

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 12 Issue 1



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\$5.00



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Front Cover: **SELF PORTRAIT WITH BEARD** – Oil on Canvas – 16” x 20”

Terry Strickland's award winning work has been shown extensively in galleries and museums in solo, group, and juried shows throughout the United States. She has received recognition from The Huffington Post, Artist's Magazine, Drawing Magazine, American Art Collector, Art Renewal Center, Portrait Society of America, International Artist Magazine, Huntsville Museum of Art, Mobile Museum of Art and others.

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Back Cover: **MOSS IN THE BREEZE** – Digital Photograph – Dan Deem is a self-taught photographer whose artistic roots lie in sports and journalism. After a 20-year hiatus from photography, Deem picked up the camera again in 2003 to pursue his artistic interests. Deem's work is well represented in many private collections throughout the U.S., and has appeared in such venues as The Saturday Evening Post, NBC's Today Show, Naismith Hall of Fame (basketball), the cover of the book Hoosiers (yes, just like the movie), ESPN, and the Jimmy Carter Library in Atlanta. **shewtr@yahoo.com**

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THE DAY

Skip Haley

The Day. Is a day for musing, a lazy summer day that calls to everyone trapped inside. Inside a building...inside a job...or just inside yourself.

I stand beside my car at the airport, smoking a cigarette and watching a Cherokee turn final, a half-mile away. As I watch, my own brain idling, Mr. Piper's little Indian flares a foot or so above the concrete, then feels for the ground with its left gear...then its right, until with a soft "squeak," the brightly painted Indian settles to earth once again.

It's going to be a good day. My eyes drift to the sky and I marvel at God's wisdom: using puffy fracto-cumulus clouds to contrast a sky that's the deepest, beautiful blue, on this, the most perfect of all summer days.

Finally, I break off my musing and walk around to the front door of the office as the Cherokee "Captain" taxis up. I stop at the door and watch him alight, bedecked in WAC charts, sectionals, computers and protractors: all the finery of a pilot who is going somewhere. As I hold the door and watch him pass, I can't help but feel a little sorry for the man inside all that finery.

Sure, he's flying. And sure, that's infinitely better than trying to sneak through to "somewhere" on a highway. Hoping that some maniac, or drunk, or just a guy with something on his mind besides his driving doesn't jump out from behind a rock—or truck—or something...and kill you.

But today is not for going somewhere. Instrument days are for going somewhere. Hazy days are for going somewhere. Just average days are for going somewhere. Today: Today was set aside. Set aside by all the elements that combined to form such a day. Set aside for boring holes. Today was especially designated for chasing your tail through the sky. For chandelling up and spinning down.

I walk on into the FBO's and pour myself a steaming cup of coffee. Taking up my chosen weekend profession as an airport bum, I trade lies with some brothers, passing judgment on various airplanes, girls and other pilots who are not present to defend themselves. But from the corner of my eye, I watch my cross-country friend. And I am saddened.

Saddened to see him take my day—The Day—and make of it a conglomerate of Victor Airways, intersections, check-points and quadrant altitudes. To make of The Day, all things governmental and regulatory.

Soon, not wishing to take on a share of my friend's load of regulations and restrictions, I rise and walk out to the ramp.

As I walk among the birds tied there: the little Indians and little Cessnas, my spirits lift. The joy of the day seeps back into "myself" and my cross-country friend is forgotten.

Tomorrow is a day for rules and regulations. A day for the ETA's and transponders, for cross bearings and density altitudes.

Today is a day for the touch...the see...and the feel.

As I approach the proud, checkerboard tail of 29 Mike, I have the foolish urge to speak. To tell her of this Day that was set aside for us. To ask her if we both are anxious to leap into the sky and bore the holes that are waiting up there...above the field of small puffy clouds.

During the pre-flight, I describe to 29 Mike the things I would have her accomplish with me this Day. The perfect loop. The crisp, clean snap-roll. The soaring graceful immelman that ends within a half-degree of 180 degrees from the entry heading.

Buckling 29 Mike around me, I try to tell me the same things. Being a neophyte acrobat is not the easiest of ways to amuse oneself. So many muscles would deny the beauty of a maneuver, would horse a beautiful aircraft into ungainly attitudes, would betray the unwary. But Today... ahhh, Today will be different.

On climb-out, I hear my cross-country friend, getting his clearance from the tower to take off. Going somewhere. And the brief sadness again touches me but is quickly forgotten, as I soar up through one of many gaps between the small white clouds, and set sail for the practice area, engulfed in the beauty of the cloud patches passing beneath 29 Mike.

After climbing well above the field of clouds, I float through several lazy clearing turns. Then, slowly, my hands ease 29 Mike's nose down and let the airspeed build. She whistles through 130 miles an hour and everything is forgotten but the search for perfection.

Smmmmooooothly now...caress the wheel back...glancing upwards through the skylight for the earth. Up comes the earth...now kill the power and—agggh! Why? Why, hand? Why did you betray me? Why did you push the yoke forward? Come on, Judhead, do it again, and let's get it right, this time.

Once more, smoothly accelerate...smoothly back...world coming up from behind...throttle back and—agggh! Too soon! Hauling back the yoke, I manage to wrestle 29 Mike over onto her back, describing a

perfect EGG! Alright, now...again...and again...and again. Another ten minutes and the loops become a little better rounded and I am drenched in sweat.

Ahhh, well. One perfect immelman coming up. Ease her forward... build the speed...haul her back...glancing up...world coming up in the skylight...NOW! Full aileron...get on the top rudder—Aggghh! Too little top rudder, too late, and the immelman becomes a drunken something or other, that winds up going off at a tangent. So be it. This next one *will* be better. I'll *make* it better. Swooping down...pulling up...up...and over...and WHAM! Full aileron...SLAM! Full top rudder. Slammed to the floor, like a bug being stomped. And 29 Mike obediently reels along, hanging sideways in the sky and I sit there wishing I were Harold Krier, or somebody.

Practice and more practice, and more sweat and improvement comes, but it's still unlikely that old Max would recognize his brainchild.

Well, back to basics. The good ol' snap roll. Now there's a maneuver. Even a child can do snaps. Ease her back to 90...quick now, full back yoke...hard left rudder...swwooop and POW! As 29 Mike starts around on her second trip, a small voice mentions recovery. Again the lurching side-slip, or whatever, that ends going in a new direction. Now it begins in earnest. Sweat rolling down between my laboring shoulders, I work at the maneuvers...hauling...jerking...forcing...and generally mistreating a very forgiving 29 Mike.

Finally, some of the maneuvers are passable. If the judges were blind. And looking the other way. And not really involved.

Well, enough. I'm drenched with sweat...and hot...and tired...and disgusted. Time to go home. Swinging 29 Mike's nose around, I start back, wondering if Bob Hoover has bad days.

A tiny speck, between me and home, catches my eye. As I peer, it grows until it finally resolves itself into another airplane.

Well, would you look at that! A J-3 Cub of all things!

Chugging along, above the little patches of fluff, the J-3 is a thing of grace and beauty. In a terrible hurry to go nowhere at all. Then, as I watch, the J-3 makes a little swoop, raises its nose and describes a perfect circle in the sky before its background of cloud and earth. Fascinated, I throttle back and watch as the venerable old lady does her thing. From loops, to snap rolls, to chandelles, to spins and back, the J-3 sails and soars and swoops, at peace with her sky.

And once again, the beauty of the day: lost to me in sweat, jerky controls, and over-corrections, comes flooding through. The moment of beauty that is the little J-3 and her sky, catches me. Without conscious thought, I swing through a clearing turn and drop the nose of 29 Mike, building speed. At a pre-ordained moment, my hand firmly pulls the yoke to me, and she starts up. Full power comes smoothly...and the world rises in the skylight above me...over the top we go...power coming off...down through the bottom...and back through level flight. Without hesitation we continue to rise until we're slowed to 90, when my hand brings me the yoke and my foot swiftly presses full left rudder. Swwooop...Wham...and Woops, almost caught her in time. But so what? Where does it say that they are all perfection, from number one? Or number one-hundred? It'll come...it'll come. Judges are for another day. More instruction is for another day. A day that isn't quite up to this one. My philosophy lesson is interrupted as my hands and feet snap 29 Mike off to the right and miraculously, stop her whip when we are more or less back on top. Up and over...a passable split-S, followed by a very nice loop, and a very sloppy snap to the left.

For an unmeasurable space of time, 29 Mike wheels and soars—and occasionally reels drunkenly—caught in the moment of flashing sky, clouds and earth. And I am part of it.

But finally: must come a time, finally. The rules enclose and the clock beckons. The ticking clock, warning of another. Another who waits for his moment.

As I worm my way into the pattern, tiredness fills my arms, weighting them. But it is a good tiredness. Not at all happy, however, with this sudden ending to my moment of freedom, my mind remains at the practice area as I land. And I manage two landings—without benefit of a go-around. Sullenly, I taxi up to the ramp and shut 29 Mike down. As I step stiffly to the ground, I hear the soft ticking of her cooling processes, and foolishly, I wonder if she, too, is a little tired.

But as I walk away, 29 Mike is already allowing the next pilot to pre-flight her. Another pilot, whose hands perhaps are not quite so hammy. Whose feet perhaps press, instead of stomp.

But I'll learn. And someday, my own hands and feet will guide, not horse. But there'll not be another day just like this one. Different perhaps, but not just like this one.

Slumping tiredly into a chair in the office, I hear the sounds of another cross-country being planned. Ahhh, well...tomorrow will probably be for flight-plans...and Victor Airways...and holding patterns.

But another day will come along soon. A day of blue skies, and maybe a few fracto-cumulus clouds...and flashing green hills coming up from behind through a tinted skylight.

And I'll walk along a ramp and feel a little sorry for another pilot, bedecked in his WAC charts and sectionals, and thinking of intersections and radials.

And on that day. And on that Day among Days...I'll look up at the sky...and see holes. Holes waiting to be bored.

For I have slipped the surly bonds...

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*Skip Haley, a native of Memphis and longtime resident of Louisiana, served in the Air Force and was stationed in Korea during the 1950's. A University of Alabama graduate, he managed television news departments in Atlanta, Montgomery, Huntsville, Baton Rouge, and Monroe, La., and spent six years in Saudi Arabia with NBC Television; was a Colonel in the USAF Auxiliary; and was a Command Pilot and Chief of Staff for the Alabama Wing. He also holds a Master Diver certification. He writes a little. **brinco@aol.com***

“The silence of a stupid man looks like wisdom.”

-Syrus

SUNRISE

Jared Pearce

We fled, Phoenix
smoldering, to tuck
ourselves against
the shady pocket
of the mountain,

When a razor
spine and boulder
knuckles broke
the earth's skin
as if we traveled

Some other planet.
The ranging eye
had found us;
the world neither
wanted us nor cared.

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Jared Pearce teaches writing and literature at William Penn University in Oskaloosa, IA. His poems are forthcoming from Angle, Far Off Places, and Albatross, and have recently been shared in Belle Reve, Paper Nautilus, Apeiron, Anthem, Lines + Stars, and The Lake. pearcejared@aol.com



SUNRISE

Digital Photograph – Panama City, FL
Tom Slonneger

Tom Slonneger retired in 2006 after spending years as a computer analyst at Bellsouth. He enjoys photographing the world around him as he travels. Tom lives in Birmingham, AL, with his wife Brenda. tslonn@bellsouth.net

TIPPING POINT

Bernie McQuillan

The obstetrician was calling her name. "Sarah, Dr Wilcox!" Sarah blinked, looking from the ventilator to the bed, where her third patient that night lay motionless. Scrawled on the board above the pillows was her name, Mary Jacobs. A tiny, mewling baby, wrapped tightly in white muslin, lay in the cot next to her, with a bright blue teddy bear tucked in at the feet. Sarah looked at the obstetrician. Gordon! Thank God it's Gordon on duty today.

"Get the tube out," he was shouting. "Bleep the crash team!"

The patient was choking, sweat beading her forehead. Sarah pulled off the mouthpiece and fiddled with the tubing to ease it gently from Mary's windpipe. That was when she realised that the tubing wasn't inserted where it should have been. She traced it quickly with her fingers down to the oesophagus, and her hands began to shake. Surely she'd followed normal procedure? Her other two patients were already back up on the maternity ward, proud that their New Year babies would feature on tomorrow's front pages.

"It's okay, Sarah, I'll take over." She felt Gordon's steady hand on her shoulder as he steered her to the side. He quickly extracted the tube as two nurses rattled in with the crash trolley. They slipped an oxygen mask over Mary's mouth. Clamped two sensors to her chest. One of them shocked her with the defibrillator. Two jolts. The red line flickered briefly on the monitor and the nurses looked to Gordon. He nodded and they tried again. The line jerked and steadied.

"We'll get her to ICU," Gordon said, reassuringly. "You okay, Sarah?"

"No," she said. "I messed up."

"You haven't been yourself."

"What do you mean?"

He leaned into her, his nose wrinkling as he sniffed. "I think you know."

The nurse came back. "ICU is expecting her." They pushed the bed out of the unit. Sarah's eyes met Gordon's. She looked away first, biting her lip. "Brain damage?" She knew it wasn't a question that she needed to ask. She could feel the contempt.

“50:50, I'd say. You best go home, one of us may as well enjoy the festivities.” He walked away, leaving her standing in the empty bay. From the nursing station came the hungry cries of the abandoned baby.

* * *

The party was still going; she said she'd get changed first. She pulled out the bottles from the back of her wardrobe, piled them into two supermarket bags and sneaked out to her car, the clinking drowned out by rock music. Another trip to the tip tomorrow but this time would be the last. Her phone rang just after 3am, when their guests were dancing in the hall. It was Gordon.

“Mary's out of danger. She's sitting up, feeding the baby. Thought you'd want to know.” No small talk with Gordon but he still cared. “Why don't you take a few days off?”

Sarah shook her head, reaching for one last glass. “I'm fine, see you tomorrow.”

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Bernie McQuillan recently completed her MA degree in Creative Writing in Queens, Belfast. She was runner up in Emerald Street's Short Story competition and was published in Woman's Way magazine. Her first novel, A Year in the Life of Maggie Sweeney, is looking for an agent.

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“I see people as the nucleus of a great idea that hasn't come to be yet.”

-Richard Pryor

LABORING IN THE BEAN FIELD

Michael Calvert

"I found a job for you," Dad said. I looked up from the *Columbus Dispatch* sports page as I spread peanut butter on toast at the kitchen table. "You've been saying that you want a summer job."

"Yeah, I definitely want to make some money. It's hard to get hired anywhere at 12, but I'll do any kind of work. Anything."

"When I was coming back to town this morning, I saw some boys about your age working in a field on Sunbury Road. I stopped and asked the straw boss if he could take on another boy. He said he can always use more hands."

"What's the pay?"

"You get paid by the pound for what you pick. It's a bean farm. Now picking beans in the sun is tough work. Are you sure you want to take this on? It's up to you."

"I can handle it. No problem." I didn't like begging Mom and Dad for a little money every time I wanted to chip in for a pizza at Bona's or buy a Coke at Lynn Drugs. My allowance had disappeared when Dad was laid off the first time. Besides, a dollar or two often came with a task that became one of my regular chores.

"I thought that's what your answer would be so I told him you would start tomorrow. Work begins at 7 am. I'll drop you off."

In the morning, I told Dad, "Picking beans can't be as hard as Ronnie's job on that nasty garbage truck or Mike's job in a hot laundry. I'll hitchhike home."

I strode away from the car with my lunch bag toward a battered pickup truck in the midst of several big trees in the middle of the field. As I got closer, a bed of orange tiger lilies caught my eye and I saw the foundations of an old farm house.

A huge man holding a clipboard stood to the side of a group of boys milling about. He was a tall man wearing a black Stetson that added half a foot to his height. An unkempt black beard like Fidel Castro's obscured his face except for his dark eyes. He wore bib overalls without a shirt to cover the riot of black hair on his chest, underarms, and his broad shoulders.

I stood as far away as I could to speak to him. "My Dad said you could use another hand." I looked over my shoulder and saw Dad's Pontiac on the side of the road.

“Yeah, I talked to your daddy. You ever pick beans before?”

“No, but I’m sure I can learn, and I’m a hard worker”

“Picking ain’t easy work.” He stared at me steadily, and I stared back at the black eyes between his wiry beard and the hat brim. I played that game in the car with my sister and usually won, but I soon looked down at my shoes.

“OK, you can try picking. I’m Bart. Here’s you a bucket. Fill it up and bring it to them scales on the back of the truck. I’ll give you a chit for 25 cents a pound. No chits cashed before 6 o’clock. These beans got to be picked before they rot. Picking starts soon as I ring that bell.” He pointed to a brass bell with a wooden handle like the one the nuns at St. Gabriel’s rang on the playground when recess was over. “You understand me?”

I said, “Yessir,” took the five-gallon bucket by the wire handle, and walked away. None of the boys looked familiar. A couple had T-shirts with “Property of Mifflin Athletic Department” stenciled on the front. At St. Gabriel, we called Mifflin the “protestant school” even though it was the public school.

The bell clanged longer than necessary. The boys began to move to the far side of the field. As I followed them, I noticed Dad pulling away. Bart sat next to the scales at the end of the truck bed, lit a cigarette, and stared blankly into the distance.

Each boy peeled off at the end of a row, dropped his bucket, squatted, and thrust his hands around a bean plant. The first beans I pulled off the plant pinged into my empty bucket. A breeze blew across the dusty field on that bright clear morning. I was glad to be earning some money.

I watched the other pickers move their hands rapidly down the sides of each bush and drop a handful of beans into their buckets. In seconds, they duck-walked to the next bush and did it again. I reached for beans several times, dropped some on the ground, and didn’t move across the field nearly as fast as the others. There was more skill involved in picking beans than I had thought, but I was sure I would get the hang of it quickly.

At first, the only sound was the thrum of cars on Sunbury Road taking people to their jobs in Columbus. Soon one guy casually said to another, “Hey, Thompson, I hear your Mom earns her living on her back.” I looked up.

“Johnson, you sorry bastard. Your Momma wears combat boots.” A call and response of insults I had seldom, if ever, heard continued intermittently through the morning with snorts and laughs.

I squatted for a while and steadily moved along my row. As my knees and thighs tightened, I was reminded of the year before when I tried out for catcher on our grade school team. I hated foul tips and feared getting hit with a bat, but squatting was the worst part. I was grateful when coach moved me back to second base.

The sun was getting warmer. Discomfort in my legs increased, and I thought less about my picking speed and technique. The stiffness in my knees and my sore back absorbed all my attention. I wondered if this might be doing permanent damage to my knees. I wondered if I would always explain that I was bull-legged or stiff-legged because I picked beans as a kid. I began perching on one knee and then the other, but the dirt clods and small stones pressed painfully into my knees. I tried standing and stooping to reach the beans, even though no one else in the field was standing. My sore back joined my knees and thighs in what I now thought of as pain and maybe even permanent damage.

The bell interrupted my misery. I looked up at Bart extending his arm high above his black Stetson and was bringing it down repeatedly like a mallet hitting a spike. Everyone began stepping over the rows and heading toward the truck under the grove of trees. It was a morning break. The boys formed a line at a barrel equipped with a spigot and drew water into Dixie paper cups. The water was warm, but refreshing just as coffee, however bad, but still welcome in the morning.

Several boys stood with their backs turned in a semi-circle around a large tree. They had assumed the unmistakable posture of males urinating, shoulders hunched, upper arms at their sides, forearms hidden, hands guiding the stream. I thought I had better join them before returning to the field.

“This tree’ll die from all our piss,” said one boy.

“Bull... Dogs piss on trees all the time. This tree’s probably been pissed on a million times and it’s still here,” said another.

“Yeah, but all of us are pissing on it twice a day,” said one of the older guys. After some other pronouncements, most agreed that the tree was doomed. The discussion moved to when it would die.

“I’ll bet any amount of money that the leaves will turn piss yellow and fall off in October,” I said.

No one laughed. “Hey. The new kid’s a smart ass,” said the older boy. All eyes were on me, and I was relieved when the bell saved me from

saying anything else. We all shook off the last drops, tucked in, and zipped up.

Bart said to me, “You only brought two buckets in so far, kid. Got to strip the beans off and move down the row fast if you’re going to make any money. Hear?”

“Yessir,” I replied automatically, and drew hard looks from boys close by.

The sun was high in the unclouded sky. Sweat formed on my skin. I noticed everyone else had a hat. Some had wide-brimmed straw hats; most had ball caps. One guy had a ridiculous, yellow hat made of foam rubber and shaped like a fedora. He saturated it with water during the break, and it didn’t seem so ridiculous as the sun beat down on the bean field.

How dumb not to wear a hat, I grumbled to myself. I labored on as the temperature rose, probably already over ninety. I was trying to imitate the motion of the others’ hands and speed up my pace. My T-shirt was clinging to my skin and sweat was dripping down my neck. I took a full bucket to the scales and stuffed the chit in my jeans. Others had already made a couple of trips to the truck since the break. Thoughts of my sore knees, legs, back and now my fingers crowded out efforts to pick faster. I glanced up at the sun to gauge how soon we would stop for lunch. I longed to hear Bart’s bell bring a break from what I now considered to be agony. I began to imagine myself as the often-depicted, bedraggled man crawling across a featureless desert under a sun drawn large radiating its deadly rays on the doomed man.

When the bell rang out that dying man was rescued. I stiffly walked to the end of the row where I had stashed my lunch bag. I was hungry, but a slice of bologna on white bread moistened with mayonnaise was not appealing. Three cups of warm water from the barrel did little to relieve my thirst, but I was out of the sun and still alive.

Several of the pickers were headed toward the Esso station beyond the field on Sunbury Road. It was a long walk, but the prospect of holding a cold, curvaceous bottle of Coke, wet with condensation, mesmerized me. I began walking before I considered whether the walk was worth it. Thirst overwhelmed my weariness.

I sat with my back against the gas station’s cool wall in a narrow band of shade. I savored the taste of Coke, and washed down my limp sandwich. I began breathing easier until thoughts of more misery after lunch in the hot bean field flooded into my mind.

Sunbury Road beckoned. It was the route home, an escape from Bart and the bean field. I had chits totaling \$2.50, but I crunched them up with my lunch bag and stuffed the ball of paper into the trash barrel. After the others had left the gas station, I crossed the road, stuck out my thumb and began walking backwards away from the bean field and toward home.

After hitching two rides, I turned onto our street to find Dad's car in the driveway. He would say that he was between appointments in his new job selling business advertising specialties to small businesses.

"You're home early," he said and waited for an explanation.

"It was awful, just awful. My back aches, my legs are sore and even my fingers hurt. It's incredibly hard work for nickels and dimes. I left after lunch." I didn't mention that I had left without getting paid.

"I was afraid that it would be a lot harder than you thought. You know it's called stoop labor."

"I'd call it stupid labor."

Dad, who never heard a pun he didn't like, grinned, and said, "But, if we're going to have beans, someone has to pick them."

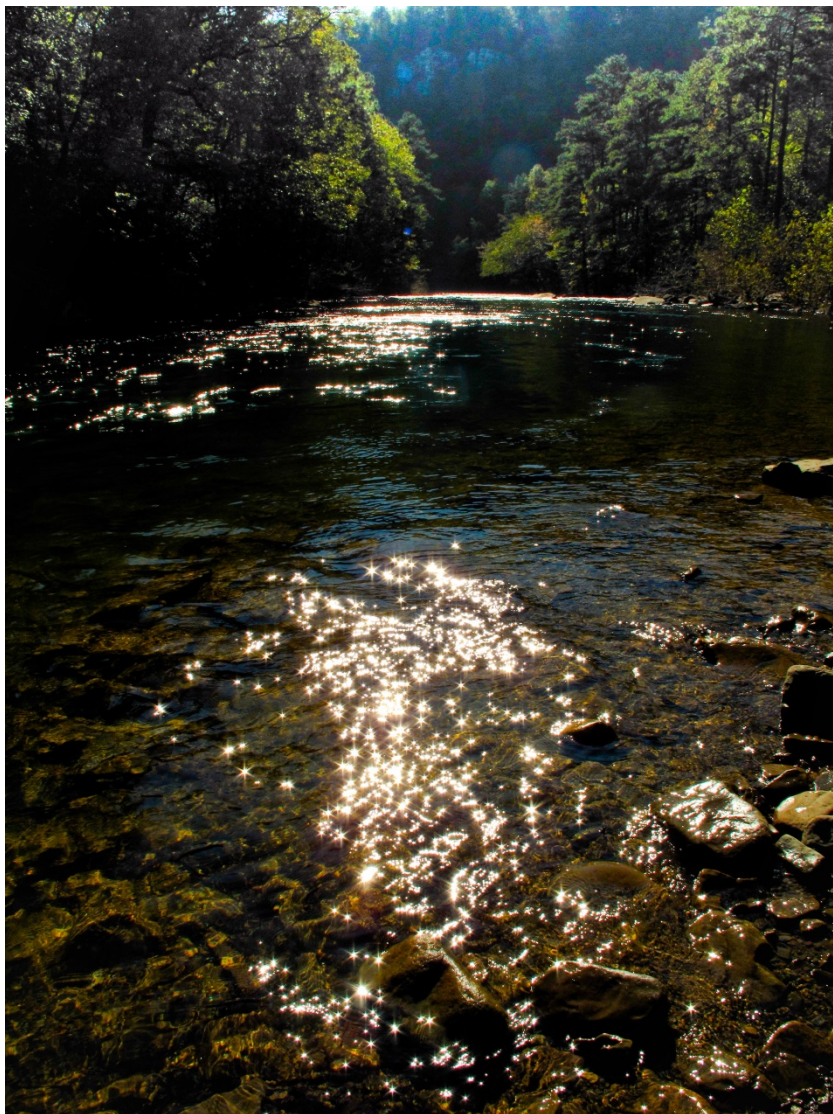
"Someone needs to invent a bean-picking machine. Before you say it, I know all those guys will be out of work, but no one should have to do that kind of work."

"What you need to do is keep your grades up, get a scholarship, graduate from college, and get a good job behind a desk."

"You can sure count on that, Dad."

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Michael Calvert, a native of Columbus, OH, is a retired urban planner who labored for 28 years to revitalize downtown Birmingham, AL. He is pursuing memoirs for family and friends under the tutelage of Carolynne Scott and Denise Trimm.
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DARK WATER, SPARKLING STREAM

Digital Photograph
Beau Gustafson

Beau Gustafson, aka “The Big Swede,” is an advertising, food, and editorial photographer based in Birmingham, AL. <http://www.bigswede.ne>

EMILY AS SNOW ON DARK WATER

Darren C. Demaree

Down
& away,
both
sides
of the lake
a threat,

Emily
tested
the ice
to fight
like
everyone

else.
She almost
died
that night,
but she
proved,

she is not
everyone
else.
That naked
girl lost
a toe,

but that body,
in context,
redefined
the rest
of what
the world is.

.....

*Darren C. Demaree's poems have appeared, or are scheduled to appear, in numerous magazines/journals, including the South Dakota Review, Meridian, The Louisville Review, Grist, and the Colorado Review. He is the author of As We Refer To Our Bodies (2013, 8th House), Temporary Champions (2014, Main Street Rag), and Not For Art Nor Prayer (2015, 8th House). He is managing editor of the Best of the Net Anthology. He lives and writes in Columbus, OH, with his wife and children. **darrencdemaree@yahoo.com***

“Everyone would have thought him fit to
rule if only he never had.”

-Tacitus

THE UNEXPECTED

Carolyn M. Rhodes

I am a child of the fifties, the days when typewriters clicked and clacked and televisions were black and white. And, we shared one phone per household. Those times were exciting in a completely different way. One quick snapshot I recall is my big sister boarding a small jet plane to fly to Paris to live with her French boyfriend. (My parents hadn't a clue about the living arrangements.) My middle sister began her adult life as a literary poet in college. I am the youngest and in this snapshot, I am in high school. It is there where I made lifelong friends.

Every summer, for the past 12 years, I fly to Cape Cod for a family and friends reunion. Towards the end of my family reunion, I spend the final three days with Sigrid and Barbara, sisters. I've known them since grammar school.

After dinner, we walk down the winding road which is roughly paved. The homes and gardens add a picturesque scene along the route to the beach. We take the same walk every summer, but it's always a different view. That second evening we happened to come across an osprey nest perched on top of a lamp post. The nest took the shape of an inside out portobello mushroom. It was a home, sturdy and massive. We humans could only imagine this family's life journey. One of them flew off into the pink sky towards the ocean. A few gathered around to watch.

But, when the unexpected happened, I'd have to wait until next year to get that story.

I made a last ditch effort in hopes that I might see the big bird landing, but, as I turned around and walked backwards—in a split second of interrupted pleasant thought about the osprey's flight—the heel of my sneaker dug into a deep hole. I fell onto my hand and landed on my back.

Sigrid and Barbara bent down and carefully returned me to my feet. I could barely catch my breath and my wrist went limp.

Barbara took charge after assessing my condition, "I'll run to the house and bring the car back. Sig, I'll do my best to get back fast. If it's too long, call an ambulance."

We were about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from the house and it was an uphill walk. My heart raced as I watched my hand swell.

Soon enough, in the ER, X-rays had been taken and I would soon learn my fate. The osprey nest was the furthest thing from my mind.

The doctor informed me I needed emergency surgery the next day and that my wrist was badly broken. I would need pins and a plate. Suddenly I began to shiver and a wave of anxiety hit me.

Sig remained by my side and told me to not worry. I could stay without a problem and she would look after me. But with a long recovery and physical therapy ahead, I knew my only option was going home. The doctor placed my arm in a splint and sent me off with a sling.

“Get that done no later than Friday,” he insisted.

I slept the entire next day while the girls sprang into action. They boxed up my clothes and shipped them via UPS so I had nothing to carry. My suitcase went to the Salvation Army and they ordered a wheelchair assistant to meet me at the Boston airport. No way could I wait on a check-in line with only one functional arm. They made sure I had at least \$20 in singles for tips.

President Obama vacationed in Nantucket that weekend and the airport bus was full. I guarded my right arm and moved into the first seat for the handicapped. I couldn’t imagine that the unexpected would strike again, but soon enough, it did.

My connecting flight to Birmingham was not coming due to bad weather in Chicago. The airline booked me for a morning flight and left me stranded en route to Baltimore.

I called my son and he made a reservation at the Marriott near the Baltimore airport. A porter met me at the Baltimore gate. I arrived at nearly midnight—my phone was dead and I was disheveled and weak. The young man knew his way around, charged my phone and dropped me off at the limo stop. He called the Marriott to alert them that I was in a wheelchair, waiting at their ramp. I gave him a \$10 tip. I couldn’t have made it without him.

Once at the Marriott, I was given a handicapped room. It was comfortable and clean. I had a king-sized bed and a very big shower with no steps—a space to get easily in and out of. Now I understood why a handicapped person would need this. I was now that person.

With a slow twist of the shower knob, water gushed out slowly until I adjusted the temperature. The goal was to keep the splint and dressing dry before surgery. A sudden move could cause further injury. My wrecked body felt a heavenly anointment of calm, as though holy water poured over me. It was the best shower in the worst of times.

At 5 am, I was on my way back, heading for the airport, almost home. Surgery and physical therapy followed for the next 3 months. Eventually, I got my hand and all fingers working. It was a slow recovery. I could never have imagined how it felt to be handicapped, to lose the use of one beautifully created diligent workhorse, my hand, with its tiny boned fingers perfectly crafted and guided by a wrist to move every second of a day and night.

And, I can't leave out the childhood friends who are there to lift our spirits exactly when we need them. I came through with eyes wide open and a bigger heart.

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*Carolyn M. Rhodes earned a BA degree in Drama and Dance, College of Staten Island, 1973. She retired from UA's College of Business as an office associate and wrote for their alumni magazine. Carolyn is an exercise instructor and an award-winning writer. She maintains a tech news blog, **writegems.blogspot.com**.*

“A life is like a garden. Perfect moments can be had, but not preserved.”

-Leonard Nimoy

MARIO LANZA ALMOST ALIVE AND IN PERSON

Jim Reed

I found this twenty-year-old entry in my Red Clay Diary. Though it happened long, long ago, it feels like yesterday. And it helps me recall my mom, and a good adventure I had with my brother, Tim.

Somewhere deep in the bowels of the city of Philadelphia, on the second floor—or is it the third? —of a music school, reside the paper-and-cloth remnants of a pre-Pavarotti superstar, a man who died in 1959, still remembered by a few aging fans who celebrate his Philadelphia-ness each year.

I am here with my brother, Tim, who is busy showing his whimsical art at an enormous civic-center show. I take a break to have an adventure in a town I know little about.

The Mario Lanza Institute and Museum, I learn, is listed as a tourist attraction by Triple-A and, of course, this is the natural place I want to visit first if I ever get to Philadelphia.

This kind of attraction appeals to me most...the dusty little out-of-the-way corners of the nation that are ignored by crowds waiting to get into the Benjamin Franklin Institute or who drive 90 miles to see the home of Edgar Allan Poe. Besides, my mother is a longtime fan of Lanza, so I think it will be a great gesture to bring her a souvenir or two from the Institute.

The Angolan cab driver has no idea how to get me to the Mario Lanza Institute and Museum, so we have to stop several places—at my expense—to ask various uninformed and usually indifferent citizens for directions. We finally find a woman, standing in front of a theatre, whose child has actually attended the music school and who thus provides directions for me—certainly not directions for the cab driver, who has no idea where anything is and whose wife was trying to get through nursing school so he won't have to spend the rest of his life driving through a city he fears. ("No cabdriver wants to drive after 5 o'clock in this town.")

So, after scrunching up our shoulders to make it through the narrow streets, I at last tell the lost driver to just let me out. He does, and I find myself in an alien land—shabby, overcrowded and oversqueezed

buildings, trash in the streets, and loiterers eyeing passersby with thirsty curiosity.

Just can't figure out where I am, so I enter a teeming neighborhood laundry to ask the Chinese owner for directions. He can't understand anything I say, and the hangers-out in the establishment are beginning to crowd uncomfortably close to me, the bearded London-Fog-overcoated bald guy who just doesn't seem to come from these parts. One rather large, sullen man looms over me, staring.

From behind, someone taps me roughly on the shoulder. I freeze, hoping the contact is accidental. The tapping continues, and I turn to find the smiling face of a woman who speaks English and actually knows where the Mario Lanza Institute is.

Just a block away, behind high metal fences, stands an aged building with high ceilings and run-down plaster-walled offices. Inside, even though I call ahead to make sure the Museum is open, nobody can tell me how to get upstairs to see the Museum. ("The elevator can be operated only by key—and you'll have to talk to the people in the office.") The people in the office are tied up with personal phone calls, so I stick my head into a side office, interrupting the casual chatter of two denizens, who send me back to the desk I've just come from.

"Here, I'll let you on the elevator with my key," a grizzled, limping elderly man smiles. He leads me down a narrow hallway to a stale-smelling tiny elevator and sends me on my way, alone and claustrophobic, to the floor where I might find Mario Lanza's scraps and pieces, if I am lucky.

Once the door clangs open, I am inside another narrow corridor that leads eventually to a high-ceilinged dimly-lit hallway on the walls of which Mario Lanza himself PR-grins himself silly for visitors and photographers around the world.

There are yellowed newspaper clippings, a framed letter to Mario from Jack Warner, another from Sammy Cahn, a Mario Lanza dinner jacket with the faint yellowing you associate with rental outfits (his arms were incredibly short, it seems), various audiocassette tapes comparing Lanza to Caruso, tabloid papers reporting on the annual Mario Lanza Festival, dingy scrapbooks and press-clipping binders available for

Lanzaphile research, a sample copy of a book about Lanza—“We’re out of these, so we can’t sell this copy”—the bored clerk who staffs the Institute says—and various fan club materials on the cracked-plaster walls of one small room.

And that is it.

The Mario Lanza Institute and Museum is about to close in the middle of the afternoon, and I am the third and final person to sign the guest book this day. I purchase a cassette for my Mother, pick up a few freebie photocopies and pamphlets for her, and make my way downstairs to the main door, dodging young musicians and their parents.

Outside in the cold winter air, I cannot find a cab, but two tourists do stop to ask me for directions. I wander toward what is called the Italian Market, smelling wonderful cooked-sausage and pasta fragrances, and trying to look as if I know what I am doing in this strange and unclean neighborhood, trying to look as if I can handle myself.

Finally, a cabdriver idling his GM car in front of a small store says he will take me back to the Philadelphia Civic Center as soon as his mate is through shopping. His wife, a petite and polite woman, chats with me a bit as we drive through the incredibly narrow streets of another planet and head toward someplace I can call familiar in this best and worst of all possible cities where once a tenor spent some time making fans of people who are beginning now to forget both him and the hopefulness that once welled from within his lungs...a hopefulness that thrilled my mom and a million other moms whose lives in the late-1940’s and early-50’s were so much harder but so much purer then

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Jim Reed has authored hundreds of stories about his life in Alabama. He has authored a dozen books, among them Dad’s Tweed Coat: Small Wisdoms, Hidden Comforts, Unexpected Joys. www.jimreedbooks.com

A BEAUTIFUL MESS

Sharon Chambers

"I really don't know how to tell you this," he whispers. Refusing to look at me, he stares off into the distance. Whatever he has on his mind and his heart is destroying him from the inside.

I know I will be its next victim. This is about to hurt. And hurt badly.

Suddenly, a feeling washes over me, and I know this will be the last time we will be this way. I feel the need to savor every second of being close to him, hearing his voice...of touching him. I pull his hand into my lap. Holding it there, I trace the roadmap of veins on the back of his hand that I know better than my own.

Lee Knight is my best friend. Always has been and always will be. Ever since that day in first grade when I walked up on him playing in the sand pit on the playground. All it took was him looking up at me with those beautiful green eyes. He smiled at me and my heart melted. I was done for.

We've been inseparable ever since.

Over the years, our relationship continued to grow right along with us. When I turned fifteen, he asked me to be his girlfriend. Of course I said "yes."

A decision I would soon regret.

I stare at him even though he refuses to look at me. His dark brown hair falls over his emerald green eyes. Eyes so beautiful and bright they could pierce the dark. I wish they would just look my way, just for a minute. "Please, don't drag it out. It just makes it worse," I bite my lip as soon as the words leave my lips. *Do I really want him to hurry up?*

Tears fill my eyes, almost to the brink of overflowing. I don't want to lose him. I *can't* lose him. He is my *heart*. My *soul*. This beautiful mess that is not a boy, but not quite a man, is my...*everything*. I will surely curl up and die without him.

Pulling his hand from mine, he stands up, and looks off into the distance. I can't tell what he is staring at and I really don't want to see. Everything around us, the leaves changing, the kids playing in the park across from us, the cars passing by, it all fades into a haze. He is the only thing I see.

He still refuses to look at me when he finally speaks. "I didn't mean for it to happen, Shay. It just did," he begins. I could hear his voice

cracking from the strain of holding back his tears. “You went out of town with your family for the weekend. She came to help me study for the Exit Exam...,” he fades off. Running his fingers through his hair, one of his nervous habits, I hear him take several deep breaths.

He’s trying to keep it together, while we are falling apart.

I can’t bear to look at him anymore. I know where this is going. The realization hits me with the force of a runaway train. He *betrayed* me. Betrayed me in the worst possible way. The “she” he spoke of is, or was, a mutual friend. A mutual friend I recommended to help him study while I was out of town with my family. Only I am the one learning a valuable lesson here.

His voice sounds so much weaker when he continues, “We were joking around taking a break when *it* happened. One minute we were laughing at some stupid TV show, then the next kissing and then...then...*that*...”

He continues on, and even though I hear the sound, I don’t hear the words. Then, I don’t hear him at all. Lost in my mind, I can see it happening: the longing in those green eyes, pleading with you to give in. I’d be lying if I denied that things didn’t get heated after dating for almost two years. We came close a few times, but I kept a level head and shut it down. Not that I didn’t love Lee or didn’t want him to be my “first.” I just didn’t want us to make a mistake that might cost us our future. Well, my shutting it down cost me a future...it cost me a future with *him*.

Snapping out of my thoughts, I came back to the now just in time for him to put the nail in coffin of our relationship. “She’s... well, she’s... pregnant, Shay. *Pregnant*. I don’t know what I am going to do.”

Well, I do. *Sick, I am going to be sick*. Jumping off the bench, I run to the garbage can just across the walkway from me. The meager lunch we just ate comes back up with force, adding to my already embarrassing moment in time.

I can feel his presence before he even touches me. Gathering my long red hair to keep it from becoming collateral damage, he whispers apologies in my ear. I make a promise to myself as soon as I regain control of my stomach I will get as far away from him as possible. It is going to take me time to process everything I’ve just heard.

On top of being sick, a kaleidoscope of emotion shoots through me. Anger, sadness, and embarrassment are in a fight to the death for control.

Control I am trying my hardest not to lose. After what seems like hours, the heaves subside. As I stand up and make a feeble attempt to put myself back together, Lee releases my hair and puts his arms around me.

I am trying so hard to keep my temper in check, but he isn't making it easy. The fact he still feels that he has a right to touch me after what he just admitted has my blood boiling. How stupid was I to trust him?

Stupid... stupid...stupid.

Spinning out of his embrace, I turn to face him. I notice that he can finally look at me. I guess because a weight has been lifted since he just confessed all his sins. His eyes stare back into mine, pleading for my forgiveness but I'm not ready to hand it over. I know he is hurting, but it is he who has caused all of this destruction. Well, he and his seventeen-year-old hormones.

That's all it takes and I lose control of my temper. It takes mere seconds for the spark in the back of my mind to engulf us both. I want to slap *him*. I want to slap *her*. My heart is shattering into a million pieces. I can't stop it from happening and I sure can't put it back together. Nothing will ever be the same. My whole world has just been yanked out from under my feet, causing me to land right on my face.

There is only one thing that will make me feel better. *Someone* needs to feel the amount of pain I feel. *Someone* else needs to hurt. Unfortunately for Lee, he is the only one standing before me.

And he is about to regret it.

My face must be changing to reveal the sudden shift in my mood. Lee puts up his hands and begins backing away. I follow until the back of his knees hit the bench, causing him to lose his balance and he is forced to sit down. Stuck with nowhere to go. Now, I have his attention. My turn. Batter up!

At first I struggle to find my voice, "How dare you? You weren't even going to tell me, were you? Not until there was no other choice." He makes the mistake of trying to touch my hand, and I explode, screaming at him, "Don't you dare touch me again! Not only did you cheat on me, you did it with one of my friends! Then you didn't even have the nerve to be honest, until she forced your hand!"

I start to tremble from the force of anger and not being able to release it quickly enough. My face is burning. My head is pounding from the

pressure. Tears stream down my cheeks and begin soaking my shirt. My vision blurs. I can't even see him anymore. Yet, I know he is still sitting there, staring at me with those beautiful green eyes.

"You both must be pure evil! I couldn't do that to either of you, let alone hide it for a month and go on like nothing happened! Both of you are out of my life... forever!"

I hear him break and he begins to plead between sobs, "Please, Shay, don't say that. You're my best friend. I-I love you. I can't go on without you in my life. I can't do this without you."

Looking down I see the glimmer of the gold bracelet that he gave me our first Christmas together. I take it off and slip it into the pocket of his letterman jacket that I'm wearing. I shrug out of it, throwing it on the ground at his feet. Turning, I cross my arms, firing the final shot of this battle before I begin walking home. My voice is softer now, almost hoarse after the sickness and tears, "Well, we both know that isn't true, don't we? You didn't have any trouble doing *that* without me. Her name might be Mary, but I don't believe this was another immaculate conception. Don't be a liar on top of everything else.

"Goodbye, Lee."

Walking home, I whisper a short prayer. *"Lord, take away this hurt and let me move on with my life. Amen."*

That is the last time I will speak to Lee Knight.

At our high school graduation, Lee pulls in next to me. Gone is the silver Toyota 4X4 he picked me up for our first date in, replaced with a four door sedan. Guess they had to get something more "family friendly." *Must be a graduation gift, or a wedding present or a baby shower gift.* Mary gets out, now visibly pregnant even in her cap and gown. Lee comes around to meet her and takes her hand. The happy couple awaiting the arrival of their little bundle of joy. Makes me want to puke.

The bright blue gown and the huge amount of weight she's gained, makes Mary look like that girl from "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." You know the one that chews the special gum and it turns into a blueberry? I think her name was Violet. *Maybe they can roll her across the stage to get her diploma.*

This thought makes me feel a little better.

The last few months of school, watching Lee live out the dreams I had for us with another girl has been a living hell. And not just any girl, someone I once considered a friend. Another person I was wrong about.

They are almost inside. I fight back the urge to run to them and shout, “I should be the one carrying his child! I should be the one planning a wedding for early next year, after I get back to my ‘pre-baby’ weight!” Once they are clear, I shut my trunk and slowly make my way to the gym.

I so wish I could go back in time. Go back to one of those times that I shut him down and not be so quick to say “no.” Maybe he wouldn’t have turned to her in my absence. Maybe I would be the one wearing an engagement ring.

In the end, I don’t know which hurts worse: Lee’s betrayal or the fact he’s let me go without a fight. He hasn’t come by. He hasn’t called. Nothing. *So much for not being able to go on without me.*

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S. D. Chambers was born and reared in Birmingham, AL. A busy accountant by day, she is also a writer, and lover of short stories. Taking that passion to the next level, she recently finished writing her first novel A Beautiful Mess.

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HOW I THINK

Connie McCay

Have you ever heard a noise while in the shower/bath, but you have soap all over your face and can't look to see what it is, so you automatically assume it's a deranged psychopath who has gotten inside the house, so you hurry to get the soap off, at least out of one eye because you assume by now the psychopath has reached the bathroom and is standing there looking at you, so you open one eye while the other's tightly squinched closed to keep the soap out, expecting to see a monster, but there's no one there. Everytime. Because that is how I think.

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Connie McCay, a native of Gardendale, attends Virginia College studying to be a medical clinic assistant. She has one husband, two children, two dogs, lives in Birmingham, AL, and considers herself a free spirit. Her bucket list includes visiting a rainforest. connie.12411@gmail.com

A VISIT WITH THE POPE

Elizabeth Sztul

It was getting dark as Celia gloomily looked out her office window at leafless trees. She was tired of populating Excel spreadsheets with financial numbers and resented this monkey work. She continued to click in the numbers, awed by the money her clients made in the ever-rising stock market. "The rich get richer and the poor stay the same", she thought sadly, thinking of the great divide between her friends in Pittsburgh, struggling with mortgages and bills, and her friends in BHM comfortable with their trusts and "other" income. That life is unfair was always obvious to her, the haphazard divide in hopes and opportunities. With age, she has gotten more and more cynical at her helplessness and inability to impact the "way it is", but it still unsettled her.

The shrill beeping of the communicator interrupted the office silence. Celia has been getting messages almost continuously for the last 2 days, ever since she invited all her friends to a blowout B-day party. It was hard to decide between the many B-day themes available, but she finally settled on a "Night in Bangkok"—it seemed exotic and she thought her friends would like the escape. It was an expensive theme, but she was willing to spend money to please her friends.

She checked her communicator and jumped up screaming—I got it, I got it! She almost lost all hope of being selected, but here it was, her invitation to meet with the Pope! Ever since she found out that it was possible for "normal" people to meet the Pope she wanted to do it. She wouldn't want to meet the previous Pope, a sour German without personality or stamina, but this new Pope, the one concerned with inequality and poverty, and advocating that we love everyone, even gays, this new Pope she wanted to meet. It wasn't easy to gain access, and she worked hard to ace the lengthy questionnaire and the personal interview. But here it was, the invitation to a papal audience! She tweeted all her friends and was amazed by the variety of responses—some were jealous and some thought it ridiculous. But she is secure in her faith and loves the comfort and the guidance it gives her life. Every Sunday, at Mass, she mumbles words of liturgy unchanged for thousands of years: charitable God, merciful God... she feels those words resonate inside her and doesn't question their negation by the news.

She arrives at Rome's Da Vinci airport bursting with excitement. A papal representative, Father Mario meets her at the gate and she is surprised by how handsome he is, more like a model than a priest. He looks to be in his 50's, perfectly suited to her age, and she smiles coyly. Surprisingly, his English is perfect, without any hint of an Italian accent and Celia is disappointed—somehow she anticipated more of a foreign experience. But her expectations are surpassed the minute they get into a car and the chauffeur drives towards St. Peter's Basilica. The streets are jammed with speeding Fiats, and horns and people are screaming at each other - it is exactly as she imagined Rome would be. They pass the Coliseum and the Vittori mausoleum, both looking gorgeous, exactly like postcards and images from old movies. Celia admires the majestic hills—she counts six and scowls—shouldn't there be seven? She rubs her eyes and counts again, and reassuringly there are seven. They drive on and she admires the old buildings with their clay red roofs looking exactly like the Renaissance paintings in her Art History class. Father Mario sits very close to her, too close she thinks, and points out ruins and landmarks, seems more like a flirting tourist guide than a man of the cloth.

They pull into the courtyard of St. Peter's and it takes Celia's breath away—how could they build this fabulousness so many years ago—the hugeness, the beauty, the flawless symmetry. Once inside, father Mario walks her over to the *Pieta*—Celia has seen pictures of it before, but now, in front of the statue, tears well up in her eyes. The pain of a mother for her dead son overcomes her, and she weeps. Father Mario smiles sympathetically and gives her a hug, slightly too long and much too tight.

They walk through the Sistine chapel towards the papal residence, and Celia almost stumbles as she glances upwards—the colorful ceiling seems to undulate. But the imagery steadies when she focuses her gaze. They enter the papal apartments and Father Mario leaves her in a small conference room. “I must calm down” – Celia forces herself to scan the old table and ornately carved chairs in the center, two wooden traveling benches on opposing walls and a large crucifix between the windows. Shouldn't the crucifix be over the door? she wonders. The return of Father Mario startles her—his appearance seems altered, he looks less dashing and elegant, more drab and priestly. When he explains that the Pope will be slightly delayed, his broken English shocks her. But now she remembers that his English has gotten progressively worse during the afternoon, and now closely resembles what she originally expected.

Thankful for the delay, she is almost composed when the Pope enters, and she kneels and kisses his ring. He blesses her and motions for her to sit across from him, takes her hands in his two. She is so choked up she can hardly breathe, but he waits patiently for her to collect herself. "Holy Father, thank you for agreeing to see me," she says and he nods answering, "I'm glad you are here."

They chat for almost an hour, and she is in awe of his humility and wisdom, and deeply touched by the way he makes her feel worthy and important. Her many questions he answers patiently, easily making sense of the world—she has never felt so secure or so whole. She wants to cry when he rises to leave. He blesses her again, and now she notices that he wears the Fisherman's ring on his left hand, rather than the ordained right. A small glitch, but nevertheless, he has been so perfect.

Father Mario collects her and they walk to the front of St. Peter's. "Will you be OK for the rest of the way?" he asks, his broken English now thick with an Italian accent. She nods her head as she exits the Basilica and sits on the front steps to think things over, absently looking at the pigeons that swarm around her. She is suddenly very tired and wants to be home.

She claps her hands three times, blinks as the bright lights flood the simulator, removes her credit card from the reader, clicks off the "Visit with the Pope" program and exits the simulator. After she makes herself a sandwich, she logs on to give feedback on the experience. She gives it a B+, with kudos for the fantastic trip through Rome, but reducing points for the issues with Father Mario—clearly, whoever is responsible for that character needs to step up their coding. The reward for rating the "Pope" program is a draw for a newly advertised adventure—a meeting with Dalai Lama, and Celia very much hopes for a win.

Falling asleep she muses that tomorrow will be a busy day—they are delivering the simulators she has rented for the "Night in Bangkok" party with her friends.

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Elizabeth Sztul, PhD, is a professor in the UAB Department of Cell, Developmental and Integrative Biology. Before coming to UAB, she served on the faculty at Princeton University. This is her first (but hopefully not last) non-scientific publication. esztul@uab.edu

THE BREATH AND NOT THE BREATHING

Jordan Knox

A
Breath
Can
Determine
Everything
From life or death to
Greatness or insignificance.
How many breaths is a life worth?
It seems not enough.
Just a few short puffs of air,
Killing time until we finally
Lose the fight.
Most of the time we
Neglect to cherish these moments;
Only stopping to smell the roses when ordered,
Placing weight on the unimportant.
Quite often it seems to be that the
Roses are the only ones living.
So what are we waiting for?
Take the time to find your breath.
Understand that life is trivial until
Verified by personal meaning.
Walk amongst the gardens and the dark forests and experience the
Xesturgy of your life on Earth as you begin to truly live.
Yesterday is forever lost and tomorrow may never come so live your life with
Zeal and always appreciate the individual breath and not just the breathing.

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*Jordan Knox is currently a junior at the University of South Alabama in Mobile, AL. She is studying print journalism and one day wishes to work with a magazine or literary journal. She is the opinion editor for the University of South Alabama's student newspaper, The Vanguard, and has been published in it several times. (TheVanguardOnline.com) **jordyknox94@gmail.com***

NEW HOUSE

Allison Grayhurst

Ready now to open the vault
and chase my vanity out with the tide.
Ready to enter the submerged stages
of colossal change and streams
of primal glory wrapped
like thread around the pulse of God.
Ready to believe in mercy and in
warmth in the dead winter night.
Under my toes the sensation grows
that something is coming to change the
structure of my roof and allow more room to rest.
Ready to hold the encroaching massacre aloof,
to paint my name on the wall and pile
all my expectations
at the foot of this entrance door.

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Allison Grayhurst is a full member of the League of Canadian Poets. She has more than 450 poems published in more than 225 international journals and anthologies. Her book Somewhere Falling was published by Beach Holme Publishers in 1995. Her work has appeared in Parabola (Summer 2012); Literary Orphans; Blue Fifth Review; South Florida Arts Journal; Gris-Gris; and many other publications. Grayhurst is also a sculptor whose work may be seen at www.allisongrayhurst.com

FONDO DE LA CULTURA ECONOMICA

James Miller Robinson

If we want to feel the excitement of hope, we have to be willing to feel the desolation of rejection as well. I thought about this when I took a test for translating at the *Fondo de la Cultura Economica* publishing company. The test consisted of my translating a few pages of a book I myself selected from a shelf in the office of the translation department.

I was excited about the prospect of becoming a translator for a publishing company. It had taken a lot of phone calls just to get into the building. It was a huge operation with about a city block of offices, warehouses, and pressrooms located a block off *Insurgentes*, a major commercial artery that bisects Mexico City from north to south.

The company was fortified by a series of high walls, chain link fences, gates, guardhouses, watchmen, and receptionists, most of whom seemed to think I didn't have any business being there at all. Once I found out the name of who was in charge of the translation department, the task became easier. I just announced to each guard, receptionist, and secretary I passed that I was going to see Senor Ruelas, and they let me go through and even told me which way to navigate through the labyrinth of hallways, corridors, staircases, offices, and lobbies. At one point, I even had to cross a roof outside the building, enter an adjoining building, and descend again into the pit of bureaucratic office workers who didn't exactly welcome me as I passed.

I was even allowed to take the "test" home with me. I thought this was too good to be true. I had carried my stack of dictionaries hidden in my briefcase, thinking I would be given some kind of standardized test to fill out there in the office.

Lupita and I spent all Wednesday night refining my rough draft as well as we could. For reasons I can no longer fathom, I had chosen an American's biography of a twentieth century German philosopher. I delivered the "sample" with great pride on Friday morning. As I entered the company offices this time, I spoke to all the watchmen and secretaries with enthusiastic friendliness, imagining them to be my future *companeros de trabajo*. I made sure to show a great deal of overall enthusiasm with Sr. Ruelas who accepted the "sample" with air of detached distraction. He told me to call back on Monday afternoon to find out the "editorial opinion."

Over the weekend I felt optimistic about my prospects of becoming a staff translator of entire books for one of the largest and most important publishing companies in all Latin America. I told Alberto about my prospects. I told Sevillano. I told Therese, my classmate at the National University, and her husband Jorge. I even gave them Sr. Ruelas' name and number and encouraged them to become book translators too. "We can be *compañeros de trabajo*!" I told them charged with excitement. "You can handle the French-Spanish work and I'll take care of the English-Spanish work!" We all laughed, but inside I was as serious as stone. I felt as though the hard times had ended for Lupita and me. Sunshine and blue skies were heading our way. I told Perez Flores. I told Silvia Lira. I told Gilda Mendoza. I even mentioned it in a letter I wrote home to the folks in Alabama on Sunday afternoon.

I was still at that stage in my thinking that there was something noble and "authentic" about living from week to week and day to day without the luxury and security of a steady paycheck, without auto and health insurance. I enjoyed not having car payments and a mortgage on a house. I had a name for this attitude that I believe came from an article by Jim Willis in *Sojourners Magazine*. He called it "downward social mobility."

The yellow Beetle that Lupita's father had given her before we married was good enough to carry me through the three or four hours of sitting in traffic every day as I trudged from office to office and house to house tutoring English to anyone from company executives to their secretaries, administrators of public institutions, to children in the fine homes of Coyoacan and Campestre Churubusco.

Most of the people I knew in classes at the National University espoused a similar attitude and enjoyed a similar freedom due to government scholarships or relatively wealthy families back home in France, Argentina, or Colombia. Since our daughter Annie was born, things had become a little more serious for us. Lupita reminded me with increasing frequency that we were not helping the poor at all just by becoming one of them.

For the past several weeks, I had been losing what few clients I still had as a private English tutor. I was getting no new ones to replace them. The latest "economic crisis" and peso devaluation were taking their toll. I thought it must all be according to God's grand design that no new clients were calling me because it was destined for me to become a translator of

books for publishing companies. Or at least for one publishing company *Fondo de la Cultura Economica*.

We passed the weekend as poor as we had been for the previous several weekends—with just enough pesos to buy a little ham and cheese to have quesadillas. But there was hope smoldering inside. As long as we have hope, a constant diet of quesadillas, beans, rice, and eggs doesn't taste so bad.

At a quarter to two on Monday the moment of truth arrived. I suddenly remembered that I was supposed to call Sr. Ruelas to find out the editorial verdict. I jokingly told Lupita I didn't have the courage to call because I so badly feared rejection. But it was just a joke. We both felt the glow of hope and confidence.

When I got Sr. Ruelas himself on the phone—with unusual speed and ease—he told me he had gotten the “editorial opinion” on my sample, but it wasn't all positive. He said this didn't mean that I couldn't translate; it just meant that my work wasn't up to par with the stringent requirements that book publishers must demand. I asked him what seemed to be the problem, and he told me it was simply a matter of “dominion of composition in the Spanish language.” Now I really didn't know what to do about our poor situation and circumstance.

The phone rang not long after I had put it down from talking with Sr. Ruelas. I let it ring two or three times, relishing the good news I felt sure it must be bringing. Once the glow of hope is ignited in a man's heart, it takes more than just one catastrophe to squelch it. I thought it must be some lawyer or a company wanting translation work done.

It was Therese calling to tell me the good news. *Fondo de la Cultura Economica* had just hired her as a regular French-Spanish translator. The pay was going to be much better than she had expected.

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James Miller Robinson has been published in Wormwood Review, Pinch Journal, Xavier Review, Birmingham Poetry Review, Southern Humanities Review, Rattle, Texas Review, Rio Grande Review, Maple Leaf Rag IV and V and others. He taught Spanish at Huntsville High School and at the University of Alabama Huntsville. In print is a chapbook, The Caterpillars at Saint Bernard. An upcoming title is Boca del Rio in the Afternoon and Other Poems. jmr815@comcast.net

EMILY AS I EXPLAIN ACTUAL COAL

Darren C. Demaree

We had forgotten
about the peaches
we bought at the last
Clintonville Farmer's
Market of the season
& now, since it was
January they had turned
inward, disgustingly
they looked like the static
normally found beneath
the ground.
They smelled cold
& had passed the point
where mold threatened,
it had already taken
what it wanted
& quit growing
a week or so ago
& then Emily asked
if that was what coal
looked like, I told her
that coal was never fruit,
though if we let the carbons
run wild, who knows
what would happen.
If I got a diamond
out of a peach, she said,
that would be cool.
I told her we should have
eaten the damn peaches.

.....

See bio on page 17.

AQUARIUM GRAVEL

Russell Helms

Doreen rakes the Kitty Kling between the couch and the TV. The dust chokes her. She lives in a fifteen-hundred square-foot litterbox and is the loneliest thing ever in Pianotown.

She climbs a stepladder to the lip of the box and exits down a set of wooden stairs built by her father so many years ago. She waves at the man named Harold across the street. He leaves a garbage can at the end of the driveway and pretends he doesn't see her.

A squirrel runs, stops, and skitters across a drooping power line. The cat crouches. Its tail sweeps the street and two lawns. It strikes. A utility pole splinters and Doreen hurries inside the litterbox, intent on washing clothes and adjusting picture frames.

The dark gray cat with a fuzzy face tiptoes into the litterbox. Doreen presses herself to the plastic wall. The cat steps on the couch and pushes it into the chalky clay pellets. The cat turns round and round. Its tail knocks Doreen this way and that. A photo of her father falls. He smiles from an earthmover mining cat litter in Kern County, California.

At the grocery store Doreen buys coffee and Kitty Kling. A handsome man with a mustache decorates the coffee can. A photo of her father on a bulldozer decorates the cat-litter bag. Doreen says hello to the cashier who yammers to the clerk at the next register about the price of basmati rice in Nepal. The amount on the receipt is wrong. Doreen's been charged for two cans of coffee instead of one. But there it is, an address that she's never noticed before. El Salvador she says aloud. I don't think they grow rice in El Salvador says a cashier. How would you know says the other cashier. Do you read encyclopedias? And that puts an end to the rice conversation.

At home, in the dim shaft of light coming through the cat hole, Doreen writes a short letter and signs her name. She lays a coffee can on the pillow beside her and turns off the flashlight. She wants to read but she's too excited. She remembers the day her mother was overcharged for cat litter and wrote a letter. She dreams of living inside a fifteen-hundred

square foot coffee can, of her exclusive night of love with a mustachioed man, and of their child who will one day be charged twice for what? aquarium gravel?

.....

*Russell Helms has had stories in Sand, Otis Nebula, Drunken Boat, Used Gravitrans, Litro, Versal, BewilderingStories, TheMoth, Soliloquies Anthology, antiTHESIS, ala carte from Main Street Rag, and others. He writes, designs books, and teaches in Tennessee, is from Alabama, was born in Georgia. Helms also holds an MFA degree in creative writing from Bluegrass Writers Studio. **russell@47journals.com***



FUTURE MEMORY

Kelly Hanwright

I've seen her again

The ghost of a child running around this place

in the yard An outcast with tangled hair and half a smile

And then she's ten wondering why her period has to start and mom told her what it was like but didn't buy her anything to keep clean so she's shoving paper towels into her underwear and who's that—

Same girl now fifteen coming down the steps on the way to work They gave her a voucher for which she was proud and relieved

She steps in the aura of success but five more years will turn her bitter and

The scene changes to

a girl who almost looks like her runs in chasing butterflies zipping along while her free mane flies in the breeze but the film jerks/flashes and her white dress fades mingling with bright clouds against the blue sky

.....

*Kelly Hanwright is a writer, teacher, and dog trainer living in the beautiful Smoky Mountains. She has a BA degree in English with a goal to earn her PhD degree. She has been writing since she was eight. **kchanwrigh42@students.tntech.edu***



SILVER PLANT

William Thomas

30" x 40"

Acrylic on Canvas

William Thomas was reared in Memphis, TN, moved as a teenager to Baton Rouge, LA, and has a BFA degree in Design from Louisiana State University. He lives and works as an artist in Birmingham, AL. After a 25-year career with Birmingham News and having spent much of his life pursuing illustration, graphics, design in stained glass, and print publications, he now focuses on his passion for gardens and painting botanicals. www.williamthomasart.com

DEVILED EGGS

Barry Curtis

Free Sandwiches! Free Sandwiches for The Poor Poets of Today. They need the sandwiches to keep writing! They need all their strength! Hunger comes to us all in this hungry hungry hippo world. Hunger is human. Defines a human. Defines the animal.

Hunger is kaleidoscopic.

So, please give. Donate today. Make free sandwiches for the poor poets of America. Think locally, act globally. These poets may never be able to make a decent living. These poets may lose their minds just a little. Hunger is kaleidoscopic. So be generous as we enter the coming of Generation Z. Give them no money! Make Free Sandwiches for the Poor Poets of America!

Support their noble cause. The poor poets of America may have something to offer that you won't find in *The New Yorker* on the Internet. They may have something that even musical bands cannot give you. The poor poets of America will be starting over. The poor poets of America will always be with us. And their poor poems about the snow and the wind and the rain may be better than anything the best poets will ever write. Their poor poems may resonate even longer than Prufrock or the Gettysburg Address. Perfect poor poems of Forever fueled with tuna and tomato and mustard. And lettuce. Let's not forget the lettuce. Once they have eaten, the conversations with them might just be incredible.

And let's never rule out the possibility of deviled eggs.

Until we see the white of the comet's eye.

.....

Barry Curtis was born in Oklahoma City, OK, and has lived in New Haven, CT, and New Orleans, LA, but has probably lived in Birmingham, AL, for a longer period of time than any other city in his life. He wishes he could play the lyre, but sometimes settles for a beat-up nylon string guitar.

okiepoetcreek53@yahoo.com

THE HAND OF GOD

Sue Ellis

The throb of a boom box penetrated the sealed confines of Cheryl Jacob's compact SUV, worsening the migraine that had persisted since lunch. She withstood the intensity through two traffic lights before desperately turning off onto a side street. The odds of her using that street under any other circumstance was low, and so she had to think, the hand of God, because sitting on the stoop of a two-story brownstone was the woman who'd dragged her out of the Spokane River after Cheryl jumped off the Monroe Street Bridge—to kill herself at age nineteen.

She parked the car. Her legs felt unsteady and her head still pounded as she walked along the sidewalk, backtracking to where she'd made the sighting. "Is that you, Jess?" she called, standing tentatively at the street rather than closing the gap between them. It had been fifteen years.

"Yes," said Jess, but seeming to expect an introduction.

Cheryl tried not to gawk as Jess stood and brushed off the front of her cargo shorts (cookie crumbs?). Those were the same muscular calves, unshaven, she remembered from their last encounter. Jess had stayed with her until the paramedics arrived, and rode with her in the ambulance. The image of those legs was lodged in her brain as firmly as the aftermath of the jump—the sickening, mid-air realization that she'd just made a terrible mistake. "It's me," Cheryl said, "Cheryl Jacobs."

"Of course," Jess said, features relaxing. "And what? Did you feel like another swim?"

"No," Cheryl said, exhaling a nervous laugh. Jess was nothing if not blunt—she clearly remembered that—along with all the rest. "I saw you sitting there and I had to stop, that's all."

"You may as well come in then," Jess said, extending an arm to usher Cheryl through the door. The small living area just beyond the foyer was heaped with camping gear. "Are you planning a weekend away?"

"Just got back."

"Oh," said Cheryl. "I'd be glad to help you stow it away."

"My husband will do it when he gets home. Nobody can organize as well as Nick. Come into the kitchen and I'll get you something to drink."

The something turned out to be Scotch, then a ham sandwich. Then Nick came home, and Cheryl thought, of course, because they fit that well together. The curtains over the sink had tiny pom poms along the hem—

avocado green. Ridiculous things, she decided, but they impressed her as much as Jess's sturdy legs had all those years ago. What they conveyed to her was this: It's okay to be different. A five-second lesson she'd learned while her broken bones and concussed brain screamed for attention, while the mannish-looking woman who'd dragged her from the current ranted, "What were you thinking? That was a damned foolish stunt!"

Jess had not replied, nor did she feel any more capable of explaining her actions now than she had then.

There was scuffling at the front door followed by the appearance of two boys. First or second graders, Cheryl guessed, brown-haired, freckled, and appealing. Their chatter stopped upon finding a stranger in the house, so Jess and Nick introduced her so that it could all begin again, the obviously fond interaction between the couple and their children.

"Do you have kids?" Jess asked her.

"No, I haven't had time, I guess," Cheryl said, and then felt herself flush at the lie. She could never risk a child. There would always be the worry that she carried a genetic predisposition to suicide. Maybe it was crazy, but she refused to take the chance.

"We'd be glad to loan you a couple," Nick joked, as the boys rifled through the kitchen's snack drawer.

"How long has it been?" asked Jess, changing the subject.

"Almost fifteen years," said Cheryl, restraining the urge to list the days, hours and minutes that had elapsed.

"It's not passed down," said Jess, her eyes piercing, while the confines of the room diminished to encompass only the space surrounding the two of them.

"What?" said Cheryl, but knowing already what Jess was about to say.

"The tendency to abandon a car in heavy traffic and leap off a bridge."

Cheryl winced at the blunt meanness in Jess's words, but she couldn't blame her—the episode haunted Jess, too. Newspaper accounts reported that Jess lived in one of the apartments that lined the river east of the bridge. She'd been taking a walk after work, picking her way along a popular footpath through the neighborhood. A honking car made her look up at the bridge, where traffic had halted in the southbound lane. And then a figure climbed onto the railing and leaped. In the interview, Jess revealed that the late afternoon sun was in her eyes as she looked up, and that the girl who jumped was backlit by solar rays as if she were on fire. It had been

miraculous that the current swept her along on a course that Jess was able to intercept.

Slow seconds passed before the dimensions of the room expanded to again include the friendly chatter between Nick and the boys, who carried on as if nothing had happened.

"I've got to be going," said Cheryl, struggling to maintain her composure until she could be alone and think about what had just taken place.

"Will you stop by again?" said Jess, and Cheryl sensed that her invitation contained both a challenge and a sincere wish to be friends.

"I'll try," said Cheryl, guessing that she probably wouldn't. Meetings with Jess were too charged with emotion, too unsettling. Still, she had loved seeing her again, and now she had a new setting to picture her in, something to overlay the terrifying scene at the river.

.....

*Sue Ellis lives and writes near Mt. Spokane in Washington State. Some writing credits include Prick of the Spindle, Mused, The Cynic Online Magazine, Wild Violet and The Camel Saloon. **sue5ellis@gmail.com***

"You come to nature with all her theories, and she knocks them all flat."

-Renoir

MAMMA'S SIDE

Ben Thompson

I heard Daddy's truck gearing down. I ran to the window and watched the long shadows cast by his yellowed headlights shrink down to nothing. Mamma opened the door when he topped the steps.

"Where's she at?" she asked.

Daddy walked passed her giggling like a drunk. Mamma searched outside the door behind him, and then closed the door.

"Where's Debbie? Did you get her? Is she okay?"

He didn't answer, just giggled a little more as he pumped the slide on his shotgun letting the red shells land on the couch.

"Quit laughing and talk to me! What happened?" Where's Jimmy?"

Daddy really started laughing then, "that little bastard is in the hospital."

"What'd you do?" she asked, her eyes opened wide.

"It wasn't me," Daddy held up his hands, "it was that crazy sister of yours."

"She kill him?"

"Naw." Daddy leaned back, "She took his thumb off."

"His thumb? With a knife?"

"With her teeth." He got to laughing harder then. "Good thing ol' Jimmy's got a car, he won't be much for hitchhiking." Daddy looked at me and shook his thumb in the air as if he was trying to catch a ride. Even Mamma smiled a little at that.

"Well...is Debbie okay? How'd she look?" she asked.

"I don't know, they had her in the police car while I was there," Daddy said.

"What?!" Mamma dropped her arms from across her chest, "Did they take her to jail?"

"Yeah," I hadn't seen Daddy smile like that in a while. "I swear yours is the only family so backwards that they take the woman to jail after a fight."

"This ain't funny," Mamma turned her back to us and walked over to the window. She leaned her head to the side so her long black hair would block her face from our view.

"Don't get mad," Daddy said. "They're only going to keep her one night," he slid his boot off of his foot and let it thump on the floor, "and the cops were being real nice about the whole thing."

Mamma stayed facing the window, brushing her cheeks with the back of her hand. She didn't cry often and she didn't like people looking at her when she did. That's when Daddy looked over at me and held his bare foot up in the air.

"Maybe they'll feed her one of Jimmy's toes for breakfast!" Daddy slapped his knee and leaned over. He had his red face between his knees, gasping for air when we heard the glass shatter. He jumped up with both of his feet already pointing in the direction of his shotgun. "What was that?"

Mamma turned towards us with her arms bowed out from her sides. The cold winter night air poured in through the broken window behind her. Blood was dripping from the knuckles of her right hand and staining the carpet beside her foot. She stared at Daddy from beneath her lowered eyebrows and told him, "I told you...it ain't funny."

.....

*Ben Thompson is a husband, father and firefighter assigned to Birmingham's west side. His work has appeared previously in Birmingham Arts Journal. He and his family live in Hoover, AL. **benthompson11@yahoo.com***

"Let us be grateful to the mirror for revealing to us our appearance only."

-Samuel Butler



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

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