from the '50s, judging by its style and from what the rest of the neighborhood looked like. It was the perfect starter home for a young professional. I wondered what they would do in this little cottage when the first baby came along. It wasn't to be that long, really.

This little building job was Step One on Climbing Jacob's Ladder.

The months rolled along and soon three years had passed since I first met Rip. Now he picked up tabs when we traveled, and he got a little meaner with his deposition targets. He was maturing as a modern attorney. Principles weren't quite as strong, being gently moved aside in lieu of pragmatism at times. Yet, he was an unusually honest lawyer, and I was proud to work for him, be associated with him.

Now came that inevitable mention of the next big project. Rip had gotten moved up the pecking order in the law firm, looked to be on his way to an eventual partnership. A little more status now, a step up.

"Rhett, what do you think about helping me design a new deck for our house?"

The baby had come along, and indeed they did need new space. They had bought a more modern ranch-style house in a neighborhood that was obviously some level up in sophistication. Extra bedroom and bath now; larger, shaded lot.

Had I known then how many steps there were on Climbing Jacob's Ladder, I might have tempered my enthusiasm, my interest in helping. This deck was Step Two. I thought about going back to the Bible and studying Jacob more closely.

I agreed to his request, and we spent the first Saturday morning on the project developing a plan for the new deck. Going to have a railing with a sit-on top.

Some angles, not all just a wooden rectangle. I wrote up a materials list, gave it to him, and asked him to call me when the lumber came, and he was ready to begin.

It wasn't long until start date. The construction ran into three whole Saturdays and several shorter work times. I had been a contractor in a prior lifetime, so this was sort of basic. Yet I felt it was necessary to have him believe most of the plan, design, materials were his own selections and that he managed the construction.

We finished finally, Rip being rather particular on the little details. I suggested the staining and sealing would be a job he and wife Belinda could handle. The finished deck was quite handsome. They invited me to an afternoon party of sorts, even though I was a lesser one in the legal field.

Rip was gracious in introducing me. "Rhett is my court reporter. He helped me on some of the design and construction." Then I would get patted on the head much as an obedient underling. Okay by me. He was now a good friend, and I was making good money from his assignments.

I suppose I should have seen the inevitable. Short years later they were buying a new house again to match his new promotion, his new status in the firm. Though not an equity partner, he was now over a half dozen younger attorneys. As I hoped, Rip had all of them use my firm for their court reporting.

Higher up the totem pole, Rip became Randy and then Randall Stone, a bit more formal. Now well on his way, on the "Partnership Track," he needed a new home, bigger, newer, in a better suburban setting. Of course I planned the new deck, quite expansive as well expensive this time, as he envisioned social settings with young lawyer parties, all crowding around with their drinks and canapés. He gave me a larger budget proposal this time and encouraged me to submit a couple of designs for his review.

This deck was quite large, probably 600 square feet, with built-in benches, a swing, frames to support greenery, and some soft indirect lighting for atmosphere. Rip, or Randall I should say now, brought in his brother from out of town to help. It was quite a project. I got one of my friends to come on several Saturdays, as this was heavy and tiring work. The finished job was quite impressive, and they threw a big late afternoon party to celebrate and show it off. I wasn't invited this time, I suppose because I was "only a court reporter." That was Step Three on Jacob's Ladder.

Life went on for a few years. Randall and wife had the second baby and then he was told he was going to be promoted to full partner in the growing firm with a total of about 50 lesser types reporting to him, you know, the ones that did the work. When the partnership was to be effective, Randy and family would need a new home to reflect their status. Strangely enough, he needed a new name also. He was now to be Randall J. Stone.

“Rhett, could you come by our new place and give me some ideas on an outdoor entertainment area?” I agreed, knowing he meant a yet fancier deck than before. I was beginning to feel a little anxious about attacking a project of this size in a gated community. Yes, a gated community. “Have to keep the children safe you know, so many dangers lurking out there.”

I spent another Saturday morning looking over the lot, making notes, couching my questions as suggestions. He thanked me, and I left.

“I’ll get back with you in a few days.” Just that cryptic parting. I think I felt a bit relieved.

A month or so later Randall’s secretary called my office manager to relay a message from him, “Come by my office, Tuesday afternoon. Tell Charlene that I am expecting you.” It seemed he now had a gated office space also, a first level of defense with the receptionist, and then the second layer, a knowing paralegal Charlene would admit me only with his prior approval.

“Rhett, I took your notes and sketches to an architectural firm where Charlie’s son works.” Charlie was a higher-level vice president, superior to Randall. “They came out for an interview with me and Belinda. Took a bunch of pictures and looked about the neighborhood, to be sure what was built would fit the surroundings. Charlie said the architects would recommend a contractor that could be trusted to do the job correctly.”

I didn’t hear from Randall for quite a while. Then one day the card arrived, inviting me to “a reception at the home of R. Jacob Stone and wife, celebrating his full shareholder status in the firm. I did the RSVP thing, regrets. This was out of my class and I knew it, and I knew also the invite was more advisory of new home with new deck and a new job title than a true invitation from a friend. Step Four now on that historic ladder.

Time passed, and I saw R. Jacob rarely. Delivering a transcript one day a few years back, I met him going out as I was coming in the law office.

“Mr. Stephens! How good to see you,” J. Randall said; “I was just talking with Belinda a few days ago. We want you and your spouse to come down to the farm some Saturday when we’re having a picnic or barbecue!”

As always when dealing with attorneys, I agreed to everything. He had taken the next lawyer step up, a farm out in the country. I wondered if there was a lake and he’d be needing a new pier. No, I’m not completely cynical; just open with the obvious. I could just hear the familiar refrain, R. Jacob to the other attorneys as the deposition ends, “I guess we’ll go down to the farm this weekend, for a little peace and quiet. It will take a while to rest up from that Austrian trip.”

“Going down to the farm this weekend” was a social notch above “Going down to our lake place this weekend.” A lake place is a cabin on the lake, one of dozens. “Going down to the farm” indicates a singular place, a place of quiet peace, for

reflection, where hired people do the work of the farm. Down to the farm, Step Five.

I knew also about this lightly shaded comment concerning Austria. A senior member of the firm, well-connected politically and socially, had been appointed Ambassador to Austria. To be an ambassador at this level, you needed to look the part. Also, have the best connections in Washington. Your political cohort needed to be wrapped in serious money. Neither diplomatic skills nor experience was important. Obviously, R. Jacob had been invited to visit the Senior Partner in Vienna. Quite an accomplishment. His joy needed to be shared.

R. Jacob, now a senior attorney, spoke with me later, “So many people, so much expected of me. Belinda and I are going up to the North Carolina mountains to our place there, maybe for a week of rest and reflection.” I could just hear the notification, in the next legal setting, “It sure will be good to get back to our place in The Highlands. So cool and restful in the mountains.”

All would know what he was referring to. After all, what was the purpose of having it if you couldn’t casually mention it occasionally? Through the years as I had stayed rather the same in my firm, about four degrees of separation had developed between me and R. Jacob. His underlings were still being referred to my firm for reporting work. I appreciated that. And, as always, I was impressed with the achievements of my friend Rip—uh, R. Jacob, that is. The mountain place; Step Six for the Ladder.

Then one day a fateful call. Charlene was on the phone. Direct, to me, from the office of R. Jacob Stone, Senior Attorney.

“Mr. Stone would like you to personally be the reporter in a special case he is handling for the Governor. He expects the case to end up in the U.S. Supreme Court, and he wants perfect transcripts. He says you are the only one he fully trusts to do the job right. There will be lots of depositions, and several defendants with their counsel will be attending. You might want to mark off July for Mr. Stone.”

A country boy grin wrapped around my face. This would be scary important and with much attendant pressure, but a month of depositions with multiple defendants ordering copies would make it surely the most profitable case I had ever handled.

The depositions came, and they went. It was a dreadfully boring series of meetings in a legal setting, covering several weeks of testimony about highway contracts and politicians and their often-profitable connections. And yes, it was demanding and profitable for me. I thought possibly of visiting our ambassador to Austria also. No, not really. Just a farm boy's idle dream.

Long after the depositions were finally over, I remember one real afternoon in the whole series. The last deposition was finished, and all the attorneys were

talking of appeals, deals, and the Supreme Court. One conversation, maybe only one, remains starkly remembered. The passing years, my friend Jacob's increasing distance from me as he progressed, had softened many other memories.

"It sure has been fine working with you, gentlemen. Well, mostly gentlemen." There was a little twitter of appreciation for Mr. Stone's dry wit. There had been some harsh objections, mean comments, demands; now mostly forgotten, put aside by these patrician types.

He continued, "We'll get all these depositions filed, and I'm asking for the first hearing no earlier than November 1. I've got to have a vacation, rest up from all this." And with a huge sigh, he began folding papers, closing books, filling two brief cases and a banker's box. I knew he would expect me to carry some of it for him.

As if on cue, one old senior attorney asked, "Where you going, Jake? The Highlands or Biltmore Estate area would be my guess. You've always liked the mountains."

Mr. Stone hesitated, being sure everyone was listening.

"No, Lissa wants to go some place cool. We're thinking Canada. Got a little hideaway up there where we like to spend our Septembers." Lissa was the lissome blonde, now R. Jacob's young trophy wife.

The hook was baited, and a lesser attorney asked, "Tell us about your hideaway. My family and I might try it some time."

"Well, Henry, it is sort of private. We like to keep it just for ourselves."

"Well, just how private is it?"

"You have to remember, it's just a small island, in the Finger Lakes area. There are no other resort sites on it. Just the caretaker's cabin, a guest cabin, the main house, the horses' quarters, the pier and boat houses. Well, a garage for the Land Rover. There are no real roads to speak of on the island, so we keep the Rover for exploring the island. Then there's the ferry on call for when we need to go to the grocery, or maybe eat out. Lissa likes to cook as she feels this is a frontier place, and it's so expensive to have the cooks come over from the mainland just for the occasional social dinner."

The room became hushed. There obviously was nothing to top this. No farm, no lake place, no mountain resort, no European vacation. R. Jacob Stone had won. He had climbed Jacob's Ladder, got to Step Seven. He stood proudly on the top rung.

Or, did he? Fate and fortune would tell.

Another senior attorney asked, "Jake, you must be making too much money. What would a month cost for a deal like that? No, no, don't tell us. Just saying..."

R. Jacob smiled softly after a long moment. Then quietly, "No, Lynwood, no rent. We like to keep it as our little private hide-a-way. We've owned the island



for several years. Just for us. Well, we did let the Secretary of State stay for a few days some years back. There were a lot of embarrassing questions being asked of him about an alleged – alleged, mind you – affair. He felt our place was secure and quiet. The Secret Service did also. They left it spotless. Good people, those federal agents.

And that is how life is for the anointed few. Before a late retirement, there was another step for Jacob; the appointment to a Federal judgeship, an honorable way to end a career. A quiet Step Eight. There had been some talk about governor, but he didn't feel he could stoop to that. However, sitting around with old cronies at Socrates, a very private club, sipping a 40-year single malt Scotch, he did mention to a couple of friends in the field, a pair of Federal judges actually, that after a few years on the Ninth Circuit he would be willing to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court if the President needed him, and of course, personally asked him.

From that little conversation, confidentially leaked to a *Washington Post* reporter on the grounds of source non-disclosure, the first hint was that bold sub-headline, "Noted attorney Jacob Stone being talked about in high places for next seat on Supreme Court." The appellate position on the Ninth Circuit would just have to be short. And it went from there.

A reporter found I had known him throughout his career and asked for a comment. I told about the split bill on the Omelet Shop breakfast. First time I had ever been recognized in the *Washington Post*. And last. Another reporter told that the President had slapped R. Jacob on the back when he heard my long-ago anecdote. "Now there's an honest man!" It was said later that little anecdote may have secured, finalized the appointment. So honest he wouldn't give nor take on a \$3 breakfast. So Step Nine was secured, and still a bit of time left for the future. Nine steps up Jacob's Ladder, to heaven and all those angels.

In all the years since, I have never directly seen nor heard from Rip, other than occasionally I would see a mention in *The Post* or a comment in the evening news. Yet, I am content in my place in the sun. I didn't give nor take on paying the breakfast bill either.

Now I'm old and gray, tired and retired. Maybe I will end up in high places someday also because of that little breakfast. And then, I may not.

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*Stephen Edmondson of Homewood, AL, writes about characters in his life, past and present. A collection of his stories is in print, To Live and Die in Alabama.*

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## CAMELLIA

### NALL

*NALL is an American multidisciplinary artist from Alabama. He makes sculptures, copper plate line engravings, carpets, porcelain modeling, photography, and quilting. This talented artist also does painting, flower decorating, etching and carving. He is well known for using found objects, seashells, driftwood, and random finds from flea markets. Everything he collects he later uses in his artwork, blending it perfectly into in a coherent item. NALL is celebrated for his ability to embellish the physical space of his works.*

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# ODE TO GROWING OLD

Linda Adams

I sit on the bench rescued from the burn pile  
Contemplating the empty pasture  
    empty of any horses, mules or donkeys  
    devoid of even fence posts and wire  
    there and here pine volunteers sprout among  
    the dogfennel plumes, un-mowed  
Contemplating also, the years left,

That is what you do in old age  
    along with nursing the odd knee  
    or the cranky shoulder  
ignoring the gathering of skin in furrows  
    on this face of mine  
this, the first cold day of Winter  
    the sky pocked with clouds, the wind nasty  
Me thinking of winters left – how many

.....

*Linda Adams was raised in the piney woods of southwest Florida. Her first love is the outdoors; her other loves are painting – murals, signs, portraits; creating memories in writing; and writing articles in a local weekly newspaper. She lives on a sandy hill in Georgia with her husband, four dogs, and nineteen chickens.*

**scuffy552000@yahoo.com**

*I've never doubted that humanity is a privilege,  
even if we, as the animals who think, are also  
the creatures who agitate, plot and fantasize.*

—Pico Ayer

# JOTTING DOWN THE IMAGINARY INVISIBLES

Jim Reed

Underneath a scraggly neighborhood tree, the tree that drops small red berries, berries impossible to eat but just perfect for squeezing and squirting red streaks across face and body during playtime war games, I sit. I sit here beneath the branches and leaves and whittle a bit with my Hopalong Cassidy penknife...whittle a small loose branch...whittle nothing in particular...whittle away, watching the wood decrease in size...whittle and whittle, leaving notches here and there as token memories of this childhood day that is passing so rapidly, so rapidly.

The notches on the shrinking wood represent things of utmost importance in my thus-far short life, way back here in the early times of youthful existence.

This notch next to my left thumb represents the recent departure of my two best friends, Monk and Deebie. You were unable to see them because they were visible only to me. We had great times together but now they exist as a notch and a deep memory.

A longer notch honors my baby brother, Ronny, who is at last old enough to be my daily playmate and fellow conspirator. Ronny will show up soon and sit next to me beneath the red berry tree. He will search for four-leaf clovers while my mind meanders notch by notch.

Many years later, when Ronny and I are ancient grownup children living far apart, we will reminisce and fondly cherish these days when there is for a moment nothing more important than juicy berries and pocket knives and shards of wood and patches of shade and four-leaf clovers.

As we age and mellow, our memories of childhood will become more vivid, more detailed, more nuanced. And we will come to realize that we were lucky, so lucky, to have been children protected by parents and family and neighbors and relatives...protected just enough so that for a short and precious time, we could safely deploy our vivid imaginations, gently express our best intentions, take time to smell the Johnson grass and red dirt, spend aimless hours observing spiders and ants and worms and crickets and frogs as they wended their way through the quiet and unpolluted landscape.

Nowadays, instead of whittling my memories, I jot them down in this Red Clay Diary, where they will exist until someone finds them and reads them or discards them. That's the way it goes, this stuffing bottles full of notes and tossing them into the cosmos. They might survive. They might be lost. They might evaporate. But, so what? The greatest pleasure has already been experienced, the

pleasure of re-living good times in memory ever fresh, the pleasure of taking a moment to relish the fact that, among the chaos of daily living through the years, there were and are good things, things worth grasping and mulling over and clinging to...and passing along to you, the next whittler

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*Jim Reed has been an editor of the non-profit Birmingham Arts Journal since its inception, when he luckily recruited editors Irene Latham and Liz Reed. Fifteen years later, they continue publishing the Journal with the help of several talented volunteers (see inside back cover). [www.redclaydiary.com](http://www.redclaydiary.com)*



## **PINE TREE WITH FLOWERS**

Kay Williams

*Acrylic Mixed Media 24" x 30"*

*Kay Williams studied art at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She has a bachelor's degree in painting and sculpture and a master's degree in art education. Kay's work is all about the joy of color. She has exhibited throughout Alabama and the Florida panhandle.*  
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# MEMORIES OF WATER

Jane Ann Baggett

*If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water.*

—Loren Eiseley

The first time I saw a whale shark was at the Georgia Aquarium. I was taken through an underwater hallway of multicolored fish to a dark room with a tank filling up one wall. I marveled at the size of the spotted beast inside, and a woman's voice told me it was a whale shark. "A whale shark? Did a whale and a shark have a baby?" I wondered how they could fit something so large in such a small place.

*The sea, once it casts its spell, holds one in its net of wonder forever.*

—Jacques Cousteau

Before my first trip to the beach, my mom made the mistake of telling me about it two weeks in advance. Every day she would pick me up from preschool, and I would ask if it was time to leave yet. Finally the day came, and after a four- (but it seemed like eight)-hour drive we were in Panama City Beach, Florida. My parents took much too long unpacking our bags and getting me into my swimsuit. My two-year-old self struggled through the hot sand while my parents got settled in their rented beach chairs. My dad picked me up and carried me a few feet into the water. Right before he lowered me into the ocean for the first time, I saw a wave coming and changed my mind. I grabbed onto my dad's hand, refusing to let go. But I didn't stop there. I started to crawl up his arm like a monkey, not stopping until I'd reached the safety of his shoulder. After many more tries they finally got me in the water – and then had trouble getting me back out.

I haven't swum in the ocean for a while now (partly because I hate sand). My favorite part of the beach is the sound of the ocean hitting the shore. It's one of the only sounds that calms me down.

*Make your heart like a lake, with a calm, still surface, and great depths of kindness.*

—Lao Tzu

My childhood was spent swimming in the lake. People always talk about the stinging salt of the ocean, but no one ever knows about the gritty feeling of opening your eyes in the lake. Before I was brave enough to ride the inner tube (I had seen my cousins thrown off too many times), I would ride the speedboat until it was time to go home and swim. I remember my cousin Anna and me finding bits of clay in the lake-mud and smearing it on each other's faces. It was our "makeup."

Once I finally was brave enough to ride the inner tube, I realized being thrown off was the best part. You would hang on with all your might, through the circles

and the bumps and the slides across the wake, to finally give into the thrill of letting go. We would get blisters on our hands from holding on too tightly, and our sunscreen acted as a grease making it impossible not to slide from side to side. My swim shorts came off every time I hit the water – thankfully no one ever seemed to notice. My most spectacular fall was a day when the stormy waves were sending us six feet into the air. I was first thrown sideways, being held on only by my left hand and my cousin’s grip. When I finally let go, I skimmed the top of the water, doing a cartwheel as I did.

*Life is like a swimming pool. You dive into the water, but you can't see how deep it is.*  
—Dennis Rodman

When I was little, my grandparents had a swimming pool with a blue lining that was beginning to ripple with age, and a gold diamond pattern adorning the walls. In the walls there were jets that I was never allowed to stick my fingers in because “there could be an animal in them that would bite my finger off,” and a filter that would collect forgotten balls and Barbies.

I used to pretend I was a mermaid, staying at the bottom of the deep end for as long as I could. I would make my aunt throw rings for me to dive for, ignoring the pressure in my ears and the water in my goggles. My favorite game to play was when I would pretend there were portals in the sides of the pool leading to alternate universes; it was my job to protect these worlds.

I would always try and figure out ways to be able to breathe underwater. I never quite mastered the snorkel. I would either forget to breathe through my mouth, or I would swallow the water trying. My grandparents had this rusty ladle that they’d use to water plants, and for some reason I decided it was the perfect pool toy. I would use it to splash other kids, propel myself through the water, and once as an oar when I made a canoe out of cardboard. Eventually I figured out that if I put it in the water upside down, no water would get in the bowl. I would put it in the water and try to use that air bubble to breathe. For some reason it never worked.

That pool is filled in with concrete now.

*When life gets you down you know what you gotta do? Just keep swimming.*  
—Dori

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*Jane Ann Baggett is a creative writing junior at the Alabama School of Fine Arts, and the recipient of the 2018 Alabama Writers Forum Literary Arts Award in Fiction. A competitive Irish dancer, she lives with her family in Birmingham and Mentone, AL*  
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# ON A NO SCHEDULE DAY,

*Keith Badowski – Hackney Awards – Third Place State - Poetry*

there was nothing, as if  
all the Guatemalan  
cooking classes, Sentinelese  
dance lessons, and outdoor  
Bossa Nova concerts fled  
the community calendar.  
On-demand movies scrolled  
by offering me hours  
of not talking to myself.  
The bathroom awaited  
scouring and was rebuffed.  
I mulled the monotony  
of local parks with gazebos  
like sip after sip of coffee.  
The wished-for ruins of Machu  
Picchu refused to jut up  
behind my shed, so instead  
I put my hope on a herd  
of wild horses, for them to swim

Fancy Bluff Creek, stampede  
across Georgia, veer a detour  
over Dillingham Bridge  
into my neighborhood to graze  
and pit the perfect lawns.  
Crestfallen I ached to pedal  
anywhere unmapped,  
but road resembled road,  
and the high weeds reprised  
my parched soul. Even the clouds  
billowed a déjà vu of desires.  
I paused under shade, my flesh  
a meal for mosquitoes.  
I was grateful for the bustle  
of batting them away  
and likened them to citronella  
candles to repel boredom.

*A past President of the Georgia Poetry Society, Keith Badowski lives in Phenix City, AL. He is a minister and publisher. In 2009 he co-founded (with Ron Self) Brick Road Poetry Press. Keith's poetry has appeared widely.*

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# THE PENTHOUSE VIEW

Scott Richburg

Beverly Hills is full of fancy cars and casual people walking their affluence like well-coifed poodles. Such a place is an odd location for a world-renowned Lyme Disease clinic. An Uber driver pointed out as much to me as I told him the reason for our visit to Los Angeles and Beverly Hills. Every Uber driver asked us why we were here. Their voice at first beaming with optimism only to sink in disappointment, maybe even embarrassment, when we told them our reason.

Not vacation. Not fun in the sun. But late-stage chronic Lyme Disease treatment.

Some would ask a few obligatory questions, offer what little they understood about the disease, then shift over to the weather or to their hard-luck life as a would-be playwright.

That first morning at the clinic, we found ourselves inside a building that looked either like a fancy apartment or a posh department store. Nothing about the building said that cutting-edge medical science was happening inside. In fact just inside the front entrance was a ritzy jewelry store offering all kinds of expensive trinkets for the casual shopper. Really a useful feature for patients like my wife who use wheelchairs because their condition has so progressed. She could get fixed and glitzed all in one stop.

Next, we rode the elevator to the penthouse where the clinic was located. *Penthouse*, I thought. *We're going to a penthouse*. My only experience with penthouses involves long defunct situational comedies like *Green Acres* and *The Jeffersons*.

When the elevator doors opened, what we saw first was not the grand view of Beverly Hills that the penthouse offered—plenty of windows promised to give us that view. Instead, we saw a frail, gaunt young woman, sunken and trembling in a wheelchair. We stood there mortified, my wife, our nine-year-old son, and I. In all our hopscotching from one clinic to the next searching for an answer, I had never seen a sick patient that rivaled my wife's condition. Most looked as if they had just stepped off a tennis court. Now I saw the really sick. We later learned that the young woman, a chronic Lyme patient, was in a full-on seizure.

Welcome to the penthouse view.

The good news is that the young woman was a repeat customer, having already gone through the exhaustive two-week therapy my wife was about to endure. This young lady was back for her one-hundred-day follow up. All of this is good news for this reason: She was now down to two seizures a day instead of the ten she used

to suffer prior to her therapy. So maybe one could indeed purchase \$25,000 worth of magic at the Neiman Marcus of Medicine.

I likened this place to Shangri-La or Valhalla. Something about it seemed surreal. Whenever my son and I would return to the clinic after a day of exploring L.A., my wife would be among five other patients, all lined up in a row, sitting in chaise lounges, IV's stuck in their arms. Often there would be green, organic vegetable-based drinks or organic bone broth resting on the small tables beside their chairs. And usually, a celestial radiance of light coming through the clinic's many windows.

One hellish aspect of this otherwise heavenly scene was the clinic's smell. Perhaps it emanated from the IVs, perhaps it arose from the substances the patients drank, but that odor confronted my son and me the moment we stepped off the elevator. A heavy antiseptic smell mixed in with the odor of hot blood. A fresh, alive, yet raw, and yes organic, smell. It even seeped through my wife's pores. As we would sit together in the back of some nondescript Uber car on the way back to our hotel, I could smell the scent rise off her skin, emerge out of her breath. The healing elixir, perhaps, from the penthouse shamans.

My wife's experience in the penthouse culminated with an injection of 45 million stem cells into her desperately failing body. The hope is that these newly revamped cells—and the doctors performed some sort of clinical voodoo on them—will start replicating through my wife's body, thus helping to repair damaged tissue and resurrect her body's ravaged immune system into the natural defense system it was intended to be. We are hopeful. We stand on trembling tip-toes of expectation.

In one hundred days, much like the terribly sick young lady we met that first day, we will return to the penthouse, to its disquieting charm, to its noxious odor, and to our last great hope.

.....

*A teacher, Scott Richburg has won many writing awards and he has also written newspaper columns. He lives in Wetumpka, AL.*

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# 1955-2001: A HAIR ODYSSEY

Lesléa Newman

I.

"The day I gave birth to you,  
you had such beautiful, dark curly hair  
the nurses all took turns combing it.  
You left the hospital with a ponytail  
tied up in a pink ribbon and I was so happy  
you were a girl  
I cried."

II.

I cry  
every morning before high school  
because of my hair  
my hair:  
*frizz bomb*  
*pubic head*  
*Jew 'fro*  
*the human barometer*  
Every night I set it on rollers the size of orange juice cans  
wrap it around my head with larger-than-life bobby pins  
scotch-tape it to my forehead and cheeks  
flatten it out along my mother's ironing board  
only to have it *boing!* back to its curly frizzy, kinky Jewish self  
every goddamn morning

III.

On a kibbutz in Israel I live in a room  
with six other American girls  
all of us fascinated by Mona.  
Mona has straight hair!  
Has does she do it?  
We watch, mesmerized  
as she divides her waist-length tresses  
into dozens of sections one-inch thick  
and runs the blow dryer up and down each one  
every morning starting at 4:00 a.m.  
in order to be ready for breakfast at 6:00.  
Two hours—is it worth it?  
You bet.  
The next morning, we are all up at 4:00  
fighting over the one outlet in the room  
having flown halfway around the world  
just to learn how to straighten our hair

IV.

The first thing I do  
when I realize I am a lesbian  
is cut off my hair.  
The second thing I do  
is cry.

V.

"Is that a perm?"  
*Yes*  
"How long have you had it?"  
*Forty-five years.*

VI.

Out of nowhere, a gray hair.  
Then another. And another.  
I can't believe it.  
The words I spat at my mother  
as an arrogant teen  
come racing back to me:  
"Women shouldn't dye their hair.  
It's so unnatural."  
How did she put up with me?  
Sitting at the hairdresser's  
under a stark light  
before an unforgiving mirror,  
a lavender smock draped about my neck  
my hair plastered back from my face  
with cold, wet goo,  
I look like my mother:  
vulnerable, exposed, ashamed.

VII.

Finally, we are friends  
my hair and I  
my dark brown hair  
dyed, cut chin-length  
framing my face in soft curls  
sometimes held back  
with a hair band or clip  
sometimes frizzy in the heat  
sometimes flat in the cold  
always growing  
always changing  
unruly  
unmanageable  
unpredictable  
like me

*Lesléa Newman is the author of several award-winning poetry collections who has received poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Massachusetts Artists Foundation. A past poet laureate of Northampton, MA, she currently teaches at Spalding University's low-residency MFA in Writing program. "2001: A Hair Odyssey" is excerpted from her newest poetry collection, Lovely. [leslea@lesleakids.com](mailto:leslea@lesleakids.com)*



## OMAHA BEACH, FRANCE - NOW

Digital Photograph  
Tom Gordon

*Tom Gordon is retired as a state reporter for The Birmingham News, where he worked for 22 years. He holds degrees in political science and journalism and has spent time in Europe and West Africa. [tomgordon99@gmail.com](mailto:tomgordon99@gmail.com)*



## OMAHA BEACH - 1945

# CIOPPINO

Robert Joe Stout

Dazzled, Jonathan took a second bite. Black mussels, deveined prawns, crackling legs of Dungeness crabs. The sauce's tang sizzled through his nerve endings. Curcuma, paprika, fennel seeds. Even chewing, swallowing, he smiled, aware that he was in Marco's Hold Up but seeming to be out beyond, feasting with the gods.

He laughed out loud. Out of pleasure, out of joy. Fresh sea bass, clams scrubbed clean and juicy, fresh baked focaccia bread. Laughed and ate as though he hadn't eaten for two weeks—two months. He chewed, he swallowed, not just food but memories. Wives, daughters, friends. Other meals, but none like this. Marco had outdone himself. No chef in San Francisco was his equal.

Each bite Jonathan took seemed richer, more extravagant. So much so he didn't mind being alone. Alone and old—almost seventy, with bulging waistline, artificial hips, balding of his once blond hair. But never mind, with every bite he heard music, not piped-in monotony but something more pervasive, ethereal. He and Mary, his first wife, had danced together, laughed together—also fought. He was drinking then—too much, drinking, working, selling, buying, building a career. He shook the thoughts away. The clams were exquisite; their savor zinged across his lips, into his cheeks, into his brain. Clams, mussels, olive oiled buttered bread. Tastes so rich, so wonderful, somewhere inside he began to weep. Grateful tears, tears of happiness, tears of joy.

And talk. Not audibly. Not to anyone or anything, just talk, converse, the voices deep within. Talk to Mary, to Indigo his second wife, to Aaron his high school best friend. Talk and hear what they were saying. Pizza Sundays, dim sum in Oakland, hotdogs at semi-pro baseball games. Catered cardboard tastelessness in meetings. Shrimp on toothpicks with martinis...

His bowl half-empty he slowed down, chewed more slowly, swallowed more deliberately. The memories kept coming and he acknowledged, spoke. His wives, his parents, the little valley town where he'd been born. Years on the road, selling, celebrating, whiskeying through deep depressions. The store, the business all his own, AA and fighting the addiction. Chasen, the alkie he'd befriended, sober sixteen months then, wham! totaled, lost, refusing help, spitting blood because he couldn't eat.

Poor Chase! For a second the sauce turned bitter, then the image faded. Jonathan snapped a crab leg between his thumb and forefinger, the bowl now nearly empty. As he did he sensed a shadow, then a presence. Chasen! Hunched facing him, thin lips winced down, eyes a grisly yellow. Not just Chasen but others, huddled, watching, reaching towards him. Cracking bones between their fingers, eating, choking, spitting...

*How?*

He looked down. Inside the nearly empty bowl things were moving. Not mussels, clams. Wormy things. Maggots. Everything that he'd been eating...

Hands pressed against his chest, he closed his eyes. Heard the clink! of something falling, laughter that could have been Indigo's, murmured words he couldn't understand. Then boisterous, beside him.

"Good, my friend? The Cioppino?"

Eyes open he looked up. Marco there beside him, compact, athletic, vigorous despite the gray streaking his black hair. Gone the others, Chasen, Mary, parents, his high school best friend. Slowly he recovered the spoon dropped on the table, wiped it with his napkin, smiled.

"Ex-quis-ite," he told Marco.

"More my friend. I bring you—?"

"No," Jonathan peered past the chef at fading shadows, "I've had all that I can handle. Thanks a lot."

.....

*Robert Joe Stout lives in Oaxaca, Mexico, where he works as a freelance journalist. He has published novels, works of non-fiction and books of verse.*

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*If you find yourself in a powder keg, the  
last thing you want to be is a struck match.*

—*Christopher Solomon*



## THE CIRCLE

Marc Carver

I wrote a poem once  
it was a long time ago  
I guess that makes me a poet  
but I have a strange feeling I was a poet  
a long time before that.

The wind is strong today  
and if I tore this poem from the pad it would fly and fly  
I would never see it again  
just like my first poem about that big fish and my pain  
long  
long  
gone.

.....

*Marc Carver has published some ten collections of poetry and over two thousand poems on the net but what he really appreciates is when he gets an email from someone he does not know saying they enjoy his work. **kronski669@yahoo.co.uk***

*Love is not love which alters when  
it alteration finds.*

—*William Shakespeare*



## LONG LEGS

Troy Crisswell

*Troy Crisswell grew up in Montevallo, AL, and studied art at Indian Springs School and Birmingham Southern College. He began exhibiting works in 1988 and has been a full-time painter since 1991.*

*Crisswell primarily uses watercolors, oils, acrylics. He plays and writes music, teaches painting, and lives in Birmingham, AL.*

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## CHARCOAL LAUGHTER

Elizabeth Olushola Adeolu

Fresh skinned and steel faced,  
The scars from yesterday's fire are faded,  
My ash smudges have cleared,  
The sooty streaks from my tears are erased,  
My singed hairs from yesterday's furnace,  
They've grown into tighter thicker curls.

Did I remember to tell you?  
Did I remember to tell you?  
About the time I paid obeisance to sorrows?  
About the time I paid dues to despairs?  
I drank from the cup of self-pity,  
I was a faithful devotee,  
Every single day the same,  
Pouring libation at the altar of shame.

But yesterday's blaze was my final straw:  
I rose in holy anger,  
My face basked in hope,  
My hair glistening with willpower,  
My arms clenching loads of faith,  
I rose this morning and I laughed.

.....

*Elizabeth Olushola Adeolu is a Nigerian writer who currently resides in Edinburgh, UK, where she is studying for a postgraduate degree in linguistics and English language. She is the writer of the detective fiction, Chasing Facades, and her poem "I Prepared for This" has been published by Acumen Poetry Journal. Her hobbies include writing, singing, and watching TV shows. **elizaadeolu@yahoo.com***

## NIGHT OWLS

Robert McGowin

The fact that I was hungry was most likely why I did it. That I had a wife and a newborn son who were hungry, too, further helped me to make up my mind. So there I sat in the student union, with the campus newspaper, looking at want ads. I had to find a job.

One item in the paper interested me. WANTED: Short order cook for graveyard shift. No phone calls. Apply in person.

What followed, of course, was the name of the diner, the manager, and the address. There was no time to waste. I drove over, filled out the application, was interviewed, and was hired. I was to start that very night. Luke, the manager, told me to come an hour early for “training.”

Now this was a sleepy North Mississippi town, to be sure. But it was also a county seat and the home of a major state university. So I figured that football weekends at this local greasy spoon could be lively, if not out and out rowdy. I had no idea!

My first mistake was that I showed up for “training” that night way overdressed. White shirt, tie, khaki pants, and loafers. Luke took one look at me and did a ceilingward eyeroll. Then he took me to the back to introduce me to the kitchen crew.

Luke was a half-breed Cherokee, and the kitchen was all black guys, except for yours truly. So, being pigmentally challenged was my second mistake. I had also brought a clipboard for taking notes. Mistake number three!

Luke, deciding to play my cracker-card for all it was worth, told the kitchen crew that I was from the “Home Office,” undoubtedly hoping to get some enthusiastic work out of them, at least for that one night. They took a look at my white shirt, tie, and clipboard, and thought that I would be evaluating their work performance, and that their jobs were on the line. They hated me right from the start!

My next night on the job was somewhat better. At least I was dress code – T-shirt, Levi’s, and Nike running shoes. The kitchen crew was now talking to me... some. The first friend I made was Essie Mae. She, all three hundred pounds of her, ran the grill. She was short, wide, and stood like a fireplug right in front of the Bull Angus Natural Gas Commercial Grill. She flipped burgers right and left and sometimes had as many as twenty of those bad boys sizzling all at once. When Luke wasn’t looking, she demonstrated her favorite maneuver. She put down her spatula and turned the burgers, using just the long fingernails and palm of her right hand. Lickety split! When I told her that she was awesome, she gave me a big, happy smile that told me we would be friends for life ... or until tomorrow, whichever came first.

And so the days at work began to drift on by. I had classes during the morning and afternoon and cooked short orders at night. My work hours were from 10 PM to 5 AM. Ten O’clock until midnight were the busiest hours, then there was a lull. Between 1 AM and 3 AM was our Twilight Zone – a weird subculture of humanity arrived during that time. Some were drunk and happy, others were sober and mean, but a considerable number were drunk and mean. Luke kept a loaded

twelve-gauge shotgun stashed in the kitchen broom closet, just in case things got nasty.

Eventually, I was privileged to experience my first football weekend at the diner. Lucky me! It was the day of the big game with LSU, and we were packed out. Luke was running the register when two drunk frat boys came up to pay their check. One of them grabbed a handful of Little Debbie SnackCakes from a box on the counter, smushed them in his fist, then let them fall to the floor, where he stomped them for good measure. When Luke told him he'd have to pay for them, he just laughed and told him to get stuffed.

Nimble as a cat, Luke jumped over the counter and backhanded the boy across the face. The blow resounded like a rifle shot. Oh, yeah! He stopped laughing then, and the whole crowd was stunned into silence. In a loud, steady voice, Luke addressed his customers. He told them that he wanted their business, but they had to behave while on his premises and act right. The two drunk frat boys stumbled out, and the din of the crowd resumed. Hotty Toddy!

The days passed, and my life as a short order cook continued to grind its way forward. I came home from work each day, with my clothes reeking of Frymaster grease. I was certain I would never be able to look at another hamburger in this lifetime, much less eat one.

It was largely another world back in the kitchen. Except for Essie Mae, the black kitchen crew was still hostile toward me, and I didn't see how that would ever change. But, little did I know, something was about to happen that would change all of that.

The next weekend was the football game with Memphis State, there at Memphis. Luke had decided that he would go and take his live-in girlfriend along as his ballgame date. He said that while he was gone, I would be in charge.

That Saturday night was busy, and we were mobbed as crowds of customers came and went. I was working up front at the meat slicing machine, when I heard a big disturbance back in the kitchen. The black kitchen crew was shouting, wailing, and running around like the Klan had just shown up. From what I gathered, something had happened in the alley out in back of the building.

I stepped outside, expecting to find a dead body. What I did find was that someone had pulled his truck around back to the men's room, hitched a logging chain up to the lavatory and driven off, tearing the wash basin out of the wall. Hot water and steam were gushing everywhere.

Someone had to do something, and, besides, I was in charge. So I pushed my way through the crowd of onlookers, went into the restroom, closed both of the shutoff valves and called the police.

It would be difficult to explain how such a simple, if decisive, act altered the kitchen crew's attitude toward me, but it did. It seemed that in doing what I did that night, I was promoted to a level of acceptance and became one of them. As they retold the incident to Luke and to others again and again, my actions of that night grew more courageous with each retelling.

Later Luke told me that he was proud of the way I had taken charge, handled the incident, and won the respect of my fellow employees. And, because of what he said, I'm sure that I was walking tall for the rest of that week.



I suppose my time spent as a short-order cook in that small Mississippi town must have taught me something important about people and how to relate to others. For here I am, almost fifty years later, still thinking about it.

.....

*Robert McGowin is a writer, teacher, and typewriter enthusiast. In 2010, he organized a creative writing workshop in Montgomery, AL, which he continues to direct. In his spare time, he grows old and enjoys exploring remote destinations in his Jeep Wrangler. **rmcgowin1120@gmail.com***

## ON WRITING WITHOUT HANDS

Alexis Tate – 3<sup>rd</sup> Place National Poetry – 2017 Hackney Literary Awards

Because my tongue cannot cajole a pen  
to curve and flick my thoughts across the page  
the way a hand would effortlessly bend  
in tandem with the mind's erratic play,  
when stories plant a garden in my head  
I fling myself against the juicy spigot—  
shoots spring up to greet the world and spread  
but soon are strangled by slithering thickets  
of wire-tight nerves overtaking the paths  
from head to hand. But sometimes little poems  
burgeon, slipping through dystonia's grasp.  
How odd—I didn't water any poems.

Does one need hands to braid the strands of thought  
or do the thoughts command a docile hand?

.....

*Alexis Tate has been awarded prizes from the Hackney Literary Awards and the League of Utah Writers. She primarily writes children's poetry and has forthcoming work in Spider magazine. She lives in Logan, UT, where she composes out loud while lying down, due to a neurological disorder. [alexistate.art@gmail.com](mailto:alexistate.art@gmail.com)*



## MEAN MOTOR SCOOTER

Eric Johnson

Laser cut carbon steel

12”h x 10” w x 4” d

*Eric Johnson lives and works in Dora, AL, with his wife Tonja and three Australian shepherds. When he's not creating sculptures, you can find him in his garden or camping off the beaten trail. [www.rejohnsoniron.com](http://www.rejohnsoniron.com)*

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## HOW FAST WILL IT GO?

Chervis Isom

I hear the motorcycle engine. Then I see him through the glass front door as he comes to a stop. He knocks down the kick stand with his foot, then swings his leg over the motorcycle. His route book is in his hands and he heads toward our front door. He opens the door and steps inside.

I'm glad to see him. He comes every Saturday morning to collect for the newspaper he brings us every morning. I always try to be sitting here on Saturday when he comes. I like to look at the motorcycle.

I suppose he's about the same age I am – I'm sixteen now, though most people wouldn't know that. I'm sixteen, and I've never ridden a motorcycle. I've never even ridden a bicycle.

As usual, he stands there awkwardly, trying to look busy with his route book.

"Hey, good morning," I say.

He tries to smile and nods and mumbles something unintelligible to me. It's clear he wants his money as quickly as he can get it and then be on his way. I want to visit.

"How fast will it go?"

No answer. He looks at me like he doesn't understand.

"How fast will it go?" This time louder.

No response again. He shrugs and looks desperate. Now I'm getting a little frustrated. I point out the door to the parked motorcycle and raise my voice.

"That motorcycle. How fast will it go?"

The paperboy was uneasy, shifting from foot to foot and looking around the room – looking everywhere but at me. Am I invisible? Why is this so hard? I just want to talk with him. Actually, I just want to talk with anybody. I can hardly remember the last time my mother came to see me. It was more than a year. Maybe two.

The paperboy is still waiting to be paid.

"How fast will it go?" I try again.

Finally, I get through to him. He looks at me and smiles an awkward, unhappy smile and says, "You doing OK today?"

Well, he didn't answer my question, but at least he said something. "How fast will it go?"

I lurch toward him, reaching with my hand, and try to get his attention. I almost twist out of my chair, and would have were I not buckled in. He recoils in surprise, backing toward the door.

Why won't he talk to me?

Then my nurse comes into the room. "Why, good morning, young man. I've got your money right here." She pays him. Then she smiles down to me, then looks back at the paperboy.

"I hope Johnny hasn't been bothering you. He can be such a worry wart sometimes," and she smiles again. Does she think I can't hear her?

The paperboy uneasily smiles and stuffs the money in his pocket.

Then she takes my handlebars and turns me. "Come along, Johnny. Let's go down to the rec room."

I twist in my seat and yell again to the paperboy, "How fast will it go?"

The nurse stops and turns to the paperboy. "I know it's hard to understand what Johnny is asking, but he wants to know how fast your motorcycle will go."

"I don't know, maybe about eighty, I guess," he says to her without even a glance in my direction.

I turn back to the front, my neck aching from twisting around. She doesn't understand either. I didn't want him to tell *her* how fast it would go. I wanted him to talk to *me*.

The paperboy waves goodbye to my nurse and opens the door to leave the Cerebral Palsy Center where I live.

.....

*Chervis Isom is an attorney in Birmingham, AL. He has an avid interest in literature and when he can find time, he enjoys wrestling with words. [cisom@bakerdonelson.com](mailto:cisom@bakerdonelson.com)*

## **(SUB)TEXT AFTER SUSHI**

Sharon DeVaney-Lovinguth

Poem for Phil

tk's for last night!  
My heart is breaking,  
(i had such fun!)  
And I don't know why  
always great to cu!!  
Such emptiness follows,  
soon! we must get together!  
And time so divides us  
soon! heartballoonrainbow 4ever, u!!  
Into memories and endings.

.....

*Sharon DeVaney-Lovinguth is a Birmingham writer, artist and supporter of self-expression in all forms. Recently retired from teaching English at Jefferson State Community College, she is currently reviewing and revising her life, walking her dog, Happiness, and sleeping in a lot.*  
**devlov@gmail.com**

## HE

Joseph Allen Boone - *3rd Prize, National Story, 2017 Hackney Literary Awards*

The boy had first seen the man, the man who now carried him in his arms wrapped head to toe in a woolen great-cape sodden with rain, on the evening his mother had unexpectedly summoned him to step out of the dim enclosure of the battered armoire. There she stowed him whenever her gentlemen callers came to the garret chamber, hissing at him to remain quiet as death as she bedded him down on the wardrobe's planked floor, the garments hovering above him spectres in the dark. That was nearly a year ago, when memories were faint clouds drifting across his consciousness—that evening when his mother had thrown open the wardrobe doors, swaying in her soiled chemise, unsteady as a three-master anchored inside Pool Dock when the arctic winds bore down the North Channel.

“Out with you now!” she had commanded, her tongue thick with the scent of brandy. “Say hello to Mister who’s specially entreated to make your acquaintance.”

The man was sitting on the edge of the bed, a shadowy monolith in the wavering light of the untrimmed candle, buttoning the fly of his trousers. His pleated white shirt, unlaced, was open to the waist. Mud-splattered boots tilted against each other on the bare floor.

“A bonny lad! Step forward, bairn, let me have a look.”

The six-year-old recognized the barrel-chested voice: from his bleak lair behind the oaken panels, he had heard the twang of its particular Yorkshire accent whispering, sweet-talking, groaning in ecstasy to his mother over the months.



And, so, with feral wariness he emerged from his hiding place, strangely compelled forward by the man's summons. At once preemptory and intimate, it spoke, in an obscure way, to a need he felt rising in his chest: a pang of hunger, after a day of fast.

The man tousled the boy's unruly hair, black as raven feathers, ran his fingers through curls slick with weeks of grime.

"A savage un he is, dark as a gipsy," the man said with a chuckle. But his fit of humor evaporated, thin lips tightened. "Already more the man than my surviving son will e'er amount to, spineless limpet that he is."

Grunting, he reached into his pocket and folded the boy's calloused fingers around a cold, metallic shape: a glittering coin.

The boy felt a prod in the small of his back. "What do you say to the gentleman? Come now, speak your gratitude!"

Sounds, rough as river rock, fell from the boy's lips.

The man looked at the woman, his forehead raised in inquiry.

"When he's afrighted, he sometimes falls back on the old language," she muttered.

"Can you say your name?" The man took the boy's chin in his palm, tilting the reluctant face upwards. The child's eyes, guarded by the thick brows that furrowed over them, were black as coals, their glare hesitant, preternaturally aged. The boy remained silent.

"He's my Sorrow."

"Come now, wench, that's no name for a bairn!"

“Niver knew his father’s name, so he’s niver had a name. Why should he? He’s just Hisself, answers to Boy, and that’s fine enough for one whose coming into this miserable world brought me to this low pass.” Waves of scented dark hair fell across one side of her face as she vaguely gestured around the small room, rouged lips quivering in a performance of misery and contriteness. “Doomed to live out my days in this vile hole.” Fluttering her eyelashes as well as the brandy allowed, she removed the man’s hand from the boy’s head and placed it on the roundness swelling beneath her thin chemise. “But *this* un’s going to have a name, right sure he will, for he’s Antoinette’s angel, your gift of life to me, because you care to claim us both.”

“I do, I swear I do. Even if it damns me to Hell, I do.”

The man’s voice caught in his throat, words emerging like a sob to speak the truth his heart knew and feared: that he could neither escape the laws of his unforgiving God nor his duties as gentleman farmer, husband, and father; that, as soon as he left this haven of bliss discovered so late in life and after so much denial, his iniquities would rise to riven heart and spirit and mind, haunting him with the heavenly injunctions he was ignoring in claiming the woman and unborn child as his own. But he refused to think of the consequences now, not in this moment, not with the mother of his unborn babe at his side, cooing in his ear as no woman had ever done, this ruined beauty whom he worshipped strangely: his Antoinette. Everyone’s Antoinette soon as he was gone, anyone’s for a few shillings was the truth of it, as he could only fabricate an excuse to journey to Liverpool every month or two. But here, now, glorying in her swelling belly, *his* Antoinette—*ma petite*—he defied the gods to deny him this moment of joy.

The boy woke nearly smothered by the wet wool that covered his face and body, cheek pressed to the man's chest, whose steady heartbeat, like his steady stride, had lulled him to sleep for hours at a time. They had been traveling all day, the man carrying him the whole time—"naught to fret, you're light as a starved hatchling, my lad." The early June morning had promised fair skies, the mild air a revelation after the soot and grime of the city, but afternoon brought an unrelenting downpour that continued into the evening and turned deadly cold as it soaked through the cape the man had wrapped around him for protection.

Surfacing from a feverish dream, he knew something had changed: the man's steps had ceased, and the clatter of pots and a cacophony of voices penetrated the cape. He inhaled the peaty odors of a farmhouse kitchen fire—smells he had yet to learn to identify—and now the man was unwrapping the dripping cape, laughing with forced heartiness as he delivered the boy from his woolen womb. The boy's feet, dangling, found the flagstones, where he wobbled skittish as a new-born colt.

"See here, wife! I was never so beaten with anything in my life: but you must e'en take it as a gift of God; though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil."

The first thing the boy saw, as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, was the blinding blaze that radiated from a vast hearth—the bed he and his mother had shared would have fit snugly in its enclosure—and, next, the dancing refractions of firelight in the battered copper pans hanging overhead and pewter tankards lining

the shelves of a heavy sideboard. The aroma of smoked haunches of meat, hanging from the ceiling beams alongside fat links of sausage, garlands of onions, and clusters of dried spices—all these scents mixed with the wet odor of the two dogs that beset him with prodding muzzles, and, more faintly, the farmyard smells that penetrated the thick stone walls of the kitchen: turned earth, dry grain, pig wallow, dung.

Out of nowhere a throng of faces zoomed forward, looming above the boy as they spoke all at once. The woman the man had addressed as “wife” made fair to fly up in his face, grabbing him by the ear only to hold him contemptuously at arm’s length, *how dare you bring this dirty gipsy brat into our house when we have their own bairn to feed and fend for?* An adolescent youth slouched in the woman’s wake, a smirk on his pimpled face as he yawned, *father might do better than pick his field-hands from Liverpool’s slums, this specimen won’t last the season!* Curiously bouncing up and down on her tiptoes behind matron and adolescent, a girl in servant’s garb, cheeks round and shiny as autumn apples, exclaimed in horror at the elfin boy’s rags and asked the Master if she should heat some water to scrub the grime away. From the depths of the settee to the right of the fireplace, an elder dangled a worn Bible from calloused hands, the only occupant of the room not deigning to show his curiosity, as he sighed, mournfully, “Ach, the divil’s come hoome ta roost!”

But the boy hardly noticed these apparitions besetting him from all corners. For he was riveted by the dark, mischievous eyes of the girl, exactly his height, who had thrust herself in his face, pert nose inches from his own, pinching his arms and prodding his ribs as she peered at him quizzically.

“What’s he trying to say, Papa? Such gibberish!”

She was interrupted by the grating voice of the Bible-toting servant. “’Tis non but Satan’s cloven tongue, ta be cartain! Master, dinna bring doom onto yer awn hoos, toss the demon-seed out on the miry dung-heap where sich belong!”

The boy heard nothing. The girl’s eyes possessed him, sparkling dark diamonds, unforgivably brilliant and alive. “You’re mine!” she laughed in an ecstasy of delight, as if he were a newly acquired, exotic cockatoo. Dancing on her tiptoes, she threw her arms around her father’s neck, lavishing him with kisses. “Papa, do say he’s all mine! Do!”

\* \* \*

Not all of his mother’s callers were as kind as the man who had brought him to this remote farm, hidden deep in the rolling moors. There were the mornings he would wake by his mother’s side, crowded in their small bed, and watch the swelling of her jaw or the marks on her limbs growing dark purple as she slept fitfully, the empty laudanum bottle on the bedside table easing her pain but multiplying the demons of her dreams. There was the West Indies slaver who brought wrist shackles from his ship. The midget Malay who knocked her out cold. The pawnshop owner who demanded that the boy sit in the room’s one chair and watch as he mounted the woman doggy-style.

But worst was the shrill French merchant, driven mad by the sound of the pigeons roosting outside the garret’s window. The building of the nest, the courtship of the two birds, the incubation of the eggs—following these rites had been the boy’s escape from desolation. So, when he heard the man throw open the

[continued on page 46]



## FALL COLOR

Ty Evans  
Digital Photograph

*Ty lives in Birmingham, AL, and enjoys taking pictures in his spare time. His other interests include collecting antique books, playing the guitar, and traveling. See also his photo on front cover.*

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sash and dash the nest, hatchlings and all, from the eaves to the street three flights below, cursing *sacrebleu!* as the parents flapped away, he forgot his mother's injunction to silence and burst from his hiding place with a wounded howl, fiercely pummeling the stranger in all his anguish. The man had departed with haste, slamming the door without leaving a farthing. His mother boxed the boy's ears till the ringing in his head was even louder than his keen of despair.

\* \* \*

"Bolt the door after me, Boy, and answer to naught by m'self, understand?"

She leaned over the bed where he lay raging with fever, her candlelit face a gauzy blur through the mucous coating his eyes. His body was a furnace, stoking a fire impervious to the ice storm that seethed outside and permeated the chamber with an arctic chill. Davey, his new brother, whimpered shrilly from the foot of the bed: six months since the infant had first howled his way into existence, but he didn't yet weigh a stone.

"Sit up now, you mun rouse yourself long enough to lock the door. I'm back soon as I can."

The spring thaw that arrived in late March had been a cruel promise, negated by a five-day blizzard that had turned each pane in the garret's window an inch of milky ice inside and out. Even if the boy hadn't been laid flat with a fever that left him helpless to move, the chest-high drifts blocking the streets and alleys would have made it impossible for him to forage for scraps of food in the rubbish mounds

behind the alehouses and taverns, a task to which he had grown accustomed when his mother's paying visitors were few and far between. Last night she'd eaten the last bits of congealed porridge—"ye'd just throw it up," she said, "and I mun make milk for the baby"—and this morning she'd burnt the last lumps of coal in the small brazier. Its pitiable radius of heat had long since yielded to the needling cold.

For the second time today, the landlady had stomped, as loudly as possible, to a standstill on the landing outside their locked door, whereupon she pounded on the frame for five minutes running, demanding the rent due last month, else she'd be summoning the bailiff and *out on the street for your brood it'll be, Missy, newborn infant or not I dunna run a charity here.*

"I can't take any more," his mother had moaned to the walls as much as to the sick boy. Having exhausted her dwindling stock of spirits and laudanum days before, she was growing wild with distraction.

She waited till midnight, listening to make sure the tenants of the boarding house had retired.

"Can't leave the brat with you," she said, resentfully, "you're too delirious." So she bundled Davey in a thick shawl, creating a pouch that she tied to her chest. She draped her cape over them both, muffling Davey's whimpers, and added a second, Indian shawl. Just before putting on her beaver bonnet, she rouged her lips and pinched her cheeks. The bonnet and shawl had been indulgences, depleting the pittance the man had sent her by post at the beginning of the month.

"Investments!" she had told the boy, mirthful with gin, when she'd modeled them in front of the cracked mirror on the wall.



“If I strike it lucky with a bloke tonight,” she now muttered, as much to herself as her son, “one o’ the other gels mun take care o’ the babe or else they’ll meet mad Antoinette’s claws.” She turned back to the bed. “Damme, Boy! Up on your feet and bolt the door behind me. And stop looking like the face o’ death, there’s woes enough without adding to my miseries.”

She passed through the threshold, and out of his life.

\* \* \*

“Stop your carping, wife!” the man said. “I found the lad starving, and houseless, as good as dumb in the streets down by the docks, and none to claim him. God revealed my duty. Would you have me deny it? And you—” he turned to his son, “stop that sniveling! *Nay*, I didn’t bring him all this way to be a servant—you and your sister mun treat him as your sibling. Slight the poor lad and it will be the leather strap to *your* high-and-mighty backside.”

At the mention of a strap, the girl’s face lit up. “Papa! You promised to bring me a whip for my pony!”

“Law, child, I lost it attending to the boy here.” He petted his daughter’s upturned head. “At least you, my mischievous sweet, seem to favor the forlorn creature. Ellen—take him to the back kitchen and wash him clean. Off with the rest of you—I’m fagged, I am!”

By the time the servant-girl had done her best with soapy water and a rough towel and bedded the silent boy in the adolescent youth’s room, as her master had instructed, the cuckoo on the sideboard had sounded twelve times. The man’s son was not happy. Once the other inhabitants of the house, roof beams creaking and

groaning in the wuthering winds outside, were sound asleep, he grabbed the drowsing boy by the ruff of his oversized nightshirt and threw him out onto the landing, along with a thin blanket, suggesting he disappear before morning light if he knew what was best for him. The boy didn't protest, as he crawled into the dim recess of a hallway; he was as used to making rough planking his bed as he was to the cold.

There the girl, awakened in the middle of the night by the faint sound of an unfamiliar whimpering, like that of an injured pup, found him, curled in a tight ball outside her door. Without words she shook him awake and, taking his hand in her own, led him into her chamber. Looming in the corner was an enclosed wooden bed, ancient and elaborately carved. As she drew the boy into its interior and slid shut the casement doors, it seemed to him as if time itself had slipped away, had returned him to the battered armoire—but now, instead of fearing his mother's wrath by making an untoward noise, he felt, as the two children twined their small bodies together, the peace of a not unquiet slumber for the first time in memory.

\*\*\*

When his fever had finally broken, twenty hours after his mother had left him alone, the edges of the sweat-drenched sheet covering him had frozen to icy shards. He woke expecting to see his mother sitting in the room's chair, Davey nursing at her breast, perhaps a chunk of second-day bread or wedge of cheese on the table. But the dark room was empty—there was just himself and a glacial chill of frightening dimensions. Weak as his body felt, he forced himself out of bed and

into his heaviest clothes, cap pulled low on his brow, worsted mittens at the ready. By some miracle he made it down the unlit servants' stairs and out the rear door, into the alley and into the black night, without being detected. The snow had stopped falling, parted clouds revealed a half moon. The boy's limbs ached, his lungs rasped, but his mind was clear for the first time in days as he compiled a list of the taverns, street corners, doorways, where he might most likely find his mother. He threaded the back alleys and mews as deftly as the narrow path between the mountain-high drifts allowed, stepping around the forms of drunken louts who'd recently fallen in the snow and might or might not rise to sleep off another day, jumping the frozen puddles of waste and sewage, pressing his face up to the misty panes of alehouses where rowdy men and rouged women mixed, timidly venturing into the ones where he was a known presence. The barkeep at the Fancy's Figurehead shook his head when he asked after his mother but handed him a thick crust of buttered bread, the proprietor of the Blue Bertha chased him out with raised fists, cursing his minx of a mother for failing to pay her tab.

It was half past ten, so the bells of St. Peter were tolling, when he found them in one of the close lanes that made up the maze of backways below Pool Lane leading to the docks. Their bodies were hidden in the shadowed recess of a low rear door where mother had crouched with infant son, their forms frosted in snow dust that, in the moonlight, transformed them into pale marble. Both had ceased breathing long ago. Up to a point, his mother must have been lucky; he found folded in the frozen palm of the hand that pressed Davey to her breast three

shillings. An empty vial had fallen to her lap. He pried the coins from her fingers and didn't look back.

\* \* \*

When the man found him in early June he had been roaming the streets for two months, one of the band of homeless waifs who had learned the art of dodging the authorities—brass-buttoned constabularies, ship patrollers in want of cabin boys, charity-minded ministers—who would gladly have swept the lot of them off the streets and into workhouses or orphanages or onto merchant vessels. Through wiles and cunning, they survived, these wild boys, moving together in pack formation as one body, strategically picking their targets and waiting for the precise moment to attack, swiftly retreating to hidden lairs where they huddled together in one mass for warmth. They depended on and supported each other against the world with creature-like loyalty; they vied with and fought each other viciously. They were a motley-hued crew—black, brown, white, yellow—and a polyglot blend of languages issued from their lips in a cant of their own invention. Some were the mixed-blood spawn of slave-trade masters and their African booty; some, orphaned refugees come to Liverpool to escape Ireland's famine; some, runaways from the provinces. But they uniformly had scrawny bodies, wild eyes that terrified, fists that could wound, and feet as nimble as the winged Mercury. The boy was a member of the pack, accepted by his comrades without question when, after his mother's death, he drifted into their orbit. But he always remained on its margins—part of and loyal to the horde but wary, ever wary, prepared to take off at a moment's notice.

It was the voice that had drawn him back into the circle of civilization. The same barrel-chested voice to which he had listened through the doors of the armoire, the voice of the man who had asked his mistress to acquaint him with her fatherless son, the man who had begot and claimed Davey. When he returned to Liverpool in June, the man had found that his secret life had vanished from the face of the earth. All the landlady knew was that the dam and her bastards had gone missing during the legendary blizzard that brought the city to a standstill on April Fool's Day. What she didn't know was that the corpses of mother and Davey had been carted off with a dozen others, when the freeze ended, to an anonymous paupers' grave.

The man was frantic; he spent two days roaming the streets and lanes of the dockyards and town, praying for mercy from God, asking for a sign, as he inquired after Antoinette and her children; he pressed into the hands and faces of the local merchants, the tavern-keepers, the prostitutes and their pimps, the painted miniature of his beloved that he kept in a locket in his vest pocket. It so happened that the boy and three of his cronies were crouched behind the refuse heap in the mews off Stone Street, plotting a distraction in order to make off with a handful of produce from a vendor whose cart had halted around the corner, just out of sight, when the man had approached the same stand, showing his miniature portrait and asking, in his distinctive brogue, if the vendor recalled seeing the lady.

The boy didn't need to understand the man's words—the very timbre of his voice—direct; demanding; desperate with desire—was all it took. Like an automaton, he left his hiding place and walked forward, tremulously. At first his comrades attempted to pull him back, hissing at him not to spoil their game, then

they watched in gaping wonder as he approached the man and waited by his side, silently, till the man espied him.

Swiftly, the man knelt and swooped the boy up into his arms.

Afterwards, there was time enough for the boy to explain, in halting words, the fates of his mother and Davey. There was time, as well, for the man to tend to the boy and feed him real grub. And there was time for the man to swear, in the timbrous voice to which the boy had always felt strangely drawn, fidelity to the lad, for his mother and brother's sakes. "I made a vow. Ye shall be the vessel of my atonement. Rise, son, 'tis time to journey home."

\* \* \*

"Well, if we *must* keep 'im," the mistress grumbled as she served up porridge the next morning, "and I reckon we must if you claim it be the Lord's will, then the boy has to be given a name."

Cathy looked at her parents expectantly, tugging at her new friend's borrowed trousers beneath the trestle table. The downcast eyes of her older brother, who'd been thrashed for evicting the boy from his bed the night before, were swollen, auguring the ill-will to come in future years. The parents conferred. Their beloved firstborn had died in infancy.

"That settles the matter," the man said. "You shall bear his name."

Heathcliff hence he became. It was to serve both as familiar and surname in the years to come. One night six years later, long after the man and his wife had passed away and three months after Hindley had returned home from his studies to make the children's lives miserable, the youth looked on as the girl carved into the ledge

of the latticed window in the enclosed bed chamber their two names, joined as one: *Catherine Heathcliff*.

“There! You are mine, and I am yours. Nothing shall separate us. Ever.”

He traced the etching with an extended finger before they curled together and fell asleep behind the sliding doors. Tomorrow they intended to rebel against Hindley’s tyranny and, weather permitting, to have a most glorious romp on the moors.

.....

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*Error of opinion may be tolerated where  
reason is free to combat it.*

—*Thomas Jefferson*

## STUDIES OF THE DARK

Natalie Bryant-Rizzieri—*1<sup>st</sup> Place National Poetry 2017 Hackney Literary Award*

- i. Here is the bitter road that parses  
the past from the afterlife.
- Here is the road of ripened figs.
- You used to sacrifice hunger  
for vision, sleep for God.
- The old way is hard
- but you forced sight and power  
has its own draw, even in the form  
of asceticism.
- Wasps sacrifice wings to lay eggs  
inside figs.
- You cut back branches blazing  
with fruit
- for what reason?



**ii.** Dust off inverted flowers.  
Turn the fig inside out.  
  
Take and eat  
  
petals encased in skin,  
invisible digested wasps—  
pollinators, mothers of figs.  
  
This may be your only consolation  
when the old way is hard  
to leave behind.  
  
Do not walk the sparse road  
of denial turned death,  
  
not when you think of the impasse  
God is.  
  
You used to hold your hands inside out—  
emptied.  
  
But that is nearly impossible  
now  
  
with figs soft and ready to wither  
within the noon hour.

Your hands are full, smeared  
with seeds, wasps, petals, juice.

**iii.** The old way is hard to leave behind.  
What takes the place of hunger?

**iv.** Gather rocks.

Bang them together  
to see what sparks fly  
from this sort of prayer.

Discard mica for siltstone—  
Sometimes life from death  
is indistinguishable.

Discard sandstone for basalt—  
Sometimes starvation  
from mysticism.

Cicada songs lace through late summer,  
steal through your ripened chest,  
fray out your back.

Follow the long road that sorts out  
quartz from hunger, figs from sight.

.....

*Natalie Bryant Rizzieri's poems have appeared in numerous journals. Her book, From the Same Fruit, was a semifinalist for both the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award and the St. Lawrence Press Book award. Her poem, "Studies of the Dark," won first place in the national competition for the Hackney Literary Prize. She runs a tiny group home called Warm Hearth for orphans with disabilities in Armenia. She also spends her time, at least in spring, digging for earthworms with her three sons and husband in Flagstaff, AZ.*  
**natalie.rizzieri@gmail.com**

## SUSTENANCE

Karen Edmisten

Bread,  
like marriage,  
requires the promise  
of leavening.

There is flour and water —  
foundation — yes,  
but it begs  
something more:  
fermentation, lather,  
messiness  
and growth.  
It must take on life,  
risk failure,  
swell in size,  
though never  
sloppily escape  
its necessary confines.

My husband  
mixes flour

and water,  
baking bread for me.  
*It is nothing,*  
he says.

*It is everything,*  
I counter,  
as I watch him  
measure, stir yeast  
and add salt,  
carefully constructing a promise.

.....

*Karen Edmisten is a freelance writer, the author of five books, and an instructor at Brave  
Writer, where she delights in helping young writers find their voices.*

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