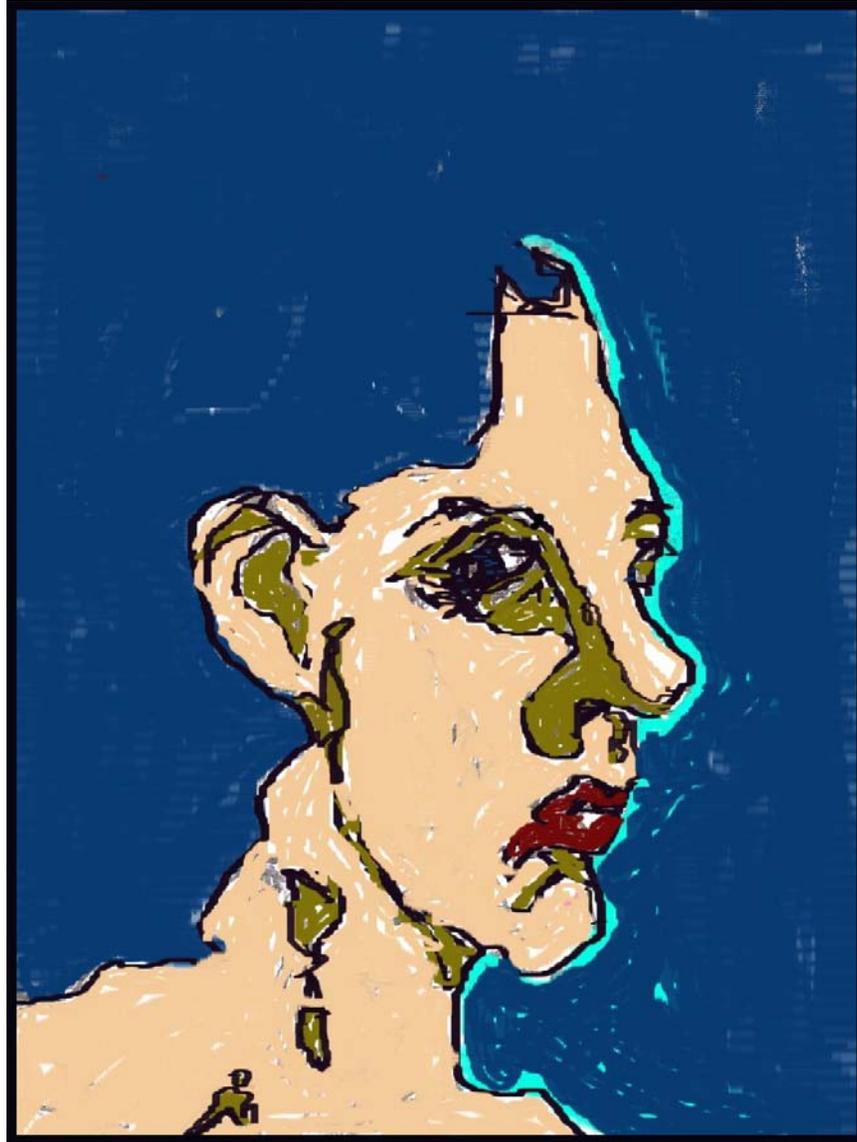


Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 9 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.

\$5.00



Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **WOMAN WITH BLUE AND RED**, 5" x 7" Acrylic on Canvas
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Back Cover: **GOTHIC DREAM**, Digital Manipulation of Original Art
Gerburg Garmann's main medium is acrylics. Stylistically, she favors Abstract Expressionism. garmann@sbcglobal.net

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1949

Erroll Miller

Big

ol' red Nash Ambassador
huffin' & puffin' up Shades
Mountain

keeping

my eye peeled for material for later
'cause I'm never comin' back, never comin'
back, things change, Ol' Bohemian Scribbler
from Saginaw, Spring Creek Road, Siluria,
Star City...

so time will tell

Mama said, the longer reaches of it, towards
that shore the tide flows onward with the dreamer's
endless list of aspirations, pausing for a cool
refreshing drink of water
at Fulton Springs

for there were times

I was going sixty inside, foot on
the gas across the County Line near
Dead Man's Curve with no
exit ramp.

.....

Errol Miller lives in Louisiana. His poetry has appeared in hundreds of journals since 1972 including Aura, Birmingham Poetry Review, Poem, and Southern Humanities Review in Alabama. He graduated from Livingston University (Alabama) in 1970.

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THAT SPIDERY BRIDGE I WILL NEVER SEE AGAIN

Christine Denkwalter - *2nd Place winner, Hackney Literary Awards National Short Story competition*

There usually was no one around on the beach in the afternoons, something I could never understand, with the water so perfect. But swimming was apparently something only I ever was inclined to do. A blue, and the floor falling off suddenly into little pools, and catching a big rock and letting the river drag my limpness, my skin. And waiting there for the sun to drop all smoky big and red, for the sudden twilight and a new rush of birds, and then the lamps against the calm and the darkness. My own bewilderingly private world. But that day there was a small crowd on the sand just beside the stairs. I only noticed them as I came out of the water. I recognized a few people from my building. One of them, the English girl, was having her picture drawn.

I had been there two months, and solitude was completing me. My loneliness was my breath. I could let the days pour over me, through me with their softness, with the perfect blankness, the tender meaningless motions, the silence. I was only thinking of getting past them. I considered walking downriver a ways to the next set of stairs, and mid-considering there was some commotion among them, and one girl screaming about the snake and the others scrambling around, so that I was forgetful and joined them.

And in that way fell in with them, they being delighted to have another person to describe the event, and me being distracted, after concern proved unnecessary, but still I suppose it required all of us to take her to the nearest apartment building. That being mine, the one I shared with some of them. There was a busyness and a making comfortable and in this time I became slightly wistful and weary for my room upstairs. But before I could float away I was abruptly and directly addressed and poured some tea.

They were an easy lot, and there were many of them, and were content with my mumbling answers to just allow me to sit a mug in their midst. The bouncing conversations of those who were always together. Tea became dinner and the injured became well and then we were all to go on the roof for a meteor shower. I filed off smoothly from the train of people at the third floor, with the sincere intention of joining them after a rest. But the curtains were so gentle on the smooth wind that I did not.

In the morning I washed my clothes and brought a book up with me to the roof to sit with them while they dried. I hung them on a sagging low line. There was evidence of the party of the night before: a few forgotten jars, a paper sugary wrapper. And behind some flapping sheets another line, a crumple of blanket and its sleeping contents.

I sat across the roof against the low stone wall and read. It was a loud, bright morning, getting hotter. I realized I was not concentrating on the pages, so growing curious at the ability of the sleeper to sleep. To surrender. I feared for him, for us all, that we ever lose a moment's vigilance, and grew impatient for him to wake.

Nor did he finally, willingly awaken. The girl from the first floor, who had taken us all in, came up presently with her washing and nudged him teasingly. He shrugged the blanket off regretfully, and with the unabashed selfishness of those just entering consciousness, ignored her insistence that she bring him some tea, and patted around for his cigarettes.

I watched all this with some inexplicable relief. Like he had at last rejoined us. He saw me as well, and though I felt protected by having a book open in front of me, he heaved himself up and began to shamble over, smoking and gathering his blanket up under his other arm. I was a little startled. I put the book down.

He said something like wasn't I the one who liked to play chess, and how did he know that, I asked, and apparently I had been seen playing on the tables in the park. So then I was finding myself collecting up my dry laundry and having him follow me down for a game, where it was much cooler in my room.

And I suppose that's all there is, to lie on your elbows on a cold stone floor, to face each other in silence and watch the game play itself, the game, your hands, the pieces. Once in the first few days I asked him what was his name, and he didn't look up and asked what was my name. I laughed, as if something inside me spread. As if I had never before understood.

He didn't like to go out much but I had my obligations and would leave him there, serenely occupied with drawing the tiny detailed frames that sequenced themselves through his sketch pad. Usually I would find him in the same hunch I'd seen him last, but sometimes he would meet me on the beach and slosh his way into the current mostly dressed. He had a wonderful shuffling heavy-headed walk, his big body and his big hands, his careless and ridiculous attempt at being invisible.

Away from him I was back overhearing the analyses of those who were still fascinated by certain combinations of numbers and the portentous appearances of an otherwise commonplace phrase. I endured and even participated but could not muster the enthusiasm for being overwhelmed with my own inhales and exhales and heartbeat, for the feel of the chair or of the pen in my fingers. Each word was a little partition, surrounding us, and silence pushed them over.

I saw him a few times, not expecting to. The first time he was standing in front of a stall getting bread, his back to me, and seeing him I had to step away into a shop and wait for him to go ahead of me down the street. After that it was easier to see him and slip off before he noticed, before I had to be two people at once. So that he never had to meet the self that cared, that made efforts, that sank daily into the petty world; that played, and played poorly.

But another time I did see him out on his own, sitting across from a man, sketching, both of them smoking and animated and relaxed, and I felt something. I felt, this is the moment I am in. The clouds are like fish bones. The light is sparking the falling dust. There are people all around me, and they can all see it too. The way we know how heavy is the cup when we lift it to our mouths, the improbable ease of the bottoms of our feet, holding up our whole bodies. How I can feel the sound of the bells, like shivers.

And once, he was outside when I left work one evening, holding himself against the wall and then pushing off and alongside me. The women who had seen me out were looking at us from the sides of their eyes. There was no hurry. The tea at the stall took a long time, for the sky to deepen and the coolness to settle. Nearby, a man was surrounded by a small crowd. He was asking the street of us Have we had an experience, Have we met a person, That has caused us to not want to live forever.

When I looked around I was alone among strangers. He had wandered away and I followed him and we ate some pale sweets, sitting on a stone bench. The monkeys with their mean eyes. A cow nuzzled up, huge and so soft and insistent, taking out of our palms what we hadn't yet finished. I could tell the rain was coming by the rattling of the leaves. I was lining up the lights along the street while he pulled a thread off his sleeve.

More isolated, the world even further away, like now I could not touch anything or be touched, that layer surrounding matter even thicker; more alone, but he was inside that with me. I was numb and

I could not examine it, so immersed, such bliss. We trailed our hems in the wet sand.

And once at night on the roof, when it was so dark and the only light was that glowing end of his cigarette, when it was such a darkness to make me bold and weak, I asked him, and he answered that he had never loved without being punished. And I was heaviness and I was exaltation and I did not sleep.

When he did leave I watched him cross the bridge and pause, leaning over, to give someone a coin. I cried a little, after, and then I opened the window.

.....

Christine Denkwalter is from a small Alaska town and went to college in Portland, Oregon. She works in aviation, splitting the year between these two places. As a musician, mechanic, and compulsive traveler, she is working on the second in a series of novels.

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My motto: Unless someone has the courtesy to ask me what time it is, I won't give them the time of day.

--Steve Martin



BATON ROUGE ROSE

Ty Evans

Manipulated Digital Photography

*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*

SURGERY

Simmons Murphy

The day of
you are
to bathe
with anti-bacterial soap.
No watch.
Class ring.
Diamond and emerald.
No care giver
bracelet
with toll free
number.
No make-up.
All too human,
with no trappings
of ideas
or achievements.
Naked,
except
for a flimsy
washed gown,
used so many times
by others.
A public bed,
with
a pulled curtain
that doesn't
truly close.

.....

*Simmons Murphy lives in Mobile, Alabama, where she is an adjunct
English Instructor at the University of South Alabama.*

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UNBIDDEN (an excerpt from the story)

Danny Thomas - *1st Place winner, Hackney Literary Awards
National Short Story competition*

The day is brightening and warming quickly with little juncos and wrens flitting in and out of the trees and brush as they carry Jane Goodloe to the wagon. Riddle moves his gear around, preparing a hollered out area for her to lay in. And for the little uns as well. Everybody gits situated good in the wagon. Patrick, he lays the shotgun jest behind him where they can reach it.

-Is zat a good place fer it, Mr. Riddle?

-Yup, he says. -We can bluff from there if need be. But he ain't really thought much about needing the shotgun or the Lemats pistol neither, trusting instead the angels or ghosts or whatever banshees are that watch the high roads.

-Hell, he tells hisself,

-We're jest gonna go and git where we're going. We ain't gonna jest set here. And that helps him put the little niggling concerns behind him. He is set on what to do...but without knowing zackly where he' going.

Riddle and Patrick git the mules, hitch em up, and head out, the sow behind the wagon, grunting, trotting to keep up.

You know anybody on this side of the mountain? Riddle asts.

Nosir. The boy sets a while next to him on the front bench as they rattle down the way, yet after a while, he asts, -Where we going, Mr. Riddle?

-You'll see.

As they rumble through the woods eventually he finds a place he knows. A bald rock where he can look down the valley. A wisp of smoke far down the way is wafting up the ridge, and he figgers out whose cabin tis. He recollects the Widow Ledbetter, who's a midwife, kinda crusty dealing with you, but known for doing right by folks in need. He's chopped wood for her couple times and give her some cloth that got rurnt, but that she was happy to receive. She repaid with sorghum and sunflower cakes, which was the sweetest delicacy he's ever tasted. She showed him how to harvest the tall stalked reed grass, which has a lumpy root you can boil as good as any potato.

He figgers, She might do for the Goodloes.

That's it then. The sky is giving way to gray clouds that have the look of snow. The air seems to have chilled some.

Both the little boys is happy along the way, although a couple times they ast for more crackers, which Riddle denies em.

The Widow Ledbetter won't home when they git to her place, and this flusters him a while. He holds the mules standing in the road a while, thinking, wondering what next, but as he's about to cluck to his mules so as to make tracks she's there in the road squinting up at him.

-What have ye brung me, Riddle? Her dark eyes glinting under her bonnet. She's a round, handsome little old woman with high cheekbones from the Cherokee, dressed in homespun gray with multiple petticoats. She's trusted by mountainfolk, but has got a mysterious air about her as well. In the time he's known her Riddle's never seen her feet nor shoes. Her skirts always drag the ground, giving her movement the look of floating crosst the ground. He's forever wondering how old she might be.

Riddle tells her the Goodloe's story, and she says, -You ain't ast me, but you can put your wagon near them stumps yonder.

-We'll take her into your front parlor, Riddle answers, motioning to Patrick.

-No! she says right sharp. -Do as I say! I ain't agreed to nothing but look yet.

So they do as told, and as the Widow climbs onto the shorter stump, Riddle watches for glimpse of leg or boot or slipper under her skirts, yet she's squirrel-like ascending the higher stump, and he still ain't seen a thing. Now she's plumped down in the wagon betwixt the little uns who're studying her every move. She puts her misshapen fingers to Jane's throat for pulse. Pulls open Jane's left eye for color and sign of recognition. Then her right. The Widow leans down, placing her cheek to Jane's. Then nose to nose, breathing slow with the invalid. Rumor has it she's able to discover ailments jest by touching the sick. Some say she also cures by touch, but Riddle ain't got personal knowledge of such.

Stephen mimics the Widow's procedure likewise with Little Charlie who sits stock still as if besotted, able only to blink and twitch.

The Widow sets up, lays a hand on Little Charlie, causing him to grin as she announces,

-I'll see to her. I'll git you some dogbane and chicory, and you can make her take some of that like it's coffee. Git her heart sped up. See if she warms up. You all can take her round back to my room.

-Is it milk fever? Riddle asts.

-How would I know that? is her answer. Not sassing him. More like midwife prudence. With the little boys underfoot, Riddle and Patrick try to deliver Jane as directed, and right quick the Widow shoos all four of em out while she does her ministering to Jane Goodloe. After a while she calls out,

-Riddle. I need ye.

As he enters the back room he figgers Jane Goodloe is gone from bad to worst, and he's working out how to break this to Patrick. When he gits in proper, he's astonished to find the Widow a-laying in the bed, naked to the waist, embraced with Jane Goodloe whose gown is opened so one female is pressed upon the other, breast to breast. Widow's face is jest above Jane's, and she says,

-Git me more of that chicory coffee. She's warming up right fair and might come out of this. He does as told, his cheeks flusht hot. He'd mistook the situation at first. Twadnt what it appeared to be. Twas jest one heart warming another. Or mebbe something much more powerful. He ain't sure what twas.

When he returns with the coffee, the Widow speaks to him as if reading his thoughts,

- Don't nobody else need to know how I do what I do. My yarbs and linaments has cost me deep in purse from time to time, yet the knowing how to use em is the greater value.

Her face is fierce...or is it she's pleading with him? He can't tell which. She might be a copperhead threatening in full sing, or is it a sarpent thrashing only in his mind?

She shuts her eyes, holding the younger woman's face to her neck, so tender and careful that Riddle can see both the pulse in the old woman's throat and the bloom of warmth on the younger woman's cheek. No rebuke is spoke, and time stands still. He's jest waiting there, watching as if he's discovered the most innocent slumbering mother and daughter.

By and by, Riddle emerges from his trance uncertain how much day has been lost, returning to the boys. The sky is surprising dark with the sun jest above the next ridge. Late afternoon, and lowering clouds drifting closer. Gitting colder, too. He finds the bucket and cup by the door, and two dry little boys use it thirstily. This keeps em busy enough so Riddle and Patrick can return to the wagon.

-Here, says Riddle, handing Patrick a small sack of salt.

-And here, giving him the crock of molasses.

Getting the drift of unexpected charity, Patrick admits, -We can't pay ye.

-You can owe me then, says Riddle.

-You going now?

-I am, Riddle says.

-I didn't take you all to raise, but I've got you started right.

Patrick swipes his arm across his nose, sniffing and blinking as the situation settles over him. He may be staring back at Riddle, but he's searching his own inner core for something sure and true. After a while he stiffens.

-But we mean to pay back what we owe. Momma would want that.

-I hear you.

A cold mist envelopes them, and across the ridge a wind billows through the dark green canopy, bringing the promise of high wind. Maybe sleet, too. Riddle says.

-Miz Ledbetter'll help you better than I ever could.

-We'll pay ye back, Mr. Riddle.

-I know you will.

The rain arrives with snow spitting through it. Riddle ties the sow to the stump, hands off the hessian to Patrick. Also the shotgun. He digs out a remnant of one of the best calicoes he's taking to Jettie. Tells Patrick it's for the Widow. Finally climbing into the wagon, he's calling to his mules,

-Come on now. Let's go. Be warmer at home. And the wagon bumps across rocks, sliding into muddy ruts splashed by more snow than rain as Riddle muses about what Ivey Riddle woulda done here. And Dancy Riddle, too. What if she hadn't stayed in that wagon with her man and her boys when they all got called to God so many years ago? He's asking himself these things as he moves down into the shadows.

Yet questions in the dark don't always get answered.

.....

Danny Thomas played football for the Bear in the late 1960's, earning his bachelor's degree in English Education at Alabama. He earned master's and doctoral degrees in English Curriculum at North Carolina, then worked in public education for 35 years. He lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. dmthomas471@gmail.com

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THE CLIPPINGS

Kevin Marshall Chopson

The garden was left to grow over this year.
Grass seed thrown early in the spring
covered the large square that yielded
corn, tomatoes, green beans, and squash.

With help from sons long gone,
hackberries, honeysuckle, and hedge rows
were trimmed back, branches and leaves
carried to the corner by the road.

Mister Whittle sat in a chair on gravel
before the opened garage door
watching the clippings settle and brown,
white light washed out onto the stones.

By the end of May the evening vigil faded.
Housebound, he disappeared from our sight.
We knew he was waiting on death over there
as we spoke his name often and softly.

Deep in July's heat, the chipper service came,
taking the clippings, turning them to mulch,
revealing grass snuffed out by the weight
of so much tender blossom.

.....

Kevin Marshall Chopson received his Masters of Fine Art degree from Murray State University. His poems appear in Poetry Salzburg Review, Incandescent, Rio Grande Review, REAL, The Baltimore Review, English Journal, and Nashville Arts. He teaches writing at Davidson Academy and Volunteer State Community College.

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HOUSE

Sharon Lanning
Acrylic on Canvas
20" x 24"

Birmingham, Alabama, artist Sharon Lanning began exploring her love of art through photography. Her work has been shown in Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama, and has raised money for many local charities. Two years ago she picked up a paint brush and has discovered yet another passion for art. "With painting, you never know what the final picture will be!"

THE MOBBING (an excerpt from the story)

Adrienne Yvonne Norton – *1st Place winner, Hackney Literary Awards State Short Story competition.*

A week later Grace Donnelson pushed up her wire reading glasses. "Our Piety meeting is a little different today." She looked at her notes, "We're expecting Sergeant Bradley Biggs from the Birmingham Police Department to talk to us. He is the policeman that Dora and Hygiena talked to last week after she was almost mangled at her mailbox. He promised to give us safety tips. He'll speak on Living Safely in the West Lake area and he'll join us for lunch when he concludes his remarks. I've promised him barbecue to go with pie and tea."

A loud siren screamed through the late morning air. Grace hurried to the picture window to pull open the draperies. The ladies descended en masse onto the porch. A tall policeman who would have looked earnest except for a crop of red hair and freckles sat behind the wheel of the police car. He turned off the siren and stepped out with a sheepish grin.

"I didn't mean to scare you ladies," the policeman said, as the frightened women remained clustered on the porch.

"I just bet he didn't. He's mighty fine looking, but a mite young, and why did he have to scare the bejesus out of us?" Hygiena whispered to Dora.

"Ladies." Sergeant Biggs removed his hat and gave a slight bow to each of them. "I am happy to be here and even happier to detect an aroma like barbecue in this neighborhood (He wrinkled his nose and sniffed the air.) instead of meth." With another grin that the women later agreed made him look about seventeen, he stepped up on the porch and shook hands with each lady.

The women were soon grouped around him in Grace's living room. "Ladies, before I take specific questions, I want to give you this sheet I've prepared. Written at the top is the word *Observant*. Each one of the letters that spell this word stands for a safety tip you need to memorize, and what's more, to follow. I don't want to frighten you, but you may remember Mrs. Sarah Louise Perkins was murdered in her home in West Lake just three blocks from here last summer."

As the women nodded, Sergeant Biggs glanced out the window and his eyebrows arched up an inch. "Pardon me, ladies, I need to

make an urgent call." He dashed for the door, then to his patrol car just as the black Chevy driven by old Mr. Burrows cruised out of sight. Sergeant Biggs had the car telephone to his mouth and the ladies could only guess what he was saying.

Moments later he was back inside and continued as though nothing had happened. "Ladies," he began. What he told them, to their disappointment, was only how all the letters in the word *Observant* provided guidelines for keeping them safe. Sergeant Biggs acknowledged that *Hygiëna* and *Dora* had developed a good system for warning each other of danger with their alarm whistles.

He provided *Fern*, *Millie* and *Grace* chrome-plated police whistles on a lanyard to wear around their necks. Now all five ladies were thus equipped. What he didn't give them were details on how to catch *The Owl*, the predator.

When young Sergeant Biggs closed the door and walked down the steps, *Hygiëna* said, "I have one more idea. I'm going to call my niece."

Her name was *Corva Jadene*. The sharp clicks of the black stiletto heels announced her arrival even before she rang the doorbell on *Hackberry Street*. As she waited for her aunt to open the door, she surveyed the neighborhood, a street of small, neat white wood houses with boxwood shrubs. A profusion of daylilies and ferns graced most yards. Aunt *Hygiëna's* house with its handicapped ramp was the only brick house on the street. The trim, porch and ramp were painted white. The harmony of the street was marred only by the appearance of the last house. This dilapidated eyesore had peeling paint, and rotted boards. Another glance showed the windows had been nailed shut. The yard was overgrown with weeds. An abandoned car was jacked up on cement blocks in the driveway.

Corva Jadene rang the doorbell a second time before *Hygiëna* peered through the peephole and opened the door. "Girl, now, aren't you something. Your Mama sure gave you the right name and she didn't even know it. You're just like me, we're both corvid birds." *Hygiëna* hugged her niece with one arm.

Corva noted that her Aunt *Gina* leaned heavily on the hazelwood cane.

"Auntie, I don't know what you mean calling me a bird, but I'm prepared to listen. I sure could use some of whatever I smell coming

from the kitchen. Could it be your scrumptious, homemade cinnamon rolls? And by the way, where's your walker?"

Over coffee and rolls, Hygiëna filled her in on details of the last few weeks, beginning with the broken walker and ending with the last Piety Club meeting. "This Sergeant Biggs wasn't no help. He just wanted us to memorize some safety rules."

"Whoa, now, Auntie, I need to tell you that Sergeant Biggs and I have partnered on several assignments with the BPD. He's a good man. I think we can all work together."

"Why don't you move in with me for a spell, Corva Jadene? You know I've got a spare room?"

Before she could respond, the telephone in Corva's case vibrated. "Look, Auntie, officially I'm on duty. We'll talk again when I get off at five." And with that, undercover agent Corva Jadene ate the last of her second cinnamon roll, smoothed her purple floral blouse into her short black skirt, kissed Aunt Gina and stepped out onto Hackberry Street.

Corva Jadene drove a newly reconditioned black late 1950's Thunderbird; a sleek and racy car. It was parked in the driveway of Hygiëna's little brick house as the Piety Club members arrived. Hygiëna had planned a simple meal of collard greens, fried green tomatoes and corn muffins. She said the meat would be embedded in the program that followed. For dessert, she decided against pie as usual, and substituted hummingbird cake. The club members gaped openly at Corva Jadene. "She looks like a high class hooker on the prowl," Millie whispered.

Dora smiled and said to Corva, "Thank God you are here to give us a plan. If Hygiëna will permit me, I'd like to be the one to thank the Almighty and Gina, too, for this meal."

As the women finished dessert, they moved to the living room. Corva Jadene positioned herself facing the picture window. Minutes later, she noted Mr. Burrows' Chevy make its usual run to McDonald's. What she observed that the club members didn't was the black Cadillac that followed five minutes later. It was just as Sergeant Biggs had told her, the black Chevy drove down the street, followed minutes later by the Cadillac.

Aloud she said, "Ladies, I sense how anxious you are to catch this predator. Sergeant Biggs, the BPD and I are all just as anxious to stop him. You are motivated to help and you can, but this is what

you must not do. You must not put yourself or each other in further danger by confronting The Owl as you call him. He has shown himself to be dangerous. You need to know that I'm an undercover agent and that Sergeant Biggs will serve as back up on this assignment. I need to give a signal when I am with you and sense real danger. I'll say something like 'All Fall down' and you must get as low and protected as you can. You ladies told me about the amount of traffic that congregates at the end of this street, more prevalent around noon and again after dark. We believe that abandoned house is a crack house and more. Keep your eyes open but stay away from there. We suspect that Mr. Burrows is a lookout for the dealer, the supplier, who may be your Owl. Your mission is not to blow my cover. I plan to be seen often in this neighborhood under the pretext of renting a room or small apartment. When you go back home, memorize Sergeant Biggs' rules and keep those whistles handy. We're going to catch that big bird."

Corva Jadene quickly glanced at her phone messages. "I'll stay in close touch with Aunt Gina who will relay messages to you. If you observe anything that we need to know, contact me or Sergeant Biggs." With cat-like grace, she was out the door and away in the Thunderbird.

Minutes later, Isadora Delatorre placed a homemade Apartment for Rent sign in her yard.

With Corva Jadene's presence in the neighborhood, the Piety Club members felt emboldened. They began taking walks at noon and just before sunset, openly meeting to talk at the corner by the abandoned house. They repeated this activity for more than a week. Some days they observed Rupert Burrows on his way to McDonald's in the Chevy. They were puzzled that the black Cadillac didn't always follow him.

The buzz that followed Corva Jadene's appearance in the neighborhood was predictable. The Piety members were determined not to blow her cover. They listened as wives complained that their husbands did a daily fashion report on what Corva Jadene wore. The day she appeared in shorts, tank top and strappy high heeled sandals, the president of the Baptist Women's Rainbow Circle called to find out if Dora had checked that woman's credentials before renting her an apartment. Faye Blackwater asked Dora point blank, "Does that woman even have a day job?"

The neighborhood women weren't the only ones taking notice. The rapper Cadillac driver slowed down on Thursday long enough to say, "You are some fine piece," to which he got a nose in the air from Corva Jadene. The Piety members remained on a high state of alert with whistles around their necks, waiting and peering from behind curtains or shutters.

Friday dawned hot with humidity thick enough to slice. Corva Jadene timed her leisurely neighborhood walk to coincide with both the Cadillac and the Chevy. She stepped out into the noon heat with white boots, black shorts and white leather vest. A black Stetson with white band sat atop her long hair.

As the women watched, Rupert Burrows began his slow drive down the street just as Corva Jadene arrived at the curb. "By God, I'm going in for a closer look," he yelled to someone over the phone. In his haste to loosen his shirt and pants and take control of his breathing, he crashed over the curb. He mowed down a row of Dora's prize winning daylilies before coming to a stop against her wrought iron rose trellis.

Corva Jadene stepped toward him with her Glock (a nine millimeter semi-automatic with a fifteen round clip) pointed at his head. Piety whistles screamed through the neighborhood as the club rushed to help. Dora was first on the scene, "I brought my shot gun just in case you needed it," she said.

Hygiena arrived out of breath but on her new walker. Grace, Millie and Fern hurriedly joined them. They looked stunned as Corva Jadene stated calmly, "Rupert Burrows, you are under arrest for aiding and abetting a known criminal, serving as lookout for a known drug dealer. Dora, you train that double barrel on Mr. Burrows here. Hygiena, you hold my gun." She handcuffed a befuddled Rupert Burrows without protest.

Fern looked at Rupert. "I can't believe you actually had the nerve to ask me out on a date once. You're like a little owl, a predator and a crook," she hissed at him.

The club members watched wide-eyed with whistles still in hand as Corva Jadene yelled into her phone "Request immediate back up." She looked sharply at Rupert Burrows' shaking his head as though in disbelief as she began, "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you have to say can..." She stopped. The black Cadillac whizzed around the corner. "All fall down," she yelled at the Piety ladies. It

was the signal they had rehearsed for taking cover. She ran with them to take cover behind Rupert's car. "Get down, man," Corva yelled to Rupert.

Hygiena would later describe what happened then as the day hellfire rained from the sky and burned up the chaff. She said, "That rapper-brother, drug dealing Owl suspected the worst and opened fire. I tried what had worked on him before. I said, "Aim for his tires. That's just what Corva Jadene did."

As he attempted to run, Officer Biggs' car flew onto Hackberry Street from the other end and parked sideways blocking that Owl. Three more police cars came round the corner. The ladies would later agree that the screaming sirens made a perfect symphony for their mobbing. They felt like dancing as The Owl stumbled from his car, throwing his hands into the air.

The Owl said, "I give up. Don't shoot and don't let them old birds get at me. Hell, they've completely ruined my business. I ain't sold a dime bag of rocks since these bitches have been messing with me."

Corva Jadene enjoyed the apartment and the Piety ladies so much that she stayed with Dora a few more weeks. During this time the Piety Club members saw the abandoned house destroyed as part of Birmingham's mayor's rigorous clean-up program. The Piety ladies volunteered to plant some of their best iris, daylilies and roses on the lot. They named the corner Righteous Square with plans to have a formal ceremony to place a bronze plaque to commemorate the Piety Club. They met there every day at sunset to celebrate the renewal of their neighborhood. Several "SOLD" signs had appeared on the street, and they'd noticed the new neighbors included school-aged children. "Praise God," Hygiena announced at the next club meeting, "The empty nests around here are filling up again!"

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Adrienne Yvonne Norton is a retired speech pathologist living in Hoover, Alabama. She and her husband, John, take creative writing courses together. She has won numerous awards from Alabama Writers' Conclave. Among her other works are a collection of short stories and a memoir. aybenett@cs.com

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TAPE WORM

Barry Marks

Tape

Worm,

A particularly nasty fellow, he would deny us the benefit of our food, as if to say that our joy must be insubstantial, always mere empty flavor, no sustenance Does tape mean that he sticks with us like a guilty conscience or does it refer to his listening and (gasp) recording everything he hears down there or is it just his serpentine form that of course conjures and connotes the perfidious, the evil, the venomous, worm was, after all the name for dragons (who ate virgins), and poor Eve and the Midgaard Serpent who circled the world with his tail in his mouth (can a tape worm have a tape worm?) What happens when this worm

turns? Admit it
it grosses you
out it is violation
desecration, truly
home invasion.

.....
Barry Marks is 1999 Alabama Poet of the Year, author of There is Nothing Oppressive as a Good Man (winner of the 2003 Morris Chapbook Competition) and co-author of two anthologies available at www.churndashpress.com. Barry's poetry books include Possible Crocodiles. "Soundings" is his latest book of verse. bmarks@marksweinberg.com

2 HAIKU

C.S. Fuqua

16's direction
confused in clumsy learning
defines new life

52's vague dreams
masqueraded as success
redefines old life

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Chris Fuqua's published books include Alabama Musicians: Musical Heritage from the Heart of Dixie, If I Were..., Trust Walk, The Swing, Big Daddy's Gadgets, Divorced Dads, and Notes to My Becca. cf40256@gmail.com

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BROKEN BY THE WIND (an excerpt from the story)

Jennifer Pitts Adair – *2nd Place winning entry, Hackney Literary Awards State Short Story competition*

She turned the headlights off and slowly guided the car onto the abandoned street as the last flecks of sunlight danced on the horizon. She knew he would be there. Seeing his dirt-smeared baseball cap bobbing above the mountain of splintered boards as if magically suspended by the clouds themselves confirmed what she already knew. According to neighbors and passersby he appeared every night at dusk and disappeared the moment anyone dared to approach him. There could be only one reason he worked under the cover of darkness. Only one reason he fled like a frightened animal at the mere sound of another human voice. He was one of them. He disgusted her, repulsed her, made her blood boil.

She lingered in the car watching him. Her grip tightened on the steering wheel as he began examining the mountain of twisted metal, splintered boards, and torn fabric in front of him. Every few seconds an unidentifiable object flew out of his hands—either into a neat pile to his left or into a large pile to his right. Must be the reject pile, she thought bitterly. Her blood pressure rose higher every time he added an item to the small neat stack on his left. When she neared the point of explosion, she slid her slender hand along the door searching for the handle, never taking her eyes off of his silhouette. She felt the metal door handle touch her fingers, and she wrapped her hand around it.

Opening the door and slipping out of the car she hoped he wouldn't hear her approaching. Slowly, one careful step at a time to avoid any noise that might alert him to her presence, she approached the shadowy figure. Stopping a few feet behind him she reached toward her waist and let her right hand rest on the cold metal hidden there.

“Looking for something?” she barked at him in her booming voice.

He spun around, startled at the sound of the young woman standing in the darkness near him. No sound escaped him as his eyes darted quickly from side to side. She knew that look well. Trapped and looking for a way out, she knew he'd take off at any moment.

“Don't even think about it,” she barked at him again.

Again, silence. Finally, the young man relaxed. With a smile spreading across his face, he waved his hand in the direction of the land around him.

“I don’t see what the problem is, miss. I’m just out here trying to clean up a little. There’s only so much time in the day,” he spoke gently, almost convincingly, if she hadn’t know better.

“Sir, it’s dark outside. There’s nothing more to be done here tonight. It’s time to move along.”

“Well...o-kayyyyy,” as he dragged his reply out he glanced back at the neat pile behind him—the fruits of many hours of hard work. “Let me just grab my stuff, and I’ll be out of here.”

“I wouldn’t touch that stuff if I were you,” she warned, her voice becoming strained.

“Ma’am, with all due respect,” he replied belligerently, “I’m not leaving here without my stuff.”

“It’s not your stuff,” she yelled as he began loading his arms with his newfound treasures.

As he turned to confront her again she felt her last ounce of restraint drain from her body. Pulling the cold metal from its hiding place by her hip, she pointed the gun directly at the young man kneeling in front of her.

“I SAID, I wouldn’t do that if I were you!” she bellowed from deep in her gut.

Terrified, the young man dropped his bounty from his arms and slowly rose to his feet. She felt her entire body shake in rage as she kept the young man lined up with the barrel of her weapon. Three days ago she never imagined she’d be standing here like this, but three days felt like a different lifetime for her. It all started out innocently enough...

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*Jennifer Pitts Adair, a software engineer living in Athens, Alabama, and her husband Brandon have a newborn baby, Lily, and four cats. Jennifer documented her family's recovery from the April 27, 2011 tornado outbreak through a personal journal.
jenniferpitts14@yahoo.com*

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REPERCUSSION: OIL SPILL SPLAT!

Nancy Raia
40" x 16" tall
Acrylic and Ink on Canvas

Nancy Raia is the Community Art Director, at the Eastern Shore Art Center in Fairhope, Alabama. nancy@esartcenter.com

CAFÉ TERRACE AT NIGHT

Lois Edstrom – *2nd Place Hackney Literary Awards*, March 2012

Oil on Canvas, 1888
Vincent Van Gogh 1853 – 1890
Kroller-Muller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands

The patrons cluster in sulfurous light
while he memorizes darkness, makes it bearable,
emerging, as he did, from gloomy Dutch interiors,
potato fields' dark furrows.

A night painting without black,
with nothing but beautiful blue and violet
and green, the strokes fall heavy,
at right angles to each other,

as if to make sense of that endless sky
where the stars wear coronas –
minor angels calling
to his upturned soul.

A cobbled road, like an uneven
life, leads away, bordered
by empty tables and chairs
just at the edge of light.

Remember the sunflowers' golden glow,
wheat ripening in a summer field,
heat that rises beneath troubled skies.
Nothing could stop those whorls of wild

blackbirds.

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Lois Parker Edstrom's poetry has appeared in Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review, Floating Bridge Review, Rock and Sling, and Connecticut River Review, among others, and her work has been adapted to dance. Her chapbook, What Brings Us to Water, received the Poetica Publishing Company Chapbook Award, 2010. Her second collection will appear soon. She lives on an island off the coast of Washington. spindrift@frontier.com

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PALINODE / ODE ON A WEDDING DAY

Sierra Nelson - *1st Place Hackney Literary Awards*, March 2012

The bride and groom
will mend the cake,
reverse the dance,
and the guests will lift
the gifts off the table,
carry those burdens away.
We can't recant
the song we sang –
there's evidence:
the photo album,
our mouths wide open –
but we can put the records
in their sleeves, give the sleeves
away, drive off
and nothing more to say.
I am angry and laughing
like a gosling swallowing pearls.
And love still exists,
thin as a motel towel.

Big white moon
flashes her belly,
and I'm happy and crying
like a fish tied with ribbons.
The radio never stops
playing love songs,
but we stay in the car
just to hear the last song through.
Count and recount
the times you've heard this—
how sure we feel, how we just knew.
The guests are tired,
the sun has set,
tearstained bride and groom
refuse to leave the dance floor.
What happens next?
Unbelievers—eat this cake!
And then what happens?
Hopeless—catch this bouquet!

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Sierra Nelson's book collaboration I Take Back the Sponge Cake with visual artist Loren Erdrich debuted from Rose Metal Press in Spring 2012. She is a MacDowell Colony fellow and co-founder of literary performance groups The Typing Explosion and Vis-à-Vis Society. She currently lives in Seattle, Washington. songsforsquid@gmail.com

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WHAT'S YOUR MOMMA'S NAME?

Larry Smith – 3rd Place winner, Hackney Literary Awards State Short Story competition (an excerpt from the story)

Nora focused on her hands again. "After I graduated from Memphis State, your Aunt Virginia and I went down there for two weeks. Mrs. Wilson had a big dinner after church the first Sunday we were there and Buford was invited."

Nora closed her eyes, then continued, "He had a convertible and a boat out on Lake Pontchartrain. We swam and water skied during the day. And several nights we rode the streetcar down to Bourbon Street. Buford took us to some clubs."

"Sounds like you guys had a high old time," said Claudine.

"We did and Virginia talked about it all the time after we got home." Nora looked at Claudine. "Until I found out I was pregnant! That's when Mother put an end to the talk."

"What did Grandma do?"

"She packed me off to your Aunt Emma in Nashville. Emma had just given birth to Jarred. Mother killed two birds with one stone. Emma needed help, and Mother needed me out of Memphis. Back then unmarried pregnant girls were a disgrace."

"You told me how you and Daddy met." Claudine stopped and slumped back in her chair with her chin quivering. "What do I call him now? Daddy? Mark? Mr. Garand?"

Nora narrowed her eyes and leaned forward, pointing at her daughter. "You listen to me, Claudine! Buford Wilson gave you life! But Mark Garand is your Father! Your Daddy! The one who rocked you at night when I was too sick to look after you. The one who taught you how to ride a bicycle." Nora pointed at the lawn outside the windows. "The one who built you a tree house. The one who loves you, just as much as he does Jack or Bridgette!" Nora pointed at Claudine and narrowed her eyes. "So, don't you get any romantic notions about running off to New Orleans to find long lost family."

"I hadn't thought of his family."

"Well don't!" Nora jabbed the table with her index finger for emphasis. "What is said in this room today, stays between us. Understand me!"

"Yes," said Claudine weakly. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand. She had never seen her mother this animated.

Nora got up and went into the kitchen. Claudine could hear cabinet doors opening and closing, ice tinkling in glasses and running

water. Nora came back, set a glass of ice water and put a paper napkin on Claudine's place mat. Nora sat next to Claudine on her left with a glass of water. "Use the napkin to wipe your nose. You know, for a doctor, you don't have good hygiene."

Claudine wiped her nose, dabbed at the corner of her eyes and took a drink of water. "Did anybody know you were pregnant?"

"Yes." Nora took a drink of water. "About a month after I got to Nashville, we were sitting on Emma's back steps. He was renting the garage apartment next door, while he was in law school."

"Yeah. He told me about that apartment."

"Mark was cutting Emma's grass for extra money, so he was always stopping by to check the grass and talk to me. He had asked me out several times. But, I had been so sick most of the time I didn't go far from home." Nora swirled the ice in her glass. "I thought he was good looking, but I couldn't see any future for us, so I thought by telling him, he would leave me alone. But, I was wrong." Nora took a drink of water. "He finally convinced me to go to the courthouse, the week before you were born, and get married."

"That solved the problem."

"No," Nora said. "It made your Grandfather Garand so angry, he threatened to stop paying your father's tuition. Your father told him the baby was his. But, they didn't speak again until Mark's graduation."

"How did they resolve the situation?"

"They didn't. You did."

Claudine leaned away from her mother and looked at Nora over her shoulder. "Me? What did I do?"

"The Garands came to graduation. Your grandfather took one look at you with your red hair and green eyes, picked you up and didn't put you down the whole afternoon. You were a little over a year old, and I had dressed you in a white dress with white shoes. You looked like a little doll. He carried you around to all his friends at the graduation reception and told them you were his granddaughter and you got the red hair from your grandmother's side of the family."

"Does Grandpa know?"

"No. And that's another thing that stays in this room. He paid for your medical school and helped you to get in."

"I thought I got in with my grades, extracurricular activities and my interview."

"You did. But, after you announced you wanted to be a doctor instead of a lawyer, your grandfather was so determined that you

would go to Vanderbilt like all his family had, he wrote a letter to the Dean of the Medical School. And when the Dean gets a letter from an alumnus, who is a Federal judge, he takes note."

Claudine slumped back in her chair. "All this time, I thought I had done everything myself."

"You did," said Nora. She took her daughter's left hand and sandwiched it between hers. "You did. You made the grades, did your internship, made resident and passed your state boards. If you weren't qualified, you wouldn't have finished. But you did. So everything you have, you did with your abilities and your talent."

Claudine put her right hand on top of her Mother's. "Thank you."

"Are we done?" asked Nora.

Claudine looked down at a copy of the letter from Buford's pocket. She untangled their hands and slid the copy in front of her Mother. "Why did you write this?"

Nora stared at the letter. "That was your Father's idea. He said every man has a right to know he has a child." Nora placed her hand on the letter. Virginia gave me some of her stationery. I wrote the letter and sent it to her. She mailed it."

"Did you hear from him?"

"No. But Virginia called me. She said Buford showed up the next week. Your Grandmother Worth told him he had disgraced our family and she had to send me to Houston. And she told him to leave town."

"Well. He stayed in Memphis."

"Yes. And when Mother died, he came to the funeral."

"I don't remember Grandmother Worth dying."

"You were four and before that you only saw her a couple of times when she visited Emma. I was due any day with Jack and the doctor didn't want me to travel. So we didn't go to her funeral."

Claudine stared at her glass. "If we had gone to the funeral, I would have met him?"

"Yes," said Nora, her voice trailing off. She took a drink of water.

They sat in silence for several minutes. Claudine said, "So, I got my green eyes from Buford?"

"Yes," said Nora. "It's a family trait. All of Buford's uncles and several of his cousins had those bright green eyes. They called them Wilson green." Nora stared at the opposite wall. "His eyes were so bright and green, it was hard to look away from them."

Claudine cupped her hand over her Mother's. "I know what you mean. Even in death, they were the greenest eyes I'd ever seen."

Claudine and Nora sat hand in hand for a few moments, then Nora asked, "Are we done?"

"Yes. Thank you." Claudine squeezed Nora's hand.

Nora stood up and turned toward the kitchen. "I made chicken salad. Do you want some?"

Claudine followed her mother. "Yes! I'm starved!"

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Larry Smith lives South of Falkville, Alabama. He has been published by the Alabama Writers' Conclave (ALALITCOM) and the Birmingham Arts Journal. sleepynlacon@yahoo.com
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FLORIDA DOCK IN FOG

Dail Mullins
Digital Photography

Dail Mullins retired from the University of Alabama at Birmingham in 2006. He lives on St. George Island, Florida.

ANIMAS RIVER SUSPENSION BRIDGE

Donald Levering - 3rd Place Hackney Literary Awards, March 2012

In sleep its timber and cables
are changed to braided copperheads,
scales glistening in river light.

On a fishing trip as teens my friend
and I had crossed this swaying footbridge
suspended just above the river

since then dammed.
Each step caused a wave of vibrations
to travel the bridge's span

and back to our feet that kept sending
more pulses mixed with the others,
like cello variations

on ways to walk across rivers.
His name in the obituary
returned my classmate's oval face,

even in his senior year without a trace
of beard above his slender torso.
His remembered visage merges

with Redon's gibbous moon
in *Guardian Spirit of Waters*.
In school he was a distance runner,

long strides and tireless,
and that odd head bobbing as he ran.
How my buoyant friend had drowned

in our stopped up fishing stream
was not stated, whether drink
or just the missteps of our age

caused him to breathe water.
The paper would not explain
why he could not keep on running

through our schoolboy days unchanged.
After all, I nearly spoke to the page,
the Animas flows on without cease,

but then recalled an earlier
Notice from the Corps of Engineers,
pictured the flood plain filling

with sluggish fluid under a moon
of mourning for the river,
the footbridge slipping under.

.....

*Donald Levering is a former NEA Fellow in Poetry and was a
Featured Poet in the Academy of American Poets online Forum and
the Ad Astra Poetry Project. His 9th and 10th poetry books, Sweeping
the Skylight and The Number of Names, have recently been
published. More information is available at: donaldlevering.com.*

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It is better to pay the power
bill than to curse the
darkness.

--Jim Reed

A FEW DISCREPANCIES

Steven Withrow

They say the broken watch fixed time,
but the water clock and the hourglass run on.

They say the old grow wise and circumspect,
but toddlers learn to lie and split the difference.

They say the sharper knife cuts quick,
but the duller dulls the whetstone equally.

They say what's done is done, enough's enough,
but are they the same who spoke of knives and time?

They say the aster and the rose, but I,
I say the withered marigold, the baby's breath, the balm.

SEA IS SOUND; AIR IS A DOOR AJAR

Steven Withrow

Sea is sound; air is a door ajar.
Sound is glass; door is the color of plums.
Glass is brine, stippled with plum-warm rain.
Brine is black; sea is glass-colored sound.
Air is a jar of warm plums.
Sound of rain is a door:
Sea stippled, brine black, jar glass.

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Steven Withrow, a Rhode Islander, is author of six books about visual design and narrative. He is co-producer of the documentary film Library of the Early Mind: A Grown-up Look at Children's Literature. He is founder of Poetry Advocates for Children & Young Adults, a global organization dedicated to advancing poetry for all ages.
<http://cracklesofspeech.blogspot.com>
<http://poetryadvocates.wordpress.com>

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OAKS

Peter Huggins

after Machado

In my high office
I see some bare oaks
On a black road.

Buses chug a hill
Distant as the moon.
Surely you remember?

The blasts of February
Howl through the cherry trees.
I don't sleep and I don't dream.

.....

Peter Huggins teaches in the English Department at Auburn University. His books of poems are NECESSARY ACTS, BLUE ANGELS, and HARD FACTS; MOSQUITOES is forthcoming. He is author of TROSCLAIR AND THE ALLIGATOR, IN THE COMPANY OF OWLS. huggipm@auburn.edu

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“We have our dreams
because without them we
could not bear the truth.”

--Erich Maria Remarque



POOLS ... IT'S ALL RELATIVE

Marcia Mouron

Mixed Media

16" x 20"

*Marcia Mouron lives in Birmingham, Alabama, with her cat, her bees and a yard full of trees. Nature inspires much of her art.
mamouron@bellsouth.net*

HOMECOMING

Matt Layne

The threshold of your perfect ankle exposed
brought me to my knees as I entered the church.

And butterfly on marigold! It was homecoming
Sunday where Spirit-struck congregants sang

like so many cicadas in chorus. Their *Tender Care*
voices, their *Sweet Prospect* voices, their *Hallelujah!*

What a Savior voices all raised in that Primitive
Baptist drone that vibrates in your very core

but back to that ankle of yours, perfectly
accentuated by red flats and your golden,

delicious calf. I confess as that preacher sang
out about heaven and hell and all the places in

between my mind turned to worldly thoughts
of the flesh and the body, specifically yours

and mine and Jesus! that church was hot for
October. And really? What is better than a crisp

juicy apple in the Fall? And if I gain a little knowledge
of good and evil in the bargain, I'm sure I can be forgiven.

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*Matt Layne is an award-winning poet and librarian who resides in
Birmingham, Alabama. He has been writing and performing his work
around the Southeast US for over twenty years.*

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ILLEGAL (Chapter 15 of the novel)

John Mort – *National Novel winner, 2011 Hackney Literary Awards*

Romeo, Romeo.

They chugged up the hill toward the farrowing barns and what Bud Varner called “Hog Heaven,” stopping by a new concrete pad. Varner told Raul to lay a line of cinder blocks for the wall of an incinerator—a sort of job interview. Mortar and trowels were in the truck. Then Varner struck for the office, leaving Raul at the edge of the desert if he faced west, with a sea of stinking hogs behind him, to his east. They nosed against the wire with their insatiable curiosity, at the very end of a barn much like the one he’d worked on. He studied a pilaster for a moment, marveling how an accident had brought him to this place. His life was nothing but strung-together accidents.

Was everyone’s? The evangelicals didn’t think so. They thought God’s design was in everything. A mile to the west stood the escarpment, maybe five hundred feet high, a barrier to mysterious land Raul longed to explore. Was there some sort of crop up above? Irrigated, miraculous corn?

So, he thought, drawing a bucket of water. If only for that, for the mystery, I will lay some bricks. If only because today is accidental. If only because the weather was cool, the work moderately challenging, and he liked this man Varner. He swept clean the pad and proceeded to mix mortar.

An hour later, Varner nodded shortly at Raul’s line of cinder blocks, which were straight and level—all that the world required of cinder blocks. He said, have you ever dressed out a deer, and yes, Raul had, with a pocketknife, and a kind of amazement crept over Varner’s wrinkled face. He said, can you run a lathe? Do you know how to weld? Sweat a fitting? He put Raul on a John Deere and told him to spear a big round bale of wheat straw—and then he hired him, and not just as a laborer or strung-out night watchman. As Head of Maintenance, at roughly twice Carla’s wages.

Raul thanked him and afterwards couldn’t speak, for fear that Varner would change his mind. He sank back in the old truck—a plateless, three-quarter-ton GMC that you might have seen on a ranch in Sonora.

Under the mud and alkali, the truck was green or red—it depended on your vantage point, because sun and sandstorms had scratched the paint down to primer. 1951? Raul wondered. 1954? He identified with the truck. He was the truck, anonymous, a tool like a pipe wrench. Pretty soon, before winter when snow blew level before

you in that eternal Panhandle wind, the truck would chug into the dusty warehouse, and park in its snug stall.

Me, too. I'll rest for a little.

Never before had he hit upon such blind, dumb luck. God's handiwork? An accident? Statistically speaking, you couldn't avoid some good luck here and there.

Maybe it wasn't luck--or God's work, either. He had experience with, maybe even he'd trained himself in, every skill Varner required. Just maybe, he was the right man for the job, and Varner, just maybe, saw past skin color and accent to do his company's bidding, and get the work done. It was ordinary work, after all, to be done by ordinary men.

In mid-afternoon, Varner drove him up on the escarpment, where two great pumps supplied water for two crop circles. Sometimes, he said, Raul's job would be to haul up a tank filled with liquid manure, and connect it to an irrigation assembly. The corn was an almost unnaturally deep, forest green, with no brown edges despite the dry air. "What about the land in between?" Raul asked.

"Where you get the runoff?"

"Yes. Could I use it for-- for--?"

Varner laughed. "A truck farm?"

"Yes." Varner shrugged. "Try it if you want, Raul. On your own time. And this is dry country. Ain't meant for growin' carrots and peas."

Raul pointed at the circles. "Not meant for corn, either."

Varner laughed again. "True enough." Cheap housing came with the job, and as the day ended Varner dropped him off in the colonia--a trailer park. It was a company town complete with a laundry, a tienda, and a desiccated, treeless playground with a soccer field and one sad-looking basketball goal.

But company housing had its advantages. You didn't have to commute from Dalhart, burning all that over-priced gasoline. You could pull electricity from off the grid, generated from hog manure; and pump pure water from the Ogallala Aquifer. You could have a vegetable garden if you wanted.

Varner pointed toward the designated trailer. "It ain't much. It ain't required, neither, and I gotta tell you, you smell that pig smell when the wind shifts. Gets in your closets, the women say, and all your clothes stink no matter what. Except, you're half a mile from the barns here, and it'll go weeks, sometimes, with the wind blowin' toward Oklahoma. I'd live here, if I was single man. And this way you don't have to shower in, shower out, be changin' your blues all the time."

Varner said nothing of another advantage, but Raul quickly deduced it. Many of the families were illegal, and this farm was as remote as you could be east of the Rockies, north of the border.

He also deduced that Varner had offered him the fired man's trailer--possibly the worst-looking trailer in the entire colonia. Still, as Varner suggested, it was good enough for a frugal bachelor. Better than Roberto's place, or Carlas's fixer uppers.

Varner handed him a key, drove back up the hill to dispense with the old GMC, and Raul walked the perimeter. There were vacant lots to either side the trailer, grown up in weeds, and in his mind's eye he laid out rows for melons and tomatillos. A lawn mower protruded from a broken place in the skirting; perhaps it ran. And he'd inherit a small outbuilding with a door off its hinges--he could run out a light, and make a workshop.

Not quite rationally, he pounded on the door. Then he turned the lock, opened the door slightly--and reeled from the stench. The dead man in Carla's Cadillac flashed in his thoughts, but this was not the smell of death, not a pig smell, but simply something rotting. He went out to his truck for a shop rag, and held it to his nose as he felt down the wall for the switch. As he was about to flip on the light he heard a low growl, a swishing, and instinctively yanked back his hand, even as teeth nearly closed on his wrist.

"¡Mierda!" he cried, and fell back on the steps. The worst trailer in the park, and a cross dog guarded it! So much for his run of good luck. He jumped in the F-150 and caught Varner at the guard gate, turning toward Dalhart. "Dog!" said Varner. "Woolsey left his dog? In that shut trailer? They oughtta string that bastard up."

"And the place is full of garbage."

"Ah huh." Varner nodded thoughtfully. "I apologize for the trailer, Raul. First month is free?" He paused, waiting for Raul's nod. "You need to see Carrie Kreider."

"Who?"

"Carrie Kreider. The hog whisperer."

"What?"

"It's a joke. You never seen that movie? With Robert Redford?"

"I have seen every movie. The Horse Whisperer, you mean."

"Well, Carrie kinda talks to 'em. And they listen, I swear they do, I seen it myself. She don't work the barns; she's doin' research. Kinda our vetinary."

"A scientist?"

"You could say. She'll take care a your dog."

So Raul, bemused, again thinking this was his lucky day, sought out the trailer of Carrie Kreider, hog scientist, six lots to his east. He

stalked up on her screened-in shelter, and stood a long moment. His boots were clean, inexpensive but relatively new. Same with his shirt and trousers. He took off his baseball cap and stood holding it in both hands as if it were a sombrero. He thumbed the bill like a brim.

A woman came to the door--he might have thought her a man, she was so broad-shouldered, but then he smiled, recognizing the woman from the guard station. Off-duty, her hair came to her shoulders, and she wore shorts and flip-flops.

Behind her played the version of Star Trek, Voyager, that featured an American mother for its captain. They should have called her Ma Janeway. But also, Raul remembered, there was the dominatrix blonde who played the alien. He'd lusted after her in Deep Ellum, as he stripped copper wire. "My name is Raul Zamora. This is my first day. And they gave me--here in the colonia--the trailer of the man who left."

Her eyes registered recognition but his presence clearly puzzled her, and now she stiffened. She was as tall as he. "Dennis Woolsey. He was fired for..." Raul was curious, not wanting to repeat Mr. Woolsey's mistakes.

"Sleeping on the job? Drugs?"

"He was abusing the animals. How can I help you, Mr. Zamora?"

"I don't have much to move in, but I wanted to turn on the air conditioning. Except--there's a big dog."

"Yes, he had a dog," she said, understanding slowly coming to her eyes. Now she stared at him almost longingly. Kindly eyes, he thought, a little wild. He sensed the big woman's loneliness, and she was not unattractive, exactly. She seemed so plain and practical that the idea of attraction--of pheromones, of silly men standing on their heads, didn't apply. No more Carlas, thank you very much, but perhaps friendship--how novel! How superior to romance, with its endless affronts and redresses!

The woman still stared, and Raul smiled awkwardly. "You are Carrie Kreider?"

"Yes!"

"Mr. Varner said you are the one to see about animal problems."

"Oh! Of course." She stepped back to her dinette table for a scuffed leather bag--his glance took in an antiseptic aerosol, various salves and ointments and packets, and some tools as well. Needlenose pliers. Duct tape.

"I thought he would take my hand off," Raul said, as they walked toward the trailer. It was evening, the sun had dropped over the escarpment, and the desert began to lose its heat.

"How do you know it's a boy dog?"

“The neighbor called him ‘Romeo.’”

Carrie pushed wide the door. With the air off, Raul thought, it was a wonder the dog hadn’t died. They stood an instant in the darkness, fighting for breath, and to see, in the rank heat. Then Raul found the living room light, which revealed a psychotic mess of broken furniture, piled-up dishes and spoiled food, and bright blue bags of trash.

He slowly smiled. “The first month is free.”

Already several steps down the hall, Carrie turned, and smiled, too. He caught up in the bathroom, where the dog lay, a big, black mongrel with a big scrotum. Blood had caked in his nostrils, and he panted heavily. The two big bodies overwhelmed the little space. Carrie gently probed him up and down. “I think he’s just weak. No food, and the terrible heat.”

She wet a washcloth in the sink, and daubed at the wounded nose. Romeo whimpered and pulled his head back. “A lot of life left,” she said.

Raul went through the trailer opening windows, and found a window fan. He tossed several of the garbage bags out the door. Then he ducked his head into the bathroom again. Romeo growled, and tensed, but calmed as Carrie stroked his ribs, and gulped at the bowl of water she held out.

“You have a touch,” Raul said. “Will I need to . . . take him to the back of the farm?”

“Shoot him?” she asked. “Oh, no. I’ll take care of him.”

“That’s good,” he said. “I don’t believe he likes me.”

“Right now he thinks you’re another Dennis Woolsey, whom no one liked. He’ll get used to you. Buy him a package of bologna sometime.”

Raul laughed. “I wish that were all it took with human beings.”

Carrie stared up at him as she stroked Romeo. “Me, too.”

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John Mort’s first novel, Soldier in Paradise (SMU), won the W. Y. Boyd Award for military fiction. Other books include Tanks, The Walnut King, Goat Boy of the Ozarks, DONT MEAN NOTHIN’, and two reference books: Christian Fiction, and Read the High Country. His experiences in Dallas and West Texas inspired ILLEGAL.
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SHATTERED

Laura Kimes
Oil on Board
24" x 30"

Laura Kimes graduated from Birmingham Southern in 1992 where she studied art and fell in love with oil painting. She returned to painting in 2007, after a hiatus to raise her young family. Laura's work was recently exhibited at her first solo show at Red Dot Gallery in Homewood. This particular series explores the devastation of the April 27th, 2011 tornado outbreak. She was especially interested in the stories told by what was taken away, what was left behind, and the juxtaposition of the two." lrkimes@gmail.com

BLUE JUICES

Frank Dawson

The four blue juice glasses in Mother's maple china stood unused for years. They were not family treasures. She had found them at some thrift store or yard sale. Lightweight, with uneven surface, they were unhandy. Not user-friendly as we say, as if the maker had put more thought into the design than into practicality. Uncomfortable to hold, they were plainly unattractive.

Over time we had broken most of the nice crystal glasses from our wedding and were down to a few mismatched pieces. One day while I visited with Mother, I asked if she used the blue ones much. I knew better than to mention anything she owned, lest it instantly become mine. Never use them, she said. Well-maybe once or twice. I must take them she insisted, so home they went.

Each time I'd see them on our kitchen shelf, I'd think of her in blue. Boy, did she ever look good dressed in blue. That's your color, we'd say. Those glasses were only one of many things and sounds and smells and tastes and insights that always brought her to mind. Even now, as I sit at a table in a writer's conference, the printed blue program sheet and the blue mints in the bowl bring her right to me.

We used the glasses for a while, but finally they found their own special space in the back of the cabinet. They were high up in a dark corner, a faint blue hint of Mother. Do you ever use them, she'd ask. Sure, I'd respond. And we did. Yes, we did actually use them. We did. Well-maybe once or twice.

One day, we said they'd have to go, so we boxed them up with some other things and carted them off to the thrift store.

The blue glasses were gone. Mother was gone. Now we had to depend on other things to remember her. The pink glow complexion of a lady shopper in Publix that made me stop and stare. The painted toenails of the senior citizen at the retirement home. The smell of Mother's face powder still in our keepsake box. The Sunday funnies she loved.

Life moved on in its responsible pace, and I would still think I ought to call her sometimes just to check on things. Then one day in a thrift store I caught sight of what I thought were her blue juice glasses high on a shelf in the back corner of the store. There was little light, and it was difficult to see for certain, so I tried to get closer by climbing over piles of merchandise. It was just a hint of blue in the dimness that made me stand cold still. It's the same feeling I get when I see a lady with beautiful white hair with maybe a finger wave in front.

My movement slowed. I squinted. I wanted to be sure that the color was the same. I stood there for a few moments in the dim scene and the vivid memories, then turned away, my eyes adjusting slowly to the sunlight spilling through the store windows.

Halfway down the aisle to the front I stopped. I wanted to go back, check the color again. I wanted to be there. Just be there. Have one more look. And I did go back and look again. And I have been back to that same spot again. Well-maybe once or twice.

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Frank Dawson, a native of Leeds, Alabama, writes poetry, essays and short stories, emphasizing parody and satire. He paints, draws and sketches, often using caricature and cartoon. jdawson@uab.edu

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“Nothing more predisposes
someone in your favour than
to let him rob you a little.”

--W. Somerset Maugham

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Jessica Jones

Fall reminds me of her--a black-
eyed Susan without the cheery yellow.
Shades of brown and gold
after a cruel summer, fall carnivals,
balloon darts, can't breathe bobbing
for apples, no cake walk. I walk
for her, run for her, bake sale,
bike rally for her. But she won't grow
wild--prefers a rusty flower bed with deep
root promises. He tells her black eyes
make the Susans beautiful. She forgets
her name is Julia.

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Jessica Jones works as Special Publications Director for Gulf Coast Newspapers. She edits monthly magazines Boomers and Beachin', along with monthly specials such as Brides and Spring Home & Garden, in addition to weekly Baldwin People. Her first column series, Help! Stories from a Smoky Kitchen, began Feb. 14. She began writing short stories at age 6 and poetry at 15. She currently lives in Stockton, Alabama. jessicareneejones223@gmail.com

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ROMANCING THE BOOK

Jim Reed

Things people say about books and the written word:

1. “I don’t read.” (My brother Ronny states this most emphatically. He explains after noting the alarm on my face: “I don’t read books. It’s boring. I fall asleep.” He admits that he reads trade publications, newspapers, the Internet, road signs, instructions, legal notices, spread sheets, etc., but to him, that doesn’t count as reading. Ronny’s not alone...I hear this statement in one form or another each and every week.

2. “I only read two books in my life-ALL OVER BUT THE SHOUTIN’ and that Bear Bryant book.” Here in Alabama, it’s acceptable to brag about not reading books, but the manly thing to do is admit that you will read something by Rick Bragg or something about late Alabama football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant. Rick would have a ready-made audience if he’d write a book about Bear Bryant.

3. “I’ve been meaning to read some good books, but I can’t start till I’m retired and have the time.” Kind of like saying you’d like to run the four minute mile but won’t get around to it till you’re 65.

4. “I plan to read MOBY DICK and James Joyce and Marcel Proust and MEIN KAMPF someday.” These are at the top of a list entitled, “Books and authors everybody means to read.” Word is out that no-one has ever really finished any of them. And so on and so forth.

My rant to the non-reader: Failing to read a good book is like ignoring that beautiful, seductive person sitting in the corner of the room yearning to be noticed and cuddled and appreciated by you and you alone. To a person who seems oblivious to the gorgeous potential of a great book, I say, “What’s the matter with you?” Well, I want to say that but don’t.

Mark Twain’s comment remains etched in my mind, “A person who doesn’t read has no advantage over a person who can’t read.”

My judgmental self thankfully remains silent, but I just wish I could inspire you to see books the way I see them. If the aforementioned beautiful, seductive person sitting in the corner of the room yearning to be noticed and cuddled and appreciated were hidden inside a book, wouldn’t you want to turn the pages, experience

the sensual joy and intellectual excitement of true love, real romance?
Especially since the affair would be legal and perfectly acceptable?

Nobody will come to take you away just for reading a book to
yourself.

Want to try some delightfully adventurous experiences without
getting caught?

Are you listening?

Well, if you're a non-reader, I know you're not seeing these
words.

Guess those of us who know how to travel to the Moon and back
in an hour without anybody's knowing it, will just have to be the
people who are having all the safe fun.

Sorry you missed out

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*Jim Reed romances books at his shop in Birmingham, Alabama, Reed
Books/The Museum of Fond Memories. <http://www.jimreedbooks.com>*

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To have a grievance is to
have a purpose in life.

--Eric Hoffer



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

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