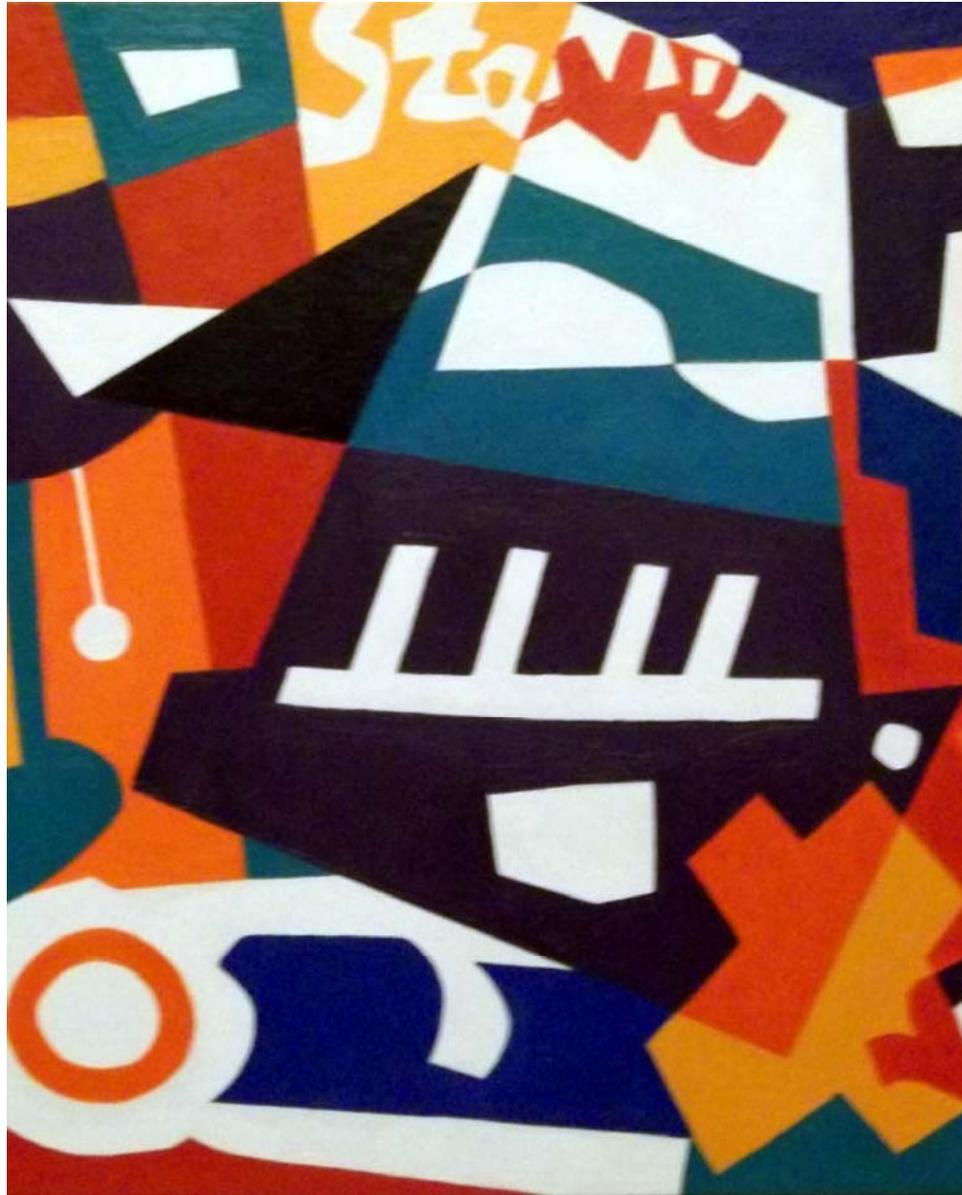


Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 8 Issue 3



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: **NO SMOKING**, 20" X 20", Acrylic on Canvas

Stephen Davis is a self-taught artist who lives and works from his home studio in St. Louis, Missouri. Exploring regional themes in colored pencil studies, Stephen then translates some of these into acrylic paintings on canvas. No Smoking comments on the recent smoking ban put into effect in St. Louis. More of Stephen's work may be seen at www.1-stephen-davis.artistwebsites.com

Back Cover: **Bayou Sunset**, Photo

Ty Evans lives in the Birmingham, Alabama, area and enjoys taking pictures in his spare time. His other interests include collecting antique books, playing the guitar, and traveling. ty.evans66@yahoo.com

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EVERY WINTER

Joel Fry

The Snake River slithers
up to the old man's house every winter
through oak thickets and brambles,
through a latticework of layered leaves.
It carries enough driftwood to build
a city. He lives close to the tumbling water,
close to all he knows -- near catfish, bass,
bream and gar. Always he hears the climbing
ripples slink away like the woman
who brought him crooning to her nest,
the cottage of her fingers, who inhabits
his study of rage and remorse, whose face
he sees blood-red and stamped on the sky
big as a harvest moon.

The cloudy night carries him
through desire. It swaddles him
through a tour of every woman
he has known, through torrents
of elegance when he reaches for flesh
and blood but finds only bed sheets,
when he hears only his heartbeat and
the distant howl of a neighbor's dog.

His voice courses through a fever
of starlight, a promenade of echoes.
He is poised on the edge of a mystery
he cannot command, a chorus he cannot escape.
Life is a one-act play that loves to repeat itself.
The river covers the sounds of his prayers,
the rumbles of his body's ecstasy, the memory
of a summer that curled his torso. The water
swallows every approaching sound. He lives
by its permission.

.....
*Joel Fry lives in Athens, Alabama. His poetry has been published in Stirring, Poem,
Acorn and other journals. He has work forthcoming in Blue Unicorn.*
fryjoel46@gmail.com

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DEATH'S COUNTDOWN

K. Bond

When my wife died, I realized every tick of the clock brings us nearer to death. So I began thinking more and more about my death. I thought about my funeral. It would be something simple -- something with music. My brother Mike and his family would come, but Mike would be the only one to cry. Some of my old coworkers would make an appearance -- mostly because they are retired and have nothing better to do. A drab man would recount my life in twenty minutes. Then, I would be underground.

I envisioned myself lying there inside a powder blue casket with folded arms, unable to move. Even with closed eyes inside a casket, I would sense the ground encircling me. Six feet of dirt would separate me from the living world and my gravestone, which would read: James "Jim" Hennex, Beloved Husband. My only comfort would come from knowing my wife would slumber so near to me. That is what I saw in my mind's eye as I listened to the ticking of the clock -- death's countdown.

Therefore, I grew determined not to waste any time. Time is valuable and should not be taken for granted. Money -- you can always earn more of that. When you have no more time, that is it! Make the most of your time. Get things done, practical things that will last and benefit you in the future. Be a busy ant that works all summer to stock up on loads and loads of time.

Hobbies were disposed of first. Every plastic model ship and superglue tube became rubbish. I stopped waiting hours to photograph the perfect angle of a magnificent bird. Goodbye, camera. I stopped paying my gym member dues. Adios, racket balls and rackets. I sold off the cabin and the land it was on. Sayonara to you, tents and fishing poles and canoes.

With no hobbies, I found myself watching more and more television. Waste! When I did not watch television, I listened to the radio. Waste! Those electronics -- well, I loaded them in my car to donate to charities that collect time-wasters.

It was as I was loading my car that my brother called. Mike wanted to chat about this and that, trivial matters and frivolous things. I told him I had to go and loaded that phone right on top of the heap I somehow managed to squeeze into the trunk of the black Volvo.

When I returned from the charity, I looked upon my furniture -- the dusty, dusty furniture that I wasted time polishing. I knew it would not fit in the Volvo, so I dragged the wood furniture to my front lawn. I wrote "FREE" in black marker on three pieces of paper and taped each paper to a full bookshelf of books, a dining room table, and a full bureau of clothes.

It then occurred to me how much time I wasted changing the oil on my Volvo and pumping its hungry belly with gas. In broad, thick strokes, I wrote "FREE" on one more piece of paper and taped it to its window.

After that, I returned to the couch and stared at the pendulum swinging on the tall grandfather clock. I listened to the tick, tick, ticking of the clock. For three hours, I sat and watched and listened without a single second of wasted time.

And I never felt deader in my life.

I wrote my own death certificate on a piece of paper in black marker. I wrote my own name: James "Jim" Hennex. I wrote my cause of death: Insanity. I wrote the time: 7:47. And I decided it could not end this way.

So I immediately created a birth certificate on a new piece of paper. I gave myself a new name: Peter Barello. I wrote the time: 7:48. And I decided this would be my new beginning, one in which I allowed myself to waste a little time. But not too much.

.....

K. Bond draws on experience from business writing to entertain readers. Her fiction appears in several print and online magazines. k.bondofstl@yahoo.com

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“I listen to the voices.”

--William Faulkner

VERY LONG TIME

Ron Self

This is the way it should be:
you reach across the table,
take my hands in yours,
look deep into my eyes,
and we stay that way a long time;
then we rise, and I put my hands
on your shoulders, one on each side,
and you put your hands
on my shoulders, one on each side,
and we lean into one another
so that our heads touch,
and we stay that way a long time;
and then our hands slide down,
our arms wrap round, our bodies
nestle into one another,
and we stay that way a long time;
and then we lie down,
we lie down together,
and we stay that way a long time;
until finally someone comes along,
covers us with a blanket
of soft, warm earth,
and we stay that way a very long time.

.....
Ron Self is a lawyer-musician in Columbus, Georgia, and past president of the Georgia Poetry Society. His poetry has appeared Atlanta Review, The English Journal, Cortland Review, Legal Studies Forum, Encore, Playgrounds Magazine and others. He received the 2008 Plains Poet Award and the 2010 San Antonio Poets Prize of the National Federation of State Poetry Societies. This year, he was co-winner of the Under 100 Chapbook Competition of the Georgia Poetry Society. He is a co-founder and editor of the Brick Road Poetry Press.
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SIX HAIKU

Peter Meister

grey forest –
below clouds,
dark green

in touch
with the first ice age
autumn rain

empty leaf –
from when the campus sidewalk
was young –

after the rain
rain
from the shed

neighbors' lights
shining up
from our field

growing sideways
out from under shade long gone –
leaning catalpa

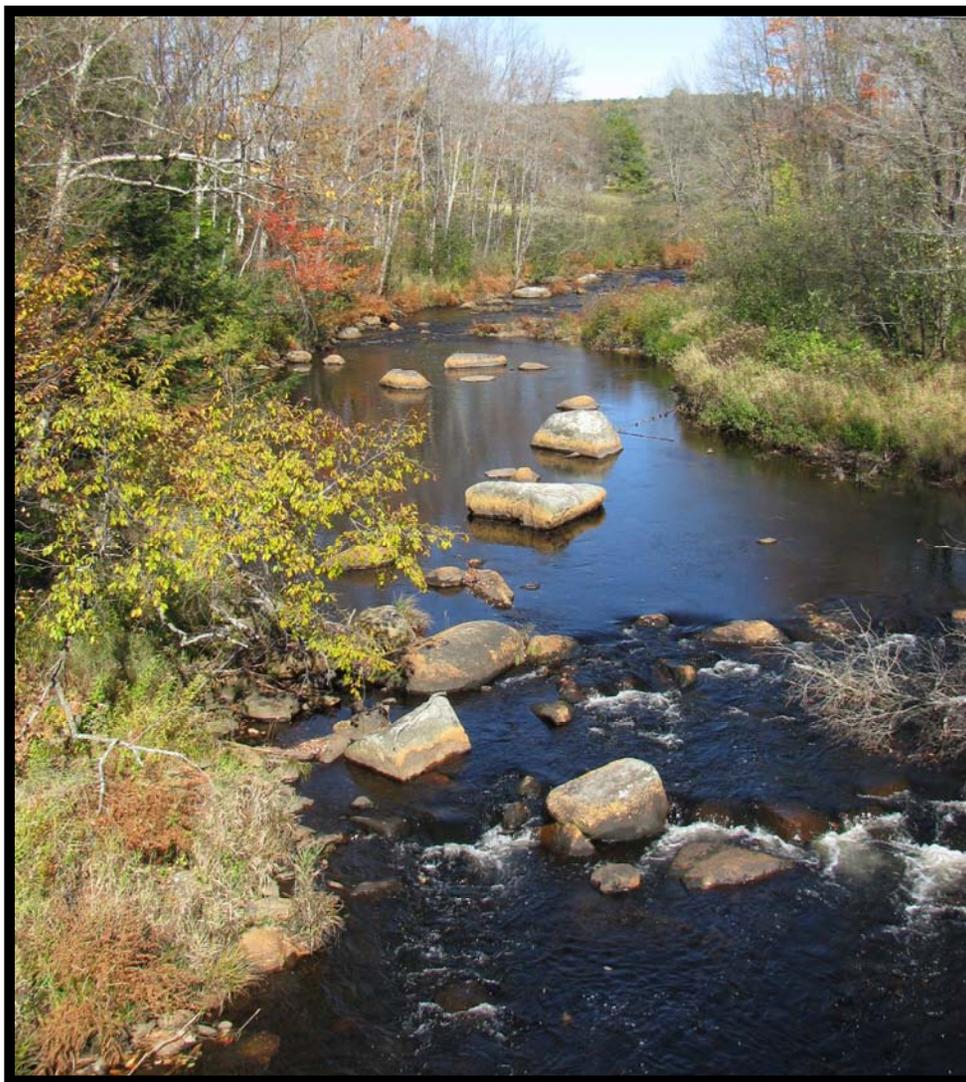
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Peter Meister teaches German at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. He has been publishing poetry in a variety of forms since the mid-seventies. He has also composed one or two hymns.

.....

"If a word were misspelled in the dictionary, how would we know?"

--Ziggy



NEW ENGLAND AUTUMN

Pat St. Pierre

Pat St. Pierre is an amateur photographer and freelance writer from Connecticut. Her photos have been on the covers of Wee Ones, Pond Ripples, The Shine Journal, etc. and included in KidzWonder, among others, and she has won several Editor's Choice awards and contests.

TODAY LET US CONSIDER STONE

Joseph L. Whitten

Observe

the pebble

broken and tumbled

silk-smooth by eons of water;

the boulder

in prehistory upheaval,

broken from the mountain and cast down;

granite domes

thrust scarred but whole

from deep rumblings of Earth,

Each shaped by conflict—
water—wind—fire—in its season
breaking—shaping—polishing
until now and into tomorrow.

Consider

Stone Mountain

man-chiseled memorial to conflict.

Conquered Confederates staring the future

hats over hearts

respecting the past—

or

mourning the future?

.....

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

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TUESDAYS WITH MIMSEY

Wayne Scheer

Mimsey Sue Mathers always had peculiar ways about her.

And in Flippen, Georgia, folks cotton to peculiar about as much as they take to a rattlesnake in the schoolyard. Or a woman preacher.

Blame her daddy, Parnell. He was always writing his crazy ideas in the town newspaper, which he published. Like when the Methodist church burned, he thought the Methodists and the Baptists should pray together since they worshipped the same God. And when the government closed the old colored school, Parnell said it was a good idea for the children to be together.

It's no wonder Mimsey's head overflowed with foolishness, growing up in a home like that.

Even though her mama died when she was a baby, Mimsey always loved to sing and tell stories. Too happy, is the way most folks described her, believing something was wrong in her head.

But she took care of her daddy, who grew more cantankerous with each new wrinkle on his craggy face. He made her promise to keep up his work -- whatever that was. He even wrote about it in his last column in the newspaper where he quoted a poem by some colored man named Langston Hughes. He called the column, "What Happens to a Dream Deferred?" or some foolishness like that. I remember the poem ended this way:

Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

None of us had any idea what he meant, but Mimsey kept right on smiling at everyone, even at her daddy's funeral.

And she got more and more peculiar, wearing big floppy hats and pants with glittery stuff on them. She worked in our town's library where she read books to the children and told them stories. Their parents would stick around to make sure Mimsey wasn't spouting the nonsense her daddy used to.

Funny thing, the adults enjoyed her stories about as much as the children. So she made Tuesday nights story time for the grown-ups. Black

folks would sit on one side, whites on the other, and she would stand in the middle, telling her stories and singing until both sides began whooping it up like they was all one family.

Mimsey always ended the festivities by singing, “Amazing Grace,” without music, but with the most tearful voice you ever heard. More than once grown men would cry. Then they'd eat the cakes brought by the women. And, later, the men, black and white, would put away the chairs and wish each other to drive home safe.

Mimsey would wait until the last person wrapped up the last piece of cake. Then she'd take her daddy's picture out from her big handbag, and have herself a good cry.

I told you she was peculiar.

.....

Wayne Scheer has been nominated for four Pushcart Prizes and a Best of the Web. His stories, essays and poems have appeared in print and online. Revealing Moments, a collection of twenty-four stories, can be downloaded at <http://www.pearnoir.com/thumbscrews.htm>. A film adaptation of his story, Zen and the Art of House Painting, is available at: <http://vimeo.com/18491827.wvscheer@aol.com>

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**“If you don’t think too good,
don’t think too much.”**

--Ted Williams

THE FLOATING DOCK

Christamar Varicella

The younger of the two boys scooped up a pebble and meant to toss it in the lake. He extended his back -- arm cocked and ready -- and glanced over at his brother expecting to meet a smile of encouragement, but instead found a set of furrowed eyebrows. He held the pose as he plotted his next move, finally releasing his pitch and catapulting a small gust of wind; the rock fell harmlessly behind him. He waited for his brother to return his smile, but the older boy's annoyance faded only after his attention locked onto something down the hill by the pier.

The yellow bow -- the banana they called it because of its shape and color -- rested in his lap, an arrow already fitted on the string. Slowly, Charley raised his little brother's toy. He drew back the string with two fingers as he mashed shut his left eye and sighted by the shaft, removing the red and green feathers from focus.

Sam was pivoting from hip to hip, craning his neck, and squinting to find the target when he heard the chord snap and the arrow whizz down the hill, all of twelve feet. *Thump*. It struck near the base of the dock.

The two boys emerged from the shade of the pine tree cluster and into the open sun. Charley bounded down the hill and was first crossing the plank bridge from the grassy bank to the floating dock. Sam scampered, yards behind. Charley was already on his hands and knees, peering over the edge, trying to remove the arrow, when Sam arrived.

The sun-cooked lumber roasted the balls of his feet. He bounced from burning foot to burning foot, then cooled his soles in the water collected in the little red dinghy tied against the pier, which swayed under the most trivial weight.

The dock was a plywood box mounted on three large Styrofoam buoys. Remove the bridge now, Sam thought, and Charley and he would float away. They could go on an adventure like Huckleberry Finn.

The arrow had caught one of the buoys.

"I wouldn't have believed it," Charley said.

"What?"

“Stop shaking the dock.”

Sam stared at Charley’s freckled back. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his cutoff blue jean shorts and then took them out again.

Charley hunched over his prey. He rose without the use of his hands, nimbly shifting his weight from his knees to his feet. When he turned toward his brother, he was grinning. A present was attached to the tip of the arrow. What at first appeared to be a long piece of spinning black licorice transmogrified into a snake.

Instinctively, Sam moved back a step. The lake was behind him. Charley stood between him and the bank. He darted forward, but Charley sealed off his escape route, waving the animal in the air as he crept closer to his little brother.

“It’s a water moccasin. It’s poisonous.”

“Stop, Charley.”

“Come ‘ere.”

“No, Charley!”

“I won’t let it hurt you.”

“Mom!”

Charley chuckled. “I just want to show it to you. Come closer.”

Sam refused to come closer.

“Come on. I’m not going to put it on you.”

“You better not.” One foot crawled forward an inch, and then the other. The arrow was almost as big as the animal’s skull.

“How did you do that?”

Charley continued his examination. Sam remained quiet, still frightened by the animal’s thrashing tail.

“Why is it still moving?”

“That’s its nerves,” Charley explained. “It’ll stop eventually.”

“It’s dead?”

Charley nodded.

Sam wondered if the snake knew that it was dead.

Charley went up the hill to the house and came back down with a garden hoe. He laid the wiggling snake in the grass by the dock.

“You can turn your back if you want to.”

Sam did as he was told. "What are you doing?"

"You want it to stop wiggling, don't you?"

Sam heard his brother make several whacks into the earth. When his job was done, a tiny blood-flecked head looked up through blades of grass.

Charley carried the body over to the dinghy and tossed it into the pool of water collected there. The headless snake swam, apparently oblivious to his condition.

"You said it would stop," Sam complained.

"It will."

They watched the snake for a long time. When at last the nerves ended, Charley took the body to the head and buried them.

But the snake never really went away. Sam carried the snake with him through the years. He grew to be a man, a large man, and still he carried the snake and also the little boy. Both the little boy and the snake were with him years later when he drove his car through the gates of the cemetery.

It was a large cemetery that soon stretched around him to the horizon in every direction. Little hills rolled around him like waves with headstones bobbing up through the green grass. He drifted along in his beat-up Toyota, trying to find his bearings.

It was more than a year since he'd been to this place and he was lost. At a random point, he pulled his car over to the side of the path. He left the driver's door hanging open and trudged up one of the hills. He scanned the names on the gravestones. The headless snake was with him then, guiding him, powering him on through the will of exposed nerves. Nerves that would never end.

The little boy trailed close behind.

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Christamar Varicella's work has appeared in Minnetonka Review, 580 Split, and JMWW. He holds a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Spalding University. christamar10@hotmail.com

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DECORATE THE DAY

Sheila Dené Lawrence

Like spider tentacles, Mable's feeble fingers pulled out her biggest and best straw hat -- the one with the silk flowers encircling the brim. It only came out of the box once a year. It had been George's favorite so she wore it for him every Decorations' Day -- when she went to adorn his grave.

Decorations' Day was a special time designated for daughters, sisters and widows of the Confederacy to honor the courage of their dearly departed menfolk. Not to be confused with Veterans' Day and Memorial Day, it gave the women an excuse to dress up, cook all their special dishes and catch up on the latest and greatest in gossip news while listening to familiar tales of "I Remember When."

For the occasion, Mable cooked George's favorite seven layer caramel butter cake and she got her daughter to drive her to Green Meadows Cemetery in Albuquerque, Alabama, where her beloved lay blissfully at rest. He was her true love for the entire world to see -- all they had to do was read the epitaph on his headstone, "To my true love, George. From your one and only, Mable. I will see you again." And she was his one and only. He had tried to leave once but that was how he ended up at Green Meadows, buried along with his prestigious purple heart.

It was funny how Mable had never served any time and she remained faithful to her holy matrimonial vows, even in her partner's untimely demise. No one ever spoke of the incident but everyone knew.

Mable packed her picnic basket and tools -- a swish broom and an old rusty retired ice pick -- in case the flowers needed a hole to stand up in. Even the pick was special -- it was the pick that had ultimately landed George in Green Meadows. Everything had meaning to Mable and George's relationship.

Once Mable arrived, she insisted on being alone with George -- telling her daughter they needed their intimate time together. She was already salty because they were the last to arrive and all the other graves had fresh flowers before George's did.

How she hem-hawed over his eternal resting place -- she trimmed stray weeds, brushed the dust away, positioned his flowers just right --

rearranged them if someone else had been thoughtful enough to come by and leave an arrangement. In the background, she heard a low hum, then a chug-a-lug-a-lug, then lo and behold, a choo-choo.

“Oh my heavens,” Mable screeched. “What in the world?”

She raced back to her daughter. “How long have trains been coming through here disturbing my George?”

“They’ve always come through on that track, just not ever when we were here. It’s because we’re later than usual.”

“Well, this will never do. You know how my George hated noise. He wouldn’t be happy at all with this location.” Mable collected her equipment and insisted, “Drive me to the other side, right now.”

“Sure. Are you going to decorate Uncle David’s grave this year?”

“No, you know he and George were on the outs when they moved in here. George would never stand for that.”

As she trailed the bobbing brim, Mable’s daughter asked, “Then who’s on the other side that you want to visit?”

“I’m not going to see anyone else. I’m going over there to pick George another spot, one where it’s quiet, but not too close to you-know-who. Then I’m going to have him moved as soon as possible so he can finally get some rest.”

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Sheila Dene’ Lawrence writes from Birmingham, Alabama, where she also works as a Systems’ Analyst and Associate Minister. She has authored titles of fiction and inspirational non-fiction. ohsheila@writeme.com

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**“If you can tickle yourself, you
can laugh when you please.”**

--Russian proverb



LIFE STUDY DRAWING #3

8" x 12"

Graphite on Paper

Jeff Faulk lives and paints in Birmingham, Alabama. jeffart61@aol.com

THAT NIGHT

Mark Sumioka

It had been a torrential night. The drinking had gotten out of hand to where our buzzes were delightful and we talked over nonsensical matters with luster and humor. But there was that chemistry of ours, the one that changed when we drank together. And it spun out of control that night.

Gale found a button to push, and exploited it. I argued over it with flaring pride. She egged me on, needling me -- even physically with her fingernail -- until we burst and our fight was intense, though never loud. And she persisted like no other woman I'd ever known; she knew how to lead me to the gaping trap where I would fall into the hole in the ground and sting with assaulted pride. She knew me well. Then I grabbed her forearm and held it tightly. I could feel my fingers pressing so that the bruises would come in a day. She grabbed my hair but it was too short, so then my ear. Suddenly I released her, realizing my foolishness. But she kept her hold on me until I raised my forearm like a karate block and moved away with headiness that said you are a man and dangerous now.

There was our heavy breathing, and the space between us trembling. Gale turned to leave, but before proceeding to the bedroom she went back to the coffee table, picked up her half-filled drink, downed it, and sped past me, closing the bedroom door. I shook my head because, like me, she never left a drop. Then it was to the couch where I slept and finally realized what throngs of men had experienced before me.

I passed out with my heart pounding in anger. I was done with her. It was a waste of time to live in such ferocity. We would be better off separate. When I woke to pee there was still anger and the thoughts of how it would be to live alone again, to have my bed to myself, and be able to stretch out and not worry about the half-the-mattress-apiece thing. I relished in it. I would be solo again. Damn straight.

After gulping a tall glass of water, I finally went to the bedroom. She was faced the other way. I was thankful. She lay on her side, legs together. Whenever I saw her this way I wondered whether her eyes might be open. I got in, lying on my back, annoyed that my right arm should not touch

her. There was that urge to spread my arms, and it made me shake my head. But that would soon change.

The morning light penetrated the faded peach curtains creating a yellowness that was neither inviting nor avoidable to the closed eye. Through the crack between the curtains and window was the stinging white light that I had to look at because I knew it was there. Still I fell asleep within minutes.

Later, I awoke while rolling over and there was less urgency, the memory of the fight watered down, and my grudge dissipated. Then came the solid mid-morning sleep that wouldn't wake a bear. Eventually Gale rustled wildly and the bed frame creaked loudly so that my eyes opened. I turned my head and her sleeping face was at my right cheek, pleasant, and not perplexed like usual. Her closed eyes told me things, explaining, showing reason. And the fight melted away, as did my determination to leave her.

I snoozed a bit longer. Then, feeling clear-minded again, I went to the kitchen and drank another glass of water, the misery now an afterthought. It was no longer necessary to carry such hatred over the incident. We were together. It had come with the alcohol and the rambunctious bravado of two tired drinkers. Standing at the bedroom door I shook my head again, this time with forgiveness and never mind. I watched her sleep and sighed relief that we wouldn't have to go through with it, the tediousness of sorting our mess, and the dividing of personal effects. The light at the curtains was softer now, as the sun was rising overhead. I went and lay down next to her even though I was wide-awake.

.....

Mark Sumioka was raised in Anaheim, California. He is a graduate of Cal Poly Pomona. His work has appeared in The Wall Street Journal Online, Scholars and Rogues, The Legendary, Orion Headless, Cynic Online Magazine, Ken Again, and Pens on Fire. He lives in coastal San Diego.

msumioka@yahoo.com

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RULER OF THE MUSIC

Amy Janette Trousdale

She stood there, tilting her head all the way back, studying the monster that stood above her. Jane was honored when she was asked to play the organ at the Saturday night Mass. Now with her new office before her eyes, she could see the difficult journey that lay before her. The unknown rattled her nerves. She was unaware of how her body would react to this new experience. For at past piano recitals, springs replaced the bones in her fingers causing quick bouncing movements that she could not control. This new job would be just like a crowded performance except the people would be singing along. Jane could not bear the thought of it.

So there it stood, Jane's exhilarated nightmare, showing off its greatness. Its powerful guns, shooting out the euphonious melodies, towered up to the sky-like sequoias in the Sierra Mountains. Its keys glistened like pearls, polished to perfection. Its foot pedals covered the floor, branching out like rays from the sun. Its body stood strong and proud, the wood thick and firm but as smooth as silk.

Her instructor beckoned her up to the balcony to start working on the pieces she would need to know. Just being near the instrument made Jane feel insignificant, like she was being assigned to take charge of an emperor. The millions of buttons and choices of sounds astounded her, giving this machine a vast knowledge of multiple tongues.

Jane was ignorant about why the church chose to throw this responsibility and privilege on her. No matter how hard the organ tried to discourage her, she was going to give it her best, wholeheartedly. She sat down, placed her fingers on the keys, the majesty's jewels, and played the notes the pages told her to. The monster, the king, the ruler of music, blasted the melody from its pipes, shaking the world with its power. "You have passed, little one. Welcome to my kingdom," said a gentle voice through the notes.

.....

Amy is a student at the University of North Alabama. She enjoys reading, writing, piano, music, and the outdoors. She wants to spend her life working with wild animals, teaching and playing piano, and writing. elephant21@comcast.net

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THE PRISONER'S POETRY PRIZE

Ian C Smith

My pal, the kind judge, has trekked
through a wasteland of poems about love.
His expertise is a donation of sympathy.
He calls, swooning in whisky's embrace.
Love is a teabag, he groans. And worse.
When I ask about violence as a theme
he surprises me, says there isn't much.
One prisoner's twenty terrible entries
perhaps reflect his life, or hers.
After more bizarre similes of love
we hang up and I drift into a reverie
about luck, loneliness, and chance
as the sun fades behind our far hills.
A prisoner has copied a poem, we believe,
but which of us is not guilty of longing?
It is about the bright world all around.
Its cadence is a thing of beauty
language lyrical, beguiling spirit free
like some people's lives, or love.

.....
*Ian C Smith's work has appeared in The Best Australian Poetry, Descant,
Island, Magma, The Malahat Review, and Southerly & Westerly. His latest
book is Lost Language of the Heart, Ginninderra (Adelaide). He lives in the
Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, Australia. bf@datafast.net.au*
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FRAGMENT

Benjamin Patrick

On a cold visit to a city on the coast, you indulge your taste for mischief. There is a neighborhood full of old, unkempt mansions in sight of your hotel, and in walking among them by streetlamp, taking in the craftsmanship of a century before, you find one at the end of the way that looks abandoned. The bottom-story windows are all boarded up and someone has scrawled his name in looping red letters over one side. A large crack almost splitting in half its concrete support on the right, the low gate hangs at an odd angle. You try the gate, find it unlocked. Then you are at the pair of Romanesque doors at the entrance, no memory of having crossed the lawn to get there.

The doors, too, are not locked though they open with the sound of wood splitting. You leave one slightly ajar rather than force it back into place in the warped doorjamb. Enough light comes through that opening to walk the hallway. Against one side, rows of empty beer cans are carefully arranged in a triangle, but otherwise the hall is bare. It eventually leads, your hand tracing the wall, into a great room, where all the more like a presence risen onto its haunches feels the absence of sensation in the dark.

You contain the panic that you will not be able to find the unfamiliar light switch, telling yourself that first there is no electricity in the house. Still, you hesitate at the mouth to the grand blackness, inviting. The only way to separate yourself from the wall is to run headlong into the room. A minute passes, then five; maybe. Time seems to have slowed. But the horn from a train passing somewhere through the city's outskirts reaches you as though a signal and you push off, bursting into the space. Immediately you reproach yourself for acting like a child, for running around an unknown house in an area you have explored for less than a day, even if you do pretend to appreciate architecture. You fix yourself at what you think is the center of the room but constantly circle lest you be too easy a target for whatever waits in here.

Inevitably you come crashing down on your elbows. Looking up into the light from the landing's high window, you see that you are at the base of a stairway. Gain the high ground, you think. The steps bow as you put your weight into them.

Your anxiety eases a bit on the window-lit second floor. Opening doors increases the light, and you walk from one entryway to the next, confidence growing. A stutter step -- you veer into a room. In another, you jump trying to reach the ceiling. This was a billiard room; this a library, from the series of tall shelves. You circle back at the end of the passage to revisit each, to find every hidden alcove, every unassuming feature. Soon you are making notes by way of talking to yourself. Quite loudly you talk to yourself, but there is no one to hear.

In the room closest the stairs, you corner a window to glance at your watch: Is it that late, window? Back to the hotel, then. Need to get ready for tomorrow.

After bounding down the steps, you pause to make certain your bearings. It is no different, so you walk the length of the great room with your eyes closed. Only ten and a half steps, goose steps, you have counted them out with the pace soldiers use in those countries that try too hard. Manageable, now. The house is already receding from you, peeling away, with you in the front hall. Your mind has switched to tracing the route back to the hotel; it is just far enough to be trying in this weather, a little over a mile.

You feel it beforehand in your chest, at the slenderness above your ankle where the legs are least protected from the chill.

In the moonlight, the gate spreads angular harp strings on the sidewalk. You watch them fold and unfold as you play with the heavy iron, listen to the hinges chirrup. While you bring the gate to, you toy with the idea of setting the side pillar upright. Right foot at its base, you place your shoulder just above the crack. A light comes on in the house at the last dormer window of the third story. Someone stands looking out, a black torso that fills the narrow square. Your lead leg gives way. You cannot see the face, but you know that he is staring down at you. You rise up, trembling, cannot see the face but know that he looks into you, straight into your seizing breast.

You run...

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Benjamin Patrick is a lapsed medical student living in the Birmingham, Alabama, area. His poetry can be found at www.theveryflesh.blogspot.com.

benpersons@hotmail.com

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WHY SHE DOES IT

John Vicary

She stood on the sidelines, apart from the other moms; she never had gotten the knack of small talk, even the easy camaraderie of sports-related jargon. She wasn't there for herself, she was there for him. To watch him.

It was still a surprise to her after all these years how different they were, the two of them -- a surprise and a bit of a relief. They were opposites, but he had gotten the best of her and none of the worst. She could watch him endlessly, his variations never a bore. She knew every plane of his face, every fleck in his eye.

And yet on the field he was one of many. She could hardly tell him apart from the others as they scrambled after the ball, all limbs and budding menace. Their play was turning rougher than she would have liked to see, but wasn't that boyhood? What did she know of such things? She who inhabited the world of books and yarn. The harshest thing she ever dealt with was a knitting needle. She was ill-prepared for the tribulations of encroaching manhood.

Watching them in their play, this herd of boys, was a marvel she had missed her own time around the schoolyard. She'd had her nose tucked in a book, her myopic gaze turned inward. She was shocked to find that one such as herself could produce an athlete. The popular one. A winner, with the charming smile.

She loved him, even though his kind had been her ruin in the distant memory of days gone past.

She watched him pull ahead of the pack and score the goal, almost effortlessly. Who was this creature, with the longer limbs and knobby knees? It frightened her that his babyhood was over. Then, they'd had a complicity. His head had fit in the crook of her shoulder; the sour smell of milk was hers to wash away, as familiar as time. His rolls of fat had insulated them both from the future of hurts, had been a comfort -- more to her than to him, it seemed now, as she watched him take a fall, unflinching.

Now as he walked off the field, eager to show off the mudsplatter, she covered her unease at his missing front tooth. The smell of his sweat was ever ranker, no longer the scent of a boy, but edging closer to man every day. He was changing, right before her eyes. *How was this fair, that life gave you your heart wrapped in a blanket to hold and then took back a piece from you every day, slowly, as it stretched and grew into something you couldn't recognize?*

But when he smiled, the dimple caught and the light crinkled and shone at the corners of his eyes, and she knew that she would always feel that little ball of warmth. He had his place in her -- that soft spot that ached sometimes with tenderness -- and that would never change. Those eyes would be the same, staring back at her, no matter how tall he got. And her heart settled back into her chest; all was right in the world again as they got into the car to go home.

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John Vicary is from Michigan. He is a two-time winner of Brigit's Flame, and has been a featured author at The Petulant Poetess. His poetry appears in The Louisville Review and The Silence of Yesterday. catlfoster@yahoo.com

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**“Anyone who says money can't
buy happiness doesn't know
where to shop.”**

--Eunice Wentworth “Lovey” Howell



HERE COMES THE SUN

Acrylic on Canvas
20" x 10"
Julie Brandino

*A graduate of Birmingham-Southern College, Julie Brandino lives and paints in Birmingham, Alabama. Her work focuses primarily on nature's bounty.
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GIVING UP OPTIONS

Jennifer L. Collins

She takes her shoes off without asking.
Lies back on the couch.
Looks at me.

Some of them do this, especially the girls.
Rather than balk the stereotype,
they run with it,
and I'm tempted to say, from the movies --
Tell me what you're feeling.
Tell me about your father, your mother.
Tell me why you're here.
I want to help you.
This is Your time, not mine.

The truth is this is my time they're using,
theirs they're wasting.
I don't ask anything, just wait,
and watch her thumbs twiddling,
pale patterns against the suede of the couch.
She soaks into the couch,
tells me she could use a nap.
I tell her this is her money,
but she laughs and says that no,
it's her mother's money.
She's right.
She closes her eyes,
and I think to myself this is her mother's need,
as well--
this girl is as adjusted as any adolescent.
More likely, her mother needs the couch.

I sit back and watch the scuffed heels of her shoes,
the way they lean half-hazardly and support each other,
the black that moves from shine to tarnish to shine.

I sit and watch and wait,
as if they'll get up and walk out into the rain.
As if they're more in charge than the girl here, or me.
As if, having been slipped out of,
and left alone,
they're all the more powerful.
All the more real.

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Jennifer Collins' poetry has appeared in Puerto Del Sol, The Rockford Review, Chelsea, Barbaric Yawp, Miller's Pond, Nerve Cowboy, Redivider, The Diner, 13th Moon, and Post Poems. She is the Creative Writing Director at Shenandoah University's Performing Arts Summer Camp and Editor of Duquesne University's literary journal. whitewavedarling@yahoo.com
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**"Well I object to all this sex on
the Television. I mean I keep
falling off."**

**--Graham Chapman
(Monty Python)**

NICE TO MEET HER

Ryan Gillespie

My ex always liked cars. A lot. He had a nice car, a nice black Mercedes he named Sadie. He took good care of it, called it his baby, waxed it and washed its hubcaps with the tips of his fingers, meticulously.

But I knew something weird was going on when I came back with the groceries, entered through our garage, and found him pressed up against his car with his pants down.

Initial reaction? It was a joke.

But then Eddie saw me walk in and his face *contorted* from some bizarre pleasure to heart stopping terror; he jerked back, stumbled and fell onto his ass, pants still down, then clambered up, yanked them up around his waist, and hurried inside.

That's when I knew something was up.

And by that night, we had split.

And then it was a week later and I wanted my stuff back, sick of bumming at a friend's and already ready to move on. In any other case, I might be sad or lonely or struggle emotionally letting go, severing what *had* been the most stable and fulfilling relationship I had had to date. But no, I was just mad. I was mad that my boyfriend essentially cheated on me with his *car*.

I hadn't spoken to him in a week. I let things stew. I hoped he cried. I really hoped he cried over me. Maybe somewhere in my soul my mouth watered at the thought of him begging me to take him back. But I also couldn't erase the image of him pressing his naked lower half against the back door of his car, or the image of his face -- bizarre pleasure -- oh my God, it was disgusting -- out of my head either.

I parked my own car far across the street -- so he couldn't molest it -- and yanked the cardboard box from my trunk before slamming the door. I stalked up the familiar steps to the front door, briefly remembering a hand tight around mine as Eddie took me home for the first time. I was in a blue party dress, he was in a sweaty dress shirt, and he told me I was beautiful before he led me upstairs and kissed me into the bedroom wall.

My heart stung.

I rang the bell.

Eddie came to the door in pajamas, with a bowl of cereal. He was always eating cereal. Cheerios, mostly. He opened the wooden door and looked at me through the screen, with my big box, and he took a step back.

“Hello, Eddie.”

“Hello, Sharon.”

I pulled open the screen and walked in. His small frame froze as I blew by, fixing my eyes away from his. He knew what I wanted. I went to the bedroom, to my drawer -- he asked me to move in with him over coffee, I was so happy -- and it creaked open when I pulled. All my clothes went into my box. They landed messily. I felt him in the doorway, but he didn't say anything until I shut the door.

“I'm sorry, Sharon.”

“I'm sorry too, Eddie.”

I stood. My shoes were in the closet; they went into the box as well.

“I don't suppose you'd want an apology.”

“I mean, since you're essentially leaving me for an inanimate object, an apology doesn't really ...”

“Don't talk about her like that.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot. *You're insane.*”

“I'm not insane.”

I picked my heavy box -- heavy heart -- up with a little difficulty, and when he moved to help me I jerked back, mostly because I wanted to hurt his feelings. And he did look hurt. I'm not usually a bitch, but the hurt on his face was so delicious, and the break up was still so fresh, and he was such a freak, so easy to insult, and I was a woman betrayed. I blew past him again and Eddie turned, still talking to me.

“Do you want an explanation? I can explain it all to you. It all makes sense.”

“I don't want to hear it.”

I was down the stairs and he was at the top when he called out: “I've always been this way!”

I whirled with my box, and glared him down, in his pajamas, with his tousled hair and his honest face that I maybe still loved a little, and I wanted him to tell me he was just joking and that I could move back in and we could be in love again, but he didn't, and so I spat:

"I don't want to hear about it. I don't want to hear about you fucking the pipe of your damn car and I don't want to hear about how you've always been this messed up. Hell, that makes it worse. You need help."

He followed me to the door, his voice rising.

"What was I supposed to say? I just wanted to feel normal. Stop walking away from me!"

I practically threw my box onto the ground and turned on him.

"You are sick and perverted. Your car is not alive."

"She is to me."

"Your car is not alive!"

"Stop saying that!"

"You are a *freak*, Eddie. A *freak*."

And then -- crying. His face crinkled up and he let out a quiet sob, one that tore into my heart. I only ever saw him cry at movies. He was a brave old soul with money and muggers and bumps in the night but melted at Lilo and Stitch -- he screamed at me to leave and turned and stumbled towards the kitchen, and I watched the back of his head with his tousled hair and I almost wished I could just take everything back, take him back. I still loved him. I jerked forward and somehow caught his shoulder, and he stopped, even though he didn't turn around.

There was this awful, awful silence, as if the world had turned its face from me in shame.

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Ryan Gillespie is a student at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. His work has appeared in ASFA's annual Cadence collection, and he has participated in three public readings of his own work. He currently lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and is in his senior year of high school. tami9900@gmail.com

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GLAZED HAM

Katherine Horrigan

The thing about John Carroll Hadley was that he hypnotized pigs before he moved on to humans. Everybody knew that. But nobody else besides Mama and me knew he wanted to better himself, not spend so much time with animals. This was his big chance he said. Mama always listened to him, said it was our Christian duty to help him go up the ladder in life. I don't rightly know what she meant. We never went to church. Maybe they had ladders there. Mrs. Sheftall, the town librarian, told me John Carroll checked out a lot of books on the subject. "Hypnotizing pigs?" I asked her. She gave me a look.

The night Mama agreed to let John Carroll Hadley hypnotize her, she got all dressed up in one of her Sunday-go-to-meeting dresses. That's what she called it anyway. "Hand me my little black hat, honey, the one with the dotted veil. Who knows what will happen over at John Carroll's? All's I know is I need to put my best foot forward tonight."

Mama was always telling me to put my best foot forward like they say in Girl Scouts. I hated Girl Scouts 'cause they made us pull the black stuff out of shrimps for the PTA lunch. Haven't ate shrimps since. Haven't been back to Girl Scouts either. That was when I took a vow to myself that I would never spend time in front of the bathroom mirror like my mama, inspecting herself like she was out to win a blue ribbon.

"Don't you be looking at me like that," she would say, brushing her teeth, turning her head this way and that, looking into the mirror so hard her eyes might pop out of her head. But her eyes went down as soon as she stopped brushing. They got real big again when she put on her makeup. I liked to watch her pursing her lips, smiling real big so's to look at her teeth again, then frowning while she examined her hairline for whiteheads and her nose for the black ones. When she brought out that shiny metal thing to curl her eyelashes, I had to look the other way. The worst was on Saturday afternoon when she put on her Merle Norman mask. The black bristles of the little brush she used to put it on always got stuck in the pink goo. Dog woke up and ran outside every time. Didn't like the smell I guess.

John Carroll Hadley stood at his front door, waiting for us.

"Now don't pay no mind if you hear some noise from out back. Meemaw's out there enjoying herself. Hear all that hollering? The cat

must of bit her again. She don't love that cat -- she'll tell you straight to your face.”

“Come on in.” Mama followed John Carroll Hadley into the front room and I followed Mama.

“I wouldn’t be nervous if I were you, Mrs.Slocumb. I've performed this service all over the county. (Yeah, but just on pigs, I wanted to say.) Mama wasn't nervous, I knew that, but John Carroll had little beads of sweat on his forehead I could see when he turned away from the lamp.

“Now, Mrs. Slocumb, shall we begin?”

I wondered why John Carroll was being so polite and formal and all. Looked to me like it didn’t bother Mama because she spread out her skirt on her chair like they taught her at Mrs. Farrell’s School of Modeling and Charm. She said I wasn’t ready yet for Mrs. Farrell's, but she still wanted to set a good example, always doing a little spin before she sat down and always crossing her ankles not her legs. Mama said posture was so important at Mrs. Farrell's that some of the girls had to wear broomsticks in the crooks of their arms across their backs so they wouldn't slump. Least that's what mama said. *She* never had to do such a thing.

“Ok, Mrs. Slocumb.”

John Carroll took a metronome from off the piano and set it like Mrs. Boatwright did when I took piano, which I hated because she made me play mazurkas. Never heard a song like that before or since.

John Carroll got that metronome going tic toc, tic toc, and loud, too. He repeated over and over Sah-Say, Sah-Say, Sah-Say. Pretty soon Mama’s eyes followed the tics and the tocks, but then she closed them, still sitting there all pretty and nice like she learned at Mrs. Farrell’s. There was a commotion out back of the house and all of a sudden we heard Meemaw hollering again. John Carroll knew what it was but didn’t let on he knew. Wouldn't you know it, here they came, his two best pigs, hypnotized all over again by the sound of that stupid metronome. Those pigs took their places each on one side of mama who looked like some Jehovah’s Witness, her eyes all rolled back in her head. The pigs’ eyes weren't closed exactly just sort of glazed over. What a sight that was. I knew the sty wasn’t too far from the house, so when the pigs heard the metronome and the magic word John Carroll must of used with them, too, here they came. John Carroll later said the ones who came into the house first were the smart ones even though believe you me I've never seen a pig who looked smart - - some folks say they are, though.

Didn't take more than a couple of minutes for that room to fill up with pigs -- about 4 more of them -- and Meemaw and the cat and Mama and me. That made 6 pigs, 1 cat and 3 humans, counting John Carroll.

When John Carroll came over the next day to say he was sorry, he said Meemaw was trying to warn us with her hollering, but that's when the cat bit her again and she had enough to deal with.

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After receiving her Ph.D. degree, Katherine Horrigan taught English for the University of Houston. Online journals including Caper Literary Journal, Microhorror, The Write Place at the Write Time, and Joyful have published her poetry and short stories. She recently completed Drought, a novel set in South Texas. MKKH@aol.com

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SIX MINUTES

Lily Porter

Sometimes,
when that hollow kind of moonlight
hits the bedroom floor,
spills over his
eyelashes
and smooth throat,
I think of a night (like this one, layers and midnights ago)
when it felt like a safari—

khaki-bright and fearless.

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Lily Porter is seventeen years old and attends the Alabama School of Fine Arts for Creative Writing. Her writing has been submitted to the school's literary magazine, Cadence, for the past four years, and she has participated for that same amount of time in department-wide readings of her work. slightlylily@gmail.com

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LIZARD LAD

Rick Hartwell

Te’Juan, my grandson, loves lizards. They leave him in peals of laughter as they litter the back porch and lawn.

At the moment Te’Juan is stalking one of the larger denizens of our back yard. The lizard, no fool, has scampered under a cypress bush out of harm’s way and Te’Juan is bent over, diapered butt in the air, and is trying out his x-ray vision through the dense foliage. Grandma has now joined this safari and Te’Juan is “shushing” her so she won’t scare away the game. It is interesting that the game of this game is reptilian and that our grandson has no fear of them, but only of spiders, like his father.

The attention span has quickly been exceeded and Te’Juan has moved on to dropping rocks on the porch and thence to his swing. I just asked Te’Juan if he was on lizard alert. He agreed he was as long as I would continue to push him higher on his “airplane swing.” Write one, push two, fly three. Write one, et cetera.

The lizards languish lazily on the lanai -- I just thought I’d throw that in for comic relief, big game hunting can be so tedious.

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Rick Hartwell is a retired middle school teacher who lives in Moreno Valley, California. His work has appeared in Educational Leadership, English Journal, California English, Kappa Delta Pi Record, The Voice, Sunspots, Once Upon A Time, Vietnam Magazine; The National Gallery of Writing, Raphael’s Village, The Foundling Review, and Bibliotheca Alexandrina: Anointed: A Devotional Anthology. rdhartwell@adelphia.net

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PEOPLE WHO WATCH PEOPLE WATCHING PEOPLE

Jim Reed

Nighttime jazzsinging event at the pub.

Lots of noise and folks eating and laughing and talking, waiting for music to begin, then hoping it will end soon so that eating and laughing and talking can continue.

The room is filled with clanking glasses and cubes and *pfit* opening fizzes and prowlers casting glances around the bar at other prowlers, and melancholy drinkers hunched over their fluids, and expectant fans waiting brighteyed for the next performance, and notetakers watching the people who are watching the people who are being watched.

The best choreography to watch is the unconsciously synchronized movement of the crowd as it wanders bumpercar-fashion around the spaces.

Everybody makes everybody else, if only in mind and fantasy.

These sensual ink-and-paper words will be translated into electrical impulses on cold screens for later publishing.

The jazz moveable feast/moveable fast depends upon the moon and the tide and the hormones.

The youth inside each of us disregards the wrinkling exterior.

We just move with and against gravity till sleeptime insomniatime encroaches

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Jim Reed is curator of Reed Books / The Museum of Fond Memories in Birmingham, Alabama. www.jimreedbooks.com
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TOOLKIT

Carey Scott Wilkerson

For this experiment, you will need:
projections of other places
disciplines of irony
you will need the Doppler effect
a line-item wrecking crew
one of these, or two
or, three and your dignity
a well-made chair
a taxonomy of beetles
goggles and a scarf trailing behind you
because this happens fast.

For this experiment, you will need
the undeserved trust of scholars
notes scribbled on a peeled apple
or a pair
of apples
you will need declarations of love
lapses in clear thinking
blisters from holding on
a gun at your temple
some clarity on mysteries
a theory of shoes left on the roadside
a left shoe
triumphalism with respect to cake
this photograph of a spruce
more than you can take
all that remains
whomever you think will listen
you will need unhappy secrets
you will need a way out
you will need something to read
to soften
to frame
to jostle
to rebuke
something to condemn
something with waves in it
you will need distortions
and polygons

and unfair assessments
you will need a tongue phantom
an incomprehensible questionnaire
neighbors peering through blinds
you will need cliché
pastorals
invective
compression
hieroglyphics
and, for this experiment, you will need
good intentions
dark suspicions
and a theory of a life lived
in lists
in careful negotiations
in boxes
in Möbius strips
in trouble
in fact
in case
you will need, for this experiment,
everything you lost
each time you forgot
one by one
evasion
convection
you will need to ask for directions
for this experiment
to work
to yield
to transpose
to falter
to fail
You will need it all
and, don't you know,
you will need
a coat.

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Scott Wilkerson teaches at Columbus State University, Georgia, holds a Masters of Fine Arts degree from Queens University of Charlotte, North Carolina, has been a Lillian E. Smith Writing Fellow, and is the author of Threading Stone and the forthcoming Ars Minotaurica, both from New Plains Press.

HOUSE ON THE HILL

Timothy Dodd

Worn hands shared the chestnut wood
raised it of 1840
when the roads were corn and squash
and the smell of soil was left in the hair.
Walnuts danced over her fingers,
honey flowed faster,
the sassafras strained,
greetings opened as quickly as the front door.

Now condemned,
eyesore scabbed of rotten wood.
Weeds prosper
over comfortable patches of fattened black snakes
and dead-mice filled pits deep enough for half a maize stalk.
Through its holes, rain water trickles in over forgotten saliva.
Deformed spine can not straighten the crooked grins which lean in.

We will not look at it squarely,
but we see it from the shekel shine in our pockets,
some say "out of the corner of our eye."
Even in its dull shade of empty gray,
it is more conspicuous after sunset,
casting a suspicious glare that strikes us
like the yellows of mammalian retina shine in the nighttide.

We will not mention it, high pretense,
except to stack the offspring sideways,
warn them it is not smooth or plastic enough to go there.
Blurred relief settles when we have passed it,
for we can forget the uncomfortable feeling that we never remember.

When it dies,
by fire, collapse, or human hand,
it will fall quickly,
much faster than what it took to build, love, or rot
When it falls,
the horizon will not be clearer

and we cannot pretend for any longer.
When it drops to the soil, it will blend with the dirt as our bones do
and none can renew its breath
until the land rebuilds itself,
which will be more than an election term.

We are that house on the hill,
what we were,
what we neglected and lost,
what we said was no longer important.

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Timothy B. Dodd was born and raised in Mink Shoals, West Virginia. He is currently an ESL teacher in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In addition to writing, he enjoys oil painting and traveling, particularly to the Republic of Georgia. timofeev@hotmail.com
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I OBSERVE A FAMILY AT THE ART GALLERY

John Grey

A man is hurrying his sons through
the gallery adorned with robust Renoir nudes.
It's not so much he fears Impressionist corruption
but boyish snickering in such an echo chamber
would flush his face a raging purple,
draw the scorn of ever aesthete in the place.

Stoned martyrs, Christ on the cross,
bloody battle scenes....not a problem.
They've seen worse in their violent video games.
But bare female flesh requires a conditioning
that skewered guts, gushing wounds, can only dream of.
He hustles them by soft pink breasts, brown nipples,
rounded buttocks, plump bellies, supple thighs.
Please sir, all I ask is to help me by them also.

.....
John Grey is an Australian born poet and U.S. resident since the late seventies. His works have recently published in Slant, Briar Cliff Review, and Albatross with work upcoming in Poem, Cider Press Review and the Evansville Review. He works as a financial systems analyst. jgrey10233@aol.com
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SWEET TEA

Glenda Slater

She had saved up the digitalis pills from his prescription. Ground them up and put the powder into a pillbox. Dissolved in liquid, that would do the job.

It was his own fault. He was too damned old. Over 96 now and practically bedridden. Could still make it to the bathroom on his own, thank God. But more demanding by the day.

It had been four years. Enough. She was ready, this was the day.

It had to be a Monday because nobody ever came on Monday. Home Health came Tuesdays to check him. Goddam Gilbert, on Wednesday. Thursday, the house cleaner. Friday was when his church folks came by, if they came. They hadn't been a hell of a lot of help, despite their "Let us know what we can do" mealy-mouth offers. Saturday and Sunday were out, you never knew what worthless relatives might show up, checking on the old man and good old Susan.

Good old Susan, that was her: the only daughter. *Only* the daughter. Goddam Gilbert brought in a pint of bourbon occasionally. A pint of bourbon and a lot of advice for her and his doting dad. Never heard from Samuel, the aging hippy. Mama's boy when she was alive. What worthless brothers they'd been. She was just the babysitter. They had fought like cats and dogs but they could sure present a united front when she tried to straighten them up.

She shouldn't have come back to this godforsaken place. Nowhere else to go. No money, no kids, only an ex-husband she hadn't seen, sure didn't want to see, in ... Lord, how long was it?

She'd left home as soon as she finished high school. Found a job in the city. When she got married she thought she was fixed for life: both of them working, making enough money to get a house and save some so she could quit when the babies came. Well, they never did get the money together for a down payment, and no babies ever came. Probably just as well; he wouldn't have been much of a father. Wasn't much of a husband. Drank and ran around on her. She didn't know why she put up with it all those years.

She didn't miss him after he left. She had two women friends at work. But, within a year, one moved to Georgia and the other died. And

then, *God*, who would have thought she could lose her job at that age? She found out in a hurry that nobody needed a 62-year-old ex-production line seamstress. She tried waitressing, but finally wasn't up to it any more. She couldn't live there on what little Social Security she got. No choice but to come back here so at least she'd have a roof over her head.

Sixty-eight years old now and taking care of a father who had lived way longer than anybody should.

Enough.

This was the day. He always took a nap after lunch. She was going to make sure it was a good long one.

She made his favorite breakfast. Grits and bacon and biscuits. Took it up and sat with him. Couldn't eat anything herself. He ate with relish, watching the news on TV, grumbling about the dirty politicians. Why in hell would anybody his age care what the liberals were doing to the country?

After breakfast she cleaned up the kitchen. She was terribly tired. Had been like that for weeks. The slightest effort sapped her. She sat down, looked out the window. She could hear his TV going and every now and then a burst of laughter or disgust from him. He was in fine fettle. For months she had wanted to scream at him. But since she'd made her decision, she hadn't felt that rage, that need to let him know what he was doing to her.

The next thing she knew, she was waking up with a start. Good Lord, it was noon. She went up to check. He was dozing. He roused up when she turned the TV off and turned the radio on for him so he could listen to Rush.

It didn't take long to warm up the leftover chicken casserole and fix the pitcher of tea. She trudged back up the stairs with the tray. After he ate, he thanked her; said everything was good. It gave her a bit of a shiver. He almost never thanked her; was usually barely civil. But when he barked at her to turn off the radio and turn the TV back on while he went to the bathroom, she realized that all was as usual.

As soon as the bathroom door closed, she poured his second glass of tea and opened up the pillbox.

When he came back, she helped him onto the bed. Fluffed the pillows behind his back. Pulled the sheet up over his legs. "Here's your tea," she told him.

He took a sip. “Just the way I like it,” he said.

Downstairs, standing in the middle of the kitchen, she felt no remorse, just release. For the first time, her life was her own.

She went over to the sink and washed up his dishes. Got a glass and poured herself the tea that was left in the pitcher. Sat down again in the chair by the window. Watched clouds gathering off to the west, saw hummingbirds at the feeder. Thought to herself that the grass needed mowing again. She smiled. “Not my problem,” she said.

Then she picked up her tea and emptied the rest of the contents of the pillbox into it.

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*Glenda Slater writes short stories and poems for children and adults, and children's plays. She graduated from Foley High School, lived in various parts of the country for many years, returned to Alabama six years ago, and lives in Fairhope.
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**“Tomorrow is the day after the
first day of the rest of your life.”**

--Jim Reed

TIDDLY WINKS

Clare Matthews

30 ¼ W 66 H

Fiber

Clare Matthews creates flat woven west faced tapestries. Her designs are based on traditional patterns, which are arranged in different combinations to explore color and pattern. Clare's formal training in Art & Design was in her native England; her inspiration comes from worldwide travel. She currently resides and teaches in Birmingham, Alabama.
www.mattfinishfibers.com



SLEIGHT OF HAND

Lynn Bey

I am resolved and it is done: I will not think of you again. Not as I climb the forty-one stairs to get to my office and sit at my desk to type the letters that I've not written and cannot come to care about. When I fax a fax or eat my lunch -- the one I bring from home -- or tell the boss his flight's on time and the taxi's come, I will not think of things to tell you, of what I said and also did until at last I cleared my desk and said goodnight.

On the walk home -- it is cold again, and damp -- I will not slip on red-brown leaves and into thoughts of you. I will square my back and lift my head, a woman undistracted. Outside the door of my wood-frame house I will not turn to invite you in. I will go inside and remove my coat, then sort through mail -- what can these people have to say? -- while the kettle slowly boils. For dinner there is squash to steam and also sprouts, one Yukon gold from last week's shop. After the news and tomorrow's weather, I'll take a bath, then read in bed until it's late and I'm asleep. Sleep: the place I go to hide from daytime dreams of you with me, those convoluted speculations and expectations that I, an epiphyte, have come to live off of. Some days I wake uncluttered as a child, entranced by gentle, simple things like crabless shells and worn black stones, basalt from long ago. Briefly, I am free, untethered from the endless need to beat you back, again and still again and one more time, returning you to places I have not seen and do not know so must imagine, unhurried as a blind man.

Yesterday has come, I'm told, and it has gone. Time is what it takes.

Who'd have thought we'd meet again this way! You wonder at the years, how so many have now passed. Eight, you say (though it is nine), then you note how strange it is, the bistro that we'd liked so much now this crowded little store. You ask and I reply: Yes, I kept the house and the job; the car I sold, it was getting old. For a while I saw the others -- but they were busy, so was I, and anyway... You smile at me and I smile back. We start to speak then stop ourselves. I watch you reach into your

pocket for the photos in your wallet; you slip them out like aces you can't keep yourself from dealing. In your hand there is a woman (she is squinting at the sun) who holds a baby in her lap. And here she is again with you so tall beside her and the baby on your chest.

"A family," I say. "How happy you all look."

It is you I look at now, your brow and cheeks and squared-off chin, your fine, small hands with nails well-smoothed and so exact, reminders of the risks you would not take.

And then you ask if that's the time, you must not miss your flight. You reach to pat my arm, your hand so quick as it retracts I almost do not see it.

At home once more, and I unpack a cream-corn can and two of soup, the apples and an Anjou pear, a boneless chop for later in the week. Sometime soon I'll fold the laundry or start a load: there is always something that needs doing. At eight tomorrow I'll call in sick and be believed, and though my phone rings several times, it isn't you, it's only salesmen flirting with my money.

The wine I've finished, and gin is all there is. I find a lemon and sniff its skin, then test a blade on angled thumb the way that barman did it once. I'd watched his every move that night, the way he had of wiping glasses and slicing lemons on a washed-out board. You'd held my hands across the table and said, low-voiced, how all of this -- *this*, the word you used -- would one day be a simple *then*. Then, when I did not know how time could pass if I was not with you.

Time did pass, I say out loud. What's done is done and done once more; I did not come undone. I take a knife and start to slice the lemon into wedges.

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Lynn Bey works and lives in Portland, Oregon, which is as gray and wet as everyone says it is. Unfortunately, that is not as gray and wet as she'd like.

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MEETING MR. HAPPY

Edgar Rider

At my job, I had become friends with Tanya, the manager-in-training. She would change from her provocative outfits into her sleazy work attire. One day she asked me if I wanted to go to the strip club. This was the first time I ever met a woman who was asking me to go to a gentleman's establishment. "I don't know what the big deal is. Why women want to go to places like that. I would rather watch women dance anyway." Tanya said twirling her hair.

"Okay." I said, of course, ready to go.

We entered the strip club. Immediately, I noticed a huge poster of a dancer with the words *now appearing in a movie with Charlie Sheen*. This was when Charlie Sheen, in the nineties, was making action pictures. This particular film was called "Terminal Velocity." I could see that this stripper thought she was high class and felt she was too good to be working this particular stage.

We sat at a table. Tanya began prodding me. "Give her a tip. Go get her, stud."

I fumbled through my wallet and picked out a bill. I walked over to the stage with her pointing for me to come over. I slightly slipped, while trying to put the dollar bill between her appendages.

She slapped me hard. "Dude, what do you think you're doing? I'm not that kind of stripper."

I walked back over to the table with Tanya laughing at me. I shrugged my shoulders. "Should have given her a five."

"C'mon, let's ditch this place," Tanya said, still laughing.

We ended up back at her apartment. "I need to get something out of the bedroom." I immediately became excited and intrigued. Was this my shot? My hopes sank as she came back with a bong.

"Ed, Mr. Happy. Mr. Happy, Ed." She handed me the bong but I politely declined.

"BRB. Be right back."

I stared into space thinking about my life. I don't understand why I made such bad choices. Is this all there is? Is this the best I can do, working

in a burger joint? Suddenly, I heard a voice, a simple calm voice, calling me.

“May I ask you a question?”

I looked at the bong, somewhat surprised. “Are you talking to me?”

“Yes just a moment of your time.”

“About what?”

“Your life, Ed. Your life.”

“What about it?”

“What are you doing with it?”

“I’m in school.”

“One class a semester.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“I am a talking bong. I know all; I see all.”

“So what should I do?”

“Take charge of your life, Ed. If you want to change your life. Get serious. Work hard. Stay in school. Graduate.” Mr. Happy smiled back at me, encouraging. How strange that the talking bong was making more sense than myself.

Tanya came back into the room. She paused for a minute as she watched me talking to the inanimate object. I realized I had been talking to myself the whole time.

“You and Mr. Happy getting acquainted?” She looked back and smiled. “You sure you don’t want any?”

I grabbed the bong. “What the hell.”

“Smoke me,” Mr. Happy said with a grin. At this moment, Mr. Happy made a lot of sense.

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During the nineties, Edgar Rider worked in a hamburger restaurant. He had a difficult time dealing with his job and began talking to a bong and suddenly realized he was actually talking to himself. His work appears in Static Movement, Danse Macabre, Haggard and Halloo, and Warwick.
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THE STORY WE NEVER TELL

Margaret A. Frey

I thought I saw you slip from bed then tiptoe to the door. Warily, you look back. No worry. Insomnia is my middle name.

I hear footsteps.

You pat-pat the walls for familiar signs -- the dent in the plaster you intended to mend, a montage of family photographs -- small comforts until you reach Rachel's door. Your fingers trace her name across a sparkly banner, a school project, once tucked in a backpack along with a baby tooth.

Remember?

Two gleaming trophies.

I smell your fear.

The door swings open. A moonlight puddle, so still, so bright, makes your breath catch and wobble. Gripping the dresser, you skim those silly barrettes, the red butterflies with rhinestone eyes. Tucked inside the drawers are ribbons and headbands galore, an animal-cracker assortment. The butterflies wait like puzzled friends.

I taste your disbelief.

You recall the doctor's words about compromised lungs, drug-resistant infection. How bad could a flu bug be? Slumping beside the small, empty bed, you recall the pacing, the hours stretching to weary days, and then...

I realize my mistake.

You moan softly, tug the blanket then press a knobby spine against mine, a surprising fit.

We tell ourselves that all things have a purpose. A cruel lie, but the truth is no kinder. We are turning a corner, we claim. Adjusting. Getting there.

On the right track. The words stick in our throats. We say them anyway.

These long nights have written another story, one we never tell -- a man, a woman and a stumbling grief that roams and groans and will not, cannot sleep.

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Margaret A. Frey writes from the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. Her work has appeared in numerous online and print publications, including Birmingham Arts Journal. She is currently wrestling a longer fiction about American miners and their families. mafrey@tds.net

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