Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **SIDE PONY —** Pastel on Paper — 12" x 18" *Wanda Randall is an artist in Birmingham, AL. Her painting, SIDE PONY, won the 2015 Birmingham Arts Journal Publication Award which is given annually to one member of the Alabama Pastel Society.*

Back Cover: **MY SELF —** Oak Sculpture — 28" x 10" – Calvin Macon is an *aspiring poet, self-taught stone and wood sculptor, who retired after 24 years in the Navy. His inspiration comes from nature which silences the white noise in his head. He is a displaying member of the Artist Incorporated Gallery, Vestavia Hills, AL*
calvin@calvinemacon.com

CROWD CONTROL

Beth Miles — *2015 Hackney Literary Awards: 1st Place, State Story*

It was a rush to spin.

In her peripheral vision, she could see the dancers draw back from her, opening a space in their midst for her wildness. Her energy ricocheted from an inner thrum and broke across muscles, limbs, and hot skin, then rocked back to its source, somewhere within the heat of her body. The disco ball threw specks of silver across the dark crowd on the dance floor. She knew they thought she was out of control as they moved away, but she gained strength from their closeness and spun nearer. Someone shrieked as she grazed a shoulder with her wrist. She threw her head back and knew their awe would bring her the power. Then she could give it away…

The three boys had come to The Hangout because that's what everyone did at Wrightsville Beach on a Friday night in the summer. The crowd changed every week with the regular influx of new vacationers always hot for a beach romance. The boys paid the cover charge and filed through the door under the glowing red exit signs, their eyes already seeking the crowd on the gritty dance floor. The room was filled with the tandem pulsation of light and music and the dancing people appeared to throb as a solid mass.

John, the shortest of the three but not the youngest, watched Austin nod at the crowd with approval. Austin moved through the room with the broad-shouldered, self-assurance of a local familiar with the scene. He'd informed the two younger boys that he didn't like to show up here when the crowd was small, had said that it made you look desperate to hang around when there wasn't any action.

Austin's brother Tyler followed with long, athletic strides. He gave a cool smile to a group of blonde girls as they walked past and they giggled.

John was the out-of-town cousin. He trailed behind, trying to look at ease but feeling like he'd just passed through the entrance to the underworld. The girls who had just smiled at Tyler didn't seem to notice him and he cursed his thick glasses. Who was he kidding, though? It wasn't just his glasses, it was also his pudgy neck and full arms that made him invisible to girls. He hoped his mom was right and his biceps were only hidden behind what she called "baby fat."

They crossed the room to the concession stand, a window in the far cinderblock wall. The tempting scent of popcorn coming from the window made the hot air seem even heavier. The two brothers bought sodas from the thin, older woman behind the counter. The stoop of her shoulders emphasized how gravitational pull affects the bone structure of those who've spent a lifetime on their feet.

When it was John's turn, he patted his pockets and came up with nothing but a quarter. He shrugged and stuck it back in his pocket, giving the woman a sheepish grin.

"Nothing for you?" she asked, looking over her glasses and down her nose at him.

John pushed his own glasses farther up on his face. "It's okay," he said. "I'm on a diet anyway."

The woman's lavender tee shirt said, "Don't Make Me Call My Flying Monkeys!" From her faded apricot hair to her veined hands, she looked like a wilted version of someone who had once been vibrant. Her purple eyelids were the same color as the shirt and John wondered if she had purposefully put on matching eye shadow or if she had some unfortunate health problem, like a vitamin deficiency, or… cancer. He pulled the quarter back out of his pocket and dropped it into the tip jar at the edge of the counter, just in case.

She blinked her discolored eyelids at him and cackled, "How 'bout some ice water, then?"

"Sure," he said, relieved to have something to hold so he wouldn't have to keep his hands in his pockets. She brought it to the window and he ducked his head in gratitude without meeting her eyes.

"Thanks." He grabbed the cup and hurried after his cousins, who hadn't bothered to wait for him.

The boys moved towards the tall tables near the steps that led to the sunken dance floor. There was nothing to sit on, so they rested their elbows on the chest-high surface. The railing that surrounded the area made it seem as if the dancers were below them in a giant holding pen.

"Look at her," said Austin, speaking loudly over the pounding music. He pointed to a girl dancing with abandon near the center of the room.

"What a show-off."

Tyler took a swallow of soda. "Probably a *tourist*," he shouted. "I've never seen her before."

"I don't know." Austin shook his head. "Tourists usually have tans."

They watched the girl's body move among the dancers, a cyclone of pale skin with dark hair slung across her face in a veil of stringy black.

"She's not even paying attention to what she's doing," scoffed Austin. "Gonna look like an idiot when she has a smack-down."

John picked up his wax cup, already softened with condensation, and slurped at a piece of ice, watching the girl from behind the rim. He heard

the way his cousins spoke the word "tourist." Did they realize they said it with a sneer, as if anyone who didn't live in Wrightsville Beach was beneath them? He wondered if they realized that he himself was a tourist who was mooching off them for a week at his parent's yearly insistence.

Austin turned to look at him.

"You ever seen her before?"

"Me?" asked John. He wiped the sweat trickling down the back of his neck. His too-short brown hair poked his soft palm like bristles. "Why would I know her?"

Austin shrugged and his eyes met Tyler's. One side of his mouth lifted. "I thought all you mooching tourists might have a club."

As the girl moved in a dizzying blur towards a wooden bench at the corner of the dance floor, the beat of the music seemed to build. Hard and crashing, it was a head-banger in a minor key that made John think of things that were unattainable to him, like beer and women. Like concerts where everybody moved effortlessly with the beat, but he couldn't figure out what to do with his feet, much less his arms or head.

"Here she comes," said Tyler. He was a year younger than John. He was also six inches taller and would have his license first if John didn't get the nerve to take the driving test soon. "She's a goner when she hits that bench," said Tyler with excitement.

But the girl stretched her leg in front of her and with a leap of frenzied grace, she landed on the bench, moving as if the music possessed her. Across the dance floor, parts of the crowd seemed to become aware of her and they stilled in the evening heat. Sunburned faces tilted towards her hypnotic gyrations and John noticed several mouths opened in awe. Or horror.

"She's got to be high," said Austin. He took a swallow of his drink, his eyes never leaving the girl. Then he took his phone out of his back pocket and started recording the action. It would probably go viral in two hours and Austin would get credit for taping it. John immediately resented Austin for thinking of it, just like he resented him for having a red Jeep, for living at the beach, for having a decent high school football career so far, and for leaving behind a string of girlfriends. Those ex-girlfriends didn't seem to care who watched them throw themselves at Austin online. John, living three hours away in the tiny, beachless town of Hamlet, watched them. He doubted a girl had ever said his name out loud unless she'd been required to during class.

(Continued on page 5)

JOSEPHINE'S BEACH

Oil on Canvas
16" x 12"
Nancy Milford

Nancy Milford is a Baldwin County, AL, artist who loves to paint rural and natural settings and subjects. She also has a passion for conservation and preservation. **gessner8905@yahoo.com**

Austin operated the camera on his phone with ease and John suddenly felt that this might not be the first time his cousin had taped someone who was unaware. He had no doubt that Austin would post it for others to watch, which would make him seem cool, but if you looked at it from the girl's perspective…

It made him feel weird in the pit of his stomach. At least Austin's girlfriends had put all their embarrassing videos online themselves. This was different.

She turned on the bench in front of the railing. Black iron bars ran perpendicular to the floor, topped with a wooden beam that had been polished smooth by thousands of hands heading to the dance floor with their summer romances. Those were the hands of the ones she never chose. The dancers were never the ones she wanted. She felt the power building, gathering hot-white and glowing. Tonight, it was slow to grow within her and that was good. It would give her more time to enjoy the pulsing that lifted her higher with each gasp of the ones who watched. Their disbelief only fueled the height of the control. She stopped moving and focused now on the railing beside her, knowing it would take her where she needed to be.

Austin glanced at Tyler, who'd gone still, his head turned at an odd angle as he looked at the girl. "Dude, why aren't you recording this?" he shouted at his brother.

Tyler didn't seem to hear. His angular face was pale in the dim light, and his blue eyes tracked the movements of the girl with complete absorption. "Something's wrong with her," he said.

"Yeah," said Austin. "Something's wrong all right. She's so high we're going to have to call an ambulance to scrape her off the ceiling."

John saw that Austin had zoomed in on her chest. Anger flared and he balled his hands into fists. He imagined himself saying something that would make Austin have some respect, but the idea of Austin's responding bark of laughter kept him from opening his mouth.

Tyler lifted a shaky hand to his forehead. "She makes me feel weird."

"Huh?" asked Austin, without looking away from the screen.

"Yeah," continued Tyler in a worried voice. "It's like she's so…I don't know…it makes me scared."

The girl paused at the end of the bench. Surely she wasn't going to dive off headfirst. John wondered if that was why Tyler felt scared. That would be a bad scene, like one of those teen movies from the seventies where someone took LSD and jumped off a roof. He felt a ripple of apprehension. He didn't want to see the blood if her head cracked open. At least they wouldn't be able to hear the thud over the music.

But again, she did the opposite of what they'd expected and grasped the railing. She propelled herself onto it, landing lightly on her feet, balancing on the wooden beam with ease. No one on the dance floor moved. Her bare feet were sure and steady as the rhythm vibrated through her, keeping her graceful moves from resembling those of a ballerina.

Austin dropped his phone. It clattered onto the table, bounced to the floor, and skidded to a stop in the shadow underneath.

"You…you dropped your phone, man," said John. He cringed, hating the way he sounded nervous, hating the way he'd added 'man' on the end like he said it all the time. But Austin didn't notice. His face held the same expression as his brother's; mouth slightly parted with a trance-like expression, his eyes never leaving the girl who was moving towards them along the top of the rail.

John glanced up at her face, but dropped his gaze quickly to the tabletop. The intensity of her movements and the raptured emotion written on her face made him feel as if he was watching something illicit. Private and forbidden. He felt his cheeks flame with embarrassment but he didn't know if he was embarrassed for her or for himself.

Beyond her, it looked as if every person in the room was turned in their direction, and John realized that he, Austin, and Tyler were the indirect recipients of unsolicited attention. The heat in his cheeks increased and he reached for his cup to hide behind again.

That's when she made her move.

She knew it was going to be him when she saw him look away from her and down at the table. And the meek shall inherit the earth, she thought in a whisper that sighed in her head, through the decades, and across the memories of the ones she'd chosen in the past. Just one per summer. It was all she allowed herself to target, all she could give and not get caught. They'd been the ones who were so unsure of themselves that it pained her to see their discomfort, the ones who'd wished they could melt into the floor and disappear when she turned to them. She closed her eyes and smiled as she remembered some of her favorites: the scrawny local, who'd worked as a busboy and hadn't made the middle school basketball team, had eventually gone pro and retired at the top of his game. And that short one with the haircut like a pudding bowl, here on vacation so many years ago and now on the radio all over the nation. Satisfaction in the knowledge that she'd chosen well in the past joined the feeling of ownership within her and the power surged…

When her feet landed on their table, all three boys stumbled back. Tyler's cup hit the ground and a spray of soda spattered across their legs.

The girl was dancing on their table. John could barely comprehend it. More than anything, he wished he could turn and run, but he didn't want to hurt her feelings. Was he truly a nice guy or just a wimp? His cousins backed away with

staggering footsteps, deserting him. John stood six inches from the table, his arms dangling at his sides, not knowing where to look. He realized he was staring at her knees, clad in tight, faded jeans. She'd ceased dancing and stood before him on the black laminate tabletop. Behind her, all the eyes in the room watched.

Slowly, her knees bent. Her thighs came into view. Then she dropped into a crouch and was suddenly face to face with him. The expression of ecstasy was gone and her eyes met his with a direct, unflinching gaze.

John hadn't been around many drug users, but he felt Austin had been wrong in his guess. She was too perfect and collected to be high. She didn't even seem to be sweating. He felt drawn to her in a way that made him feel panicked and he now understood what Tyler had meant. She scared him as much as she attracted him.

And she was looking at him.

Like a serpent rising from a lidded basket, she crooked a finger in his direction and beckoned him nearer. John couldn't move. Her dark eyes widened and then she smiled a soft, sad smile as if she pitied him. She sat down on the table in front of him, swinging her legs over the side, her knees just below his ribs.

Somewhere in the crowd, a male voice called out. "Damn, boy!" followed by a couple of hoots and whistles.

Something wasn't right here. It had to be a set-up. Would Austin have paid this girl off to embarrass him? But Austin stood several feet away, his mouth hanging open, his eyes watching in an uncomprehending stare. And then he felt that beckoning finger hook the front of his shirt and tug him closer.

There was no intrigue at this point. Humiliation pulsed within him and he scanned the room for who might be in on the joke. From the corner of his eye, he saw Tyler move even further away. It was then that he finally realized his position.

She was the hunter who'd been looking for prey, and Austin and Tyler once again, had been smarter, faster, better at something. He wasn't special to her, nor was he the target of a joke. She was still looking to be the center of attention, to put on a show, and he was merely the one who'd managed to get caught. Survival of the fittest. Losers always lose.

Her face was moving closer to his, so close now that he could only focus on individual features; her full lower lip, the side of her nose, a smooth cheek. His gaze bounced in panic to her eyes, which were looking at him with an intensity he'd only seen on the movie screen. He could actually see her individual eyelashes. She dropped her gaze to his lips and grasped the front of his shirt with both hands.

"It's going to be okay," she whispered and he marveled at the way her scent made him think of the taste of ripe strawberries, cheerleaders' bouncy ponytails, and even his mother's cool hands on his forehead when he had a fever.

Then she kissed him.

He heard the crowd cheering, felt adrenaline rush into his midsection, noticed as her hair brushed his face. And then she stopped and looked at him with concern.

"How was that?" she asked.

"Um…o…okay?" he answered, trembling. She shook her head as if disgusted and hauled him closer.

"We'll have to try again," she said. "Close your eyes this time."

He slammed his eyes shut and waited. This time she barely brushed his lips with hers. He felt himself pucker and she kissed him again with more pressure. He turned his head to the left and she wrapped her arms around his neck. He heard the crowd cheer even louder as something powerful grew within him. It filled him with a sensation that exploded inside his head and made him return her embrace. He felt himself lifting her from the table, felt his spine straighten as he held her and kissed her and lowered her to the floor. Then the magic happened.

John knew immediately that it came from the girl, this feeling that warm wax was being poured into his body and allowed to spread. It contained the pride you feel when you've aced a test, it embodied the emotion that you've not only completed a race, but actually won first place. It was knowing—really believing—that you'll think of what needs to be done in any situation, and it will be exactly the right thing.

And it was all his.

As she gained footing on the floor, she broke away and looked at him, searching. He looked back and this time the confidence in his expression satisfied her. She recognized the depleted sensation in her body. All the awe she had gathered from the crowd, all the attention she'd harnessed as they'd watched her had been given to him. His to keep forever. He would never be the same.

She turned and walked towards the concession stand. No one gave any notice to the pale, skinny girl skirting the crowd in worn jeans. No one remembered the way her movements had commanded their attention just a few minutes before. She opened the door to the concession stand and the white fluorescent light cast her shadow across the floor of the Hangout one last time before she went inside, back to work.

"You're grounded, you know," said the old woman as she counted the money in the cashbox.

"Maybe you should send your flying monkeys to carry me away," suggested the girl.

"Hummpf," said the woman. "You're going to let it loose on the wrong boy one day, mark my words."

The girl looked at the woman with a defiant expression. "I haven't chosen wrong yet, have I?"

The woman stopped counting and looked across the counter at the boy, now standing beside the dance floor. Several kids were already approaching him, drawn to him, ready to be in his entourage. The woman remembered the way he'd made eye contact with her, how he'd given his quarter and expected nothing in return, how he'd genuinely thanked her for the small cup of ice water she'd given him.

John nodded at two girls who were standing at his elbow.

"Hey," he said with a warm smile. "I'm John." They giggled, just like he'd known they would.

One of the girls slipped him a piece of paper.

"I'm Sophie," she said. "Call me." She ducked and linked arms with her friend and they hurried away laughing.

Beside him, Austin whipped out his phone and turned on the camera. He zoomed in on the girls' butts as they moved towards the dance floor.

"Cut that crap out," John said and knocked Austin's phone from his hand with a smooth backhanded chop.

"What'd you do that for?" demanded Austin in disbelief.

"They don't deserve it," said John in a reasonable tone.

"Yeah," chimed in Tyler, taking John's side. "How would you feel if someone did that to you?"

Across the room, the woman saw. It had been bold of him to stand up to someone bigger for the sake of another. She watched him pick up the phone and toss it back to the older boy with a look of condemnation, saw the ashamed expression on the older one's face. She raised an eyebrow.

Maybe he was kind. Maybe he was a generous and compassionate boy who would rise to be a great man. But she said nothing to the girl. Compliments were not what they did.

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ZEN IN HOLLYWOOD

Ravi Shankar — *2015 Hackney Literary Awards: 1st Place, National Poetry*

Seen from helicopter porthole,
clogged arteries of overpass
shimmer like bracelets on
the wrist of a flamenco dancer,

shimmer, but don't move
forward except in halting dribs,
limousine & cab slowed
to crawl like gel hardening

in the coif of the inked man in cufflinks
carrying pita & bottled spring
water on a tray garnished with orchids,
plus packets of designer wet naps.

He has headshots to sweep out
to any buddy who knows anybody
with a script & enough backers
to rivet his bod onto blue ray.

Just a few bright blocks away,
streams of well-heeled models
pour from a bus into boutiques & cafés,
curves glistening like hard toffee.

Watching fashionistas dine on quail
eggs aged in pomegranate puree,
a pimp in a coolie cap & big Bootsy
Collins shades slaloms a gold Cadillac

with jumping hydraulics & chrome
rims, pumping a bass so pure & low
the cantilevered awnings vibrate
in wake of his diurnal course,

while up in the hills, unimaginable
villas, Spanish tile lavishly tilting
in smog-bleary lantern light-
illuminated liquidambar canopies

planted next to jacarandas, pruned
gingko & camphor in jade planters,
a garden reflected in an infinity pool
opalescent as celluloid & gated

away from the pierced urchins
on Vine who beg for change
under a billboard that exclaims
El Mundo Cambiara!

Perhaps *los palmas* alter the airs
of reclusive heirs & auditioning actors,
the factions that form a flotilla
of flesh typecast into replicas of itself:

faux-blonde with genuine tit-job,
overbuff roughneck in retractable hardtop,
the sad sandwich-board wearers,
the one who carries a camera to follow

a buoyant flouncer friend who paws & mock
pounces in a designer choker,
hairy hoop earrings & red rubber jeans.
They say to see here is to be seen.

How the hills are rubbed raw
with neon, stellar belts buried
deep in light pollution, yet notice
still how relaxed the surfer remains.

.....

Ravi Shankar is an award-winning poet, editor, translator, and professor of writing who founded the international online journal of the arts, Drunken Boat*, and has published or edited 10 books and chapbooks of poetry. His most recent collection is* What Else Could it Be: Ekphrastics and Collaborations.
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QUALITIES OF THE MODERN FARMER

Emily Franklin — *2015 Hackney Literary Awards: First Place, National Story*

Somewhere between two and three in the morning, hours before the police showed up, Miller sat in the field on a metal folding chair. Luna had offered a cushion but he'd turned her down and there he was, cold ass and nearly-drained coffee seasoned with Nubit, the liquor Luna made from the pecans nobody wanted to buy. The sky was a hush of black and stars so tightly plotted together they looked tangled, Miller's shotgun an after-thought on his lap. From the chair he could just about make out the porch and its filmy overhead light, possibly someone moving in the kitchen. Luna was inside making icebox cookies for the swap the next day, all the wives and girlfriends getting together in the afternoon instead of the evening because of the thieves and someone needing to be in the house if trouble started.

At dinner, Luna had served some fish she'd done in a green sauce. Miller thought it tasted like bait but ate it because he was hungry and the nights stretched out too long, messing with his senses, his needs; he often pictured Luna inside the house doing something perverted or uncharacteristic—performing a striptease in his fishing gear, waders against her bare skin or inviting the Mormon missionaries who once in a while wandered onto the property to stay overnight, no doubt throwing their beliefs out the small windows and seducing his girl while he was out minding the harvest.

Crime had gone up—at a nickel a nut with 30,000 pounds to harvest in the next few weeks—and Miller knew he should focus, listen for boots on the cold ground or a pick-up with its lights off, perhaps in neutral, men pushing it onto the field to unload a crew with bags or buckets at the ready, sometimes as many as fifty men at once. Just last week Mitch Faber down in Lorraine had gone inside, eaten supper, and come back to find over four hundred pounds stolen. Luna told Miller he could take comfort knowing that everyone nearby hovered with heavy limbs from one sleepless night to the next, brains coiled like wet laundry. He'd come out in his underwear the night before, rolling a mobile spotlight Luna bought at the bulk club with credit he wouldn't be able to pay off. He'd scanned the dirt drive and gulch where someone might park a truck, but didn't see anything out there in the dark. Miller shifted in his chair, wriggling his fingers the way he'd done when typing too much on his unfinished dissertation which was stored—permanently, he figured—on the computer stashed in his father's old roll-top desk. He found no comfort in knowing every single farmer was doing what he was right now, stretching the

minutes with leftover supper biscuits or sandwiches, thermos of coffee or booze nearby. Some men made a party of it, uncles gathering with grown nephews or fathers next to a portable grill, someone with a sweaty tallboy pulled from a cooler, stories or news radio heckling until morning. But Miller was alone.

A peculiar loneliness opened up in the fields at night and instead of communing in the tick-tock of swaying tree limbs and plotting against potential thieves with friends he didn't have, Miller thought about bears. He'd read about brown bears, each over a thousand pounds, all addicted to gasoline huffing. He could picture them in some Russian nature reserve. They'd stick their snouts into containers left from helicopters and power generators, inhale aviation fuel and paw at the dirt to make a napping place when they'd ingested enough. In his mind the bears were comical, dipsy with fumes, one with a red tutu extending a paw the size of a shovel to ask him to dance. But just as quickly Miller could see the bears intoxicated and mean, coming at him ill-balanced, ready to smack him, smother his scrubby face into the ground.

His phone dinged; Luna sent a message that she was showering despite the late hour. She liked to give him a play-by-play in real time most days. Now I'm washing the dishes. Now upstairs. Water pressure still sucks. He didn't know what to write back so switched the thing off instead. Every time he typed pecans into the phone Luna bought him it autocorrected to oceans which seemed cruel and unnecessary.

The field at night smelled part like pie baking in the end of summer, scent elbowing its way through the grass alleys, and part like something dying. The last thing Miller made besides testing pecan recipes was dessert; baked damson plums, brown sugar scorched on top, with a heavy slop of cream. He'd scooped the wilted fruit into a chipped mug for his father, and brought it upstairs to the side bedroom, stood there with his knuckles burning as they pressed into the mug's too-small handle. There was his father, sheet shitty and damp, food in his beard though he hadn't eaten in days. At the end, Miller had frozen chicken stock in an ice tray and held a cube in his fingertips as his father tried to suckle it. The season was just starting then.

Out the window Miller had watched the green nudging him, the nuts whispering to him that this was now his, every last bud on all twenty-nine hundred trees, the largest farm in Walbarger County, everything needing his supervision.

"Who's there?" Miller asked now.

He knew it could be someone or nothing. Around harvest, the pecans seemed their own society, able to communicate with odd twisting sounds, the lazy breeze loping between them, creating conversation that Miller struggled to understand. No answer. Miller swallowed more Nubit, toyed with the idea of bottling it for retail, small armies of snack mixes, liquors, and oils. Hadn't he dreamed of working a cash register as a kid? He could set up a shop in one of the out-buildings, do it up with curtains and a sign out front, take the farm to the next level with tours and products for shipping. Just as fast as he designed the store in his mind and type-set a brochure, he imagined standing up, setting everything down: gun, Nubit, even his coat, and walking away from the place for good, away from the life he'd inherited under duress.

The wind swept through the branches, cast a few ready pecans to the ground. The Pawnees were always the first to go, heaviest, best for baking and easy to peel but prone to Pecan Scab. The ugly poetry of diseases: Downy Spot, Fungal Leaf Scorch, Powdery Mildew, each one its own ruin. Now Miller was sure he heard something. His shoulders twitched. A fox squirrel could be disastrous, with whole families at the ready to raid and chew wires, crops. Miller stood up, pivoted, checked all sides for scurrying, or footsteps. What was it? He headed to the Cheyenne crop, trees heavy on the bottom and huddled close together like church ladies, each overlapping with more to say. Was it foolish, being out there at night, waiting for something? Miller pawed at his face, wishing to wake up back in his tidy apartment in Somerville, surrounded by books piled into skyscapes or in the lecture hall going on about grammar and syntax in scientific writing.

He stopped to pull up a sock sliding past his ankle and when he stood up, he saw something dark in the brush past the folding chair. Miller grabbed the shotgun, hoofed it back out there, his boots crunching on fallen pecans, his mind calculating loss. He shouted, thinking Luna would hear him and call the cops, then blame him for not having his phone on and doing it himself. He fired a shot between the trees, then stopped. His wrists shook. Mitch Faber had shot first, questioned later, and wound up hitting his fourteen-year-old neighbor in the thigh. Miller didn't want to be that guy, but he'd shot already.

"Come out here," he said, his voice sounding like his father's in a way that was both comforting and horrifying, deleted years scratching at him.

"I called the cops," he lied. There would be a crew of them, thieves all younger and stronger than he, possibly with ropes to tie him to one of the trunks, the bark needling his back while they took everything.

"So you better just—"

"I am here."

A man, hands up in a stadium wave, hedged out from behind one of the Cheyennes, slim and tidy in dark jeans and a button-down. Had he dressed up for the robbery? In one hand he held a pillowcase. King size, Miller noted, but still—a pillowcase! Like he'd come Halloween trick-or-treating. Miller stuttered with the gun, his stomach tight, hands ready.

"Are you alone?" The man nodded but too subtly for Miller to see in the dark so he asked again. Miller's eyes metronomic, he checked for a crew.

"You're alone?"

"I am alone." He flagged the air with the case.

"I bring only this." He took a few steps closer.

"Are you hurt?" Miller scanned the man's legs for seeping blood, his shoulder for wounds. The man shook his head. His father would've scorned him for caring, for asking about the guy's wellbeing, but Miller couldn't help it.

"I am unharmed." His accent thick, soft on the consonants. Miller wanted him to leave, and also wanted to hear him speak more, read aloud perhaps. Close to the man, the shotgun between them, Miller snagged the pillowcase and threw it to the ground.

"Who takes one bag? What'll that do?"

Miller spat the words out, critical more of the man's process than his intent to steal. Only someone truly desperate would take so little. The man had no jacket, nothing but the limp pillowcase now at Miller's feet and a cheap belt that held up pants a size too large but pressed. What would one bag cost him?

"You want them?"

Miller wiped his forehead on his sleeve. The man stayed very still at first and then nodded. How did Miller know the man was unarmed, that he wasn't lying about having an entire crew lurking on the outer grounds? He herded the guy to the folding chair, the shotgun a question mark between them.

"Sit here."

What should he do with this man? Fragments of ideas, each one Miller chucked to the ground. Atif approached the chair as though it was a boar or a bear, something not to be trifled with.

"Just sit," Miller said. What was the protocol? Was he meant to demand answers—who this man was and how he got here and why? Miller inhaled through his nose and then, when the guy settled in, hands clasped on his lap, all he could think to say was, "It's for sale, you know."

Determined not to examine the gun, not to drift back to other guns pointed at him, Atif worked at appearing calm, slowing his breath, keeping still.

"Oh?"

"Oh? Yes, oh. Why, you want to buy a farm?"

Miller didn't feel great about listing the farm. In fact, he hadn't signed with Shelty Realty just yet. He paced in front of the chair, wondered if Luna heard them or if she was watching reality shows. He hadn't been consulted about owning the farm, there'd been no other plan in place, no buyer at the ready, just pecans that needed harvesting and his father dying in the bed his mother had wanted to die in but hadn't, instead dying early and fast in the local hospital with no one next to her. Miller mumbled, unsure who he addressed—himself, the man, anyone back East.

"Here's the s___ you don't know about pecan farming, guy."

"My name is Atif." This caught Miller off guard.

"Oh. I'm Miller."

Did he feel like an asshole for introducing himself to the thief who was moments before set to haul off part of the season's harvest? He shrugged.

"Just sit there and listen."

That was something his dad would have said. Miller described the two separate tracts, six hundred acres and three hundred acres, each flush with pecan trees.

"Three different varieties right here—I bet you didn't even know that. Wichita, Pawnee, and—"

"Cheyenne," Atif said.

Atif had done his research, finding Miller's place after visiting others, slipping onto the fields at night, once being chased by two men with dogs, a shot fired nearby. Why didn't Miller grow Desirable pecans, large and disease-resistant?

"Wichita is excellent variety pecan. Paper-shell pecan. Lots of oil to make great taste."

"It's the best buy," Miller added, "Yields sixty-two percent meat."

Atif filed this information away.

"Pawnee is large, rich taste. Good for baking. Early harvest, right?" Miller nodded.

"Cheyenne pecans. Small, light. Your best seller."

Atif knew the details but had not accumulated what Miller had: pecan clusters emerging in spring, catkins horrifyingly bright green. One cluster at a

time, they were delicate, bewitching in their simplicity. All together, though, they were alien pods, breeding and unfolding overnight so that a single day later at bud-break, the trees encroached on the pathways, hovering. They had to be thinned, cut and disposed of or used for grafting.

"Eighty years my family spends building a crop and then you come and swipe it?"

Miller was a pecan farmer now or as of eight months ago, but who could know the man he'd been before?

"You don't seem like a farmer."

Nubit soured Miller's stomach, shame prickling his hairline. Atif understood in a few minutes what Miller had been sure of his whole life.

"Yeah? Well, you're too well spoken to be a thief," Miller said, and quickly wished he hadn't. Then, right after that he was annoyed because why shouldn't he say it? Was it wrong to offend the guy who was trying to rob you? Miller had his father's Winchester still pointing somewhere between Atif's chest and neck, but Atif knew it was half-hearted. Instead of firing it, Miller found himself listening to Atif. Atif hadn't told anyone anything, because mostly no one asked and mostly he didn't have the time to reflect or craft a story with any sort of resolution. His family had grown khadrawi dates and first he'd dreamed of importing them, but they were too dark, high quality but unsuitable for long journeys. He could almost recall their sweetness, the slight saltiness in each bite, the ragged interior where the pit hid.

"Basrah Province. You know it?" Atif said.

Miller shook his head, too embarrassed at his own ignorance to find only anger at this intruder. He could not point to this man's hometown, possibly could not identify the country on a blank map of the Middle East.

"I moved to Houston. South Gessner Road?"

Miller's gun seemed to ask for more so Atif hurried with the facts.

"Michigan, Massachusetts, Houston. The place where we go now, the Iraqis. RIAC. Refugee and Immigrant Assistance Center. You take English classes and maybe, like my cousin, find a job as janitor assistant or dishwasher."

Atif patted his hair down at the sides, crossed an ankle over his knee.

"He takes two buses and the Metro at five in the morning to wash all the plates at Rice University. You know it?"

Miller said he did. Atif's posture was perfect, like the women at the yoga studio near Miller's old apartment. He could barely recall the feeling of his mat, having the time between classes to do something as indulgent as breathing

deeply or going for a run. Had he been a scholar or just always en route to this life in this field?

"How'd you…get here?" Miller cleared his throat, tried to picture Atif in his natural environment, but instead imagined them both as bears in Russia, fume-high and whirling. Atif clicked his tongue on his front teeth.

"I was engineer."

His English was good, but not good enough to insert the article before engineer. I was an engineer. What was I? Miller thought. A PhD candidate. An almost professor of pure mathematics. Intersection theory. Pullback of cycles. Suppose that X and Y be nonsingular projective varieties, and let $f : X \to Y$ be a morphism. Suppose that $Z \subset Y$ is a closed sub-variety. Suppose he never became anything other than what he was now. What was that, exactly?

"And then?" Miller prodded.

"And then…" Atif paused, unsure if he should tell him or keep the scene in his own mind. "I see my wife and children murdered and come here to clean the floors of a pharmacy."

Atif could not see Miller's face, his eyes watery. In the end, Miller had pushed the morphine, watched the stillness ripple over his father's chest, his beard bright white against his ashy skin. What had Atif seen? How had he survived?

"This is your farm?" Atif asked, anxious to keep Miller talking. Miller opened his mouth to explain, his grandfather's, then father's, not his, now his. What did it matter?

"I smell something." Miller sniffed. "Chicory burning. Keeps the insects away."

"I thought maybe it was the pecans."

Atif's chest rose and dipped fast, his eyes on the gun, which did not interest him and then the trees, which did. In the past weeks he'd been prowling there often seemed more trees than sky, and he found it comforting to be surrounded by such old growth. Deep sandy loam soil, he'd learned, good for drainage and steady crops. That's what Miller's farm had. Deep sandy loam soil, he repeated the phrase in his head now as some foreign lullaby.

"You know," Atif admitted, "I never eat them."

"Ate them?"

"Ate them." Miller sighed, "Wait. You're stealing this stuff, my livelihood here and you haven't ever had a pecan?"

Was that his Texas accent returning? Pee-kahn. Would he let it creep in or keep it at bay like unwanted pounds?

"Pecan pie? At Thanksgiving…." He stopped himself.

"Where is the rest of your…family?" Atif threaded his fingers together, nesting his hands together on one knee.

"My father is back there." He gestured as though Iraq was somewhere in back of the house.

"My mother in Fort Worth with my sister. My brother is dead."

Atif inhaled loudly. His stomach rumbled audibly.

"Where is yours?"

He checked the farmhouse as though they might be there, in overalls or aprons, pie ready for them. Miller cradled the shotgun.

"I don't have any." It was the first time he had said this aloud, the night shrugging onto his shoulders, infiltrating the words so that the sentence felt suspended in air.

"There's a girl in the house?"

Miller nodded, swiveled his gaze to take in the small farmhouse. No, she wasn't by the screen door but no doubt holed up on the settee happy in her insomniac spread—cereal and bad TV. Miller realized that Luna would never be entertaining missionaries or living out some fantasy because the life she had right now was it already: high school boyfriend Miller LeCraw came back from up East and settled in where he should have been all along. They'd picked up right after the funeral without much talk of the woman he'd left behind in Boston, the baby they'd almost had.

"She's a…girlfriend I guess. She hasn't ever left this town."

Atif nodded. "Most women I know were like that. Now they won't leave whatever place they come to." He paused. "So…pie." Atif slid his hands over his belly, keeping them where Miller was able to see them, and reached in for something. Miller went on, watching.

"I never really liked pecan pie. Too sweet. But. Still. You should try it at least once."

In a couple of months it would be Thanksgiving. His first without his father, and he'd bake a pie, spiraling the Pawnee pecans out from the middle in a snail coil, and later hide a Wichita in the steamed Christmas fruit cake the way his mother had done for luck. Miller had a vision of Atif eating the cake in late December on a holiday that wasn't his, maybe cracking a tooth on the baked nut.

"It's not a weapon," Atif said as he reached into his pocket. He removed a small parcel wrapped in brown waxed paper and held it out to Miller. Miller took it without asking what it was and found two cookies.

He handed one back, shifted the shotgun around from the crook of one arm to the other, slinging it across his back while he considered the cookie in front of his mouth.

"Kleicha," Atif said. "There's a friend of a friend, in Nickerson?" Nickerson was thirty miles away. Had Atif walked from there?

"Kleicha." Miller said the word back to him, trying to replicate the accent.

"National cookie. This one…dates. Kleichat tamur."

Miller nodded. He could picture it. The earthy dates mixed with smashed pecans, the discarded ones.

"There is another one. With nuts and sugar. Kleichat joz."

"It's really good," Miller said. He wished for more and then felt greedy. Could Atif write as well as he spoke? Would he give out the recipe? Could Miller manage to replicate them? When Atif shook his legs out, trying to warm them, he kicked over a coffee tin. The contents rattled but didn't spill.

"I apologize," Atif said and it was unclear to Miller if he meant for knocking over the tin or being here or attempting to rob him but he nodded anyway.

"Open it up," Miller ducked his chin toward the can. Atif crouched down, wondering just for a moment if the insides would explode in his face, but then pried off the plastic cover. Inside, a pigpile of pecans.

"I made them myself," Miller said. "You dredge the nuts in egg white and then roll them in cinnamon and sugar or chili powder if you want a kick and bake it on low for a long time." Luna had come into the kitchen in the middle of this batch, been revolted by the stick of egg white on Miller's fingers. She didn't want him in the house, just out in the field where she could see him but not have talk, just receive her texts. Each day it seemed he'd come in from work and find a new bathmat or trinket they didn't need marring the farmhouse. By the front door, a planter shaped like a cat, with herbs growing out of the skull that Luna thought was sweet but Miller found lurid, or by the stove a utensil pot one of her friends had made from bottle caps. Avant garde, Luna had said, rhyming avant with ant which Miller hated and then hated himself for being bothered by her pronunciation. Miller felt discomfort just knowing Luna was in his house, rearranging the sheets his father used as tablecloths, trying to weed out whatever she considered dated, even if it was perfectly functional. She'd gone through the bookshelf, boxing up worn

paperbacks, the spy novels his mother had liked, tool manuals and machinery warranties long-expired. When Luna had gone to her sister's, Miller had re-shelved each one. *The Book of Useful Plants*, which had been his grandmother's. *Qualities of the Modern Farmer* published in 1928, the pine green spine preserved by old linoleum floor tape. Miller hadn't done more than look at his father's name printed on the inside cover. His father's handwriting was jagged; he'd left school in sixth grade. Look, he'd pointed a finger over the faded pencil to show Luna. She'd shrugged. Miller squinted to find her in one of the tall windows. He would have to ask her to leave in the morning. Possibly she was already packing in there. There wasn't much; she had only an overnight bag and hairspray, toothbrush, a mess of magazines too old to keep at the dentist office where she worked.

"Tell me something," Atif said and stood up without asking permission.

"Will you press charges against me?"

Miller opened his mouth to answer but the sound of pecans dropping to the ground in great torrents stopped him. Truck tires rolled onto the ground popping the fallen nuts, sharp cracks firing into the air. Miller grabbed his gun but Atif was faster, running toward the sound, toward the pick-up that nosed right onto the tree roots. Atif yelled at the intruders in English, and then in what Miller assumed to be Arabic, flailed his arms, to signal to Miller. Miller aimed his shotgun but didn't fire until the truck started up, reversing quickly, lights sweeping as the tires belched over fallen pecans. Out of breath, Atif jogged back to meet Miller.

"They are gone. Americans, I think. Texans, maybe."

Miller tried to absorb what Atif had done, watched Atif's face for regret but saw only that he was thin, the cold settling onto his skin after his sprint. Miller took a fabric remnant, ugly, maroon, from his pocket. His father had a bin of scraps, this one long enough to be used as a scarf.

"You look cold." Atif took the fabric and wrapped it around his shoulders.

"I have nothing."

Miller didn't know if Atif meant to reassure that he was unarmed, or still cold, or just saying in general. They stood there, shaking slightly from the surprise invasion. Blue but mute police lights flickered out at the property's edge. Atif's fingers worried the scarf ends as he tried to separate stray bits of fabric, his eye on the first trickle of morning pink way off to the east.

"Stay here?" Miller asked. Atif nodded. Miller headed to the driveway where the police car stopped, and Atif could see the officer's elbow on the rolled-down window. This was it. Atif stood there accepting his fate. He would be

reported and jailed and Miller would use the empty pillowcase for its original purpose, forgetting about Atif entirely. Atif reached into his pocket, pulled out a Wichita pecan, rolled it in his palm, smelling it through the tough skin. He imagined keeping this same pecan forever, in a jail cell or on bedside table he didn't own. Miller jogged back, the shotgun uncomfortable on his back.

"It's not easy, you know," Miller said once he was in front of Atif. The police car's lights swiveled across the front porch, the field, and out onto the road that lead back to town. Miller's voice was angry now, determined.

"Shaking trees and sweeping. See there? The brush is dense. It cuts you sometimes."

Miller paced, his overpriced hiking boots worn at the heel and loosely laced, worn now as farm boots.

"And the irrigation system's faulty. You have to check it four times. And that's just these two tracts. You know I only found out two weeks ago we have another twenty acres? Down past the house there's twenty goddamned acres of irrigated Bermuda grass we used to lease. It's like there's a manual for my life somewhere and I don't have it."

Atif listened, nodding as though it all made sense, as though he had always planned on being a pecan farmer, figured on finding Miller and starting a farm store, shipping boxes his sister decorated with old symbols and pecans of varying sizes. This much became clear. Miller would not shoot Atif. Atif would not steal the pecans. Each man guarded the pecans or the fields or each other. They stayed there through the night, taking turns on the cold folding chair, rising up and sitting back down like fume-inhaling bears, clumsy-pawed and sad, something impossible to recognize in the dark.

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Emily Franklin is the author of a novel, Liner Notes*, and a story collection,* The Girls' Almanac *as well as sixteen YA novels. Her work has been featured on National Public Radio, in* The New York Times, *and numerous literary magazines.*
www.emilyfranklin.com

APOLOGY TO THE BLUEBIRD

George Sawaya - *2015 Hackney Literary Awards: 1st Place – National Poetry*

Perhaps it was with headache, or claustrophobic pangs
of boredom, that Adam, when marched before him,

named you so plainly. Too much enthusiasm his earlier
entitlings had taken—Orangutan, Boa, Gull—that you

were a frustration, dismissible fix, glue
in the wound of a process he never imagined

could take so long. What could God need with you
after all? He had the Vulture and the Cardinal already,

the Octopus, the Bull, the Hare. But you, feckless
bead of sky, no talons to speak of, no

hooked beak, hopped to your place to be named.
Imagine, please, the dedication, his calling of the trees—

Spruce and Cedar, Gumball and Dogwood—
to say nothing of the flowers, the insects, the grass.

Whatever sin, our impatience with you, understand
as we attempt you justice now: Fat Vein of Hands,

Atoll Water, Lover's Eye, the Feeling You Get
Some Mornings after Dreaming You Were a Child Again.

.....

George Sawaya received his BA degree in English from the University of Alabama, his MA degree from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and his MFA from Sarah Lawrence College, NY. Most recently he is the recipient of the 2015 John B. Santoianni Award for Poetry presented by the Academy of American Poets and the 2015 Hackney literary award for the state of Alabama. **Gsawaya86@gmail.com.**

STRAW HAT
Andrew Tyson
19.25" x 11.25"
Pastel on Board

Andrew Tyson, an award-winning, self-taught photographer and artist in Birmingham, AL, has a degree in computer imaging and visualization. His artistic tools include graphite, pastel and the camera. His award-winning work has previously been published in Birmingham Arts Journal.
tysona@bellsouth.net www.journalmtw.com

LIGHTNING-CATCHER

Xochitl Luna — *2015 Hackney Literary Awards: 3rd Place, National Poetry*

It's been a passion of mine, for a very long time to
Try and figure out what's
Inside the mind. I've considered
Becoming a neurologist—
But it isn't brain cells I want to study,
It's the thoughts, which take form
In the brain as lightning strikes.
Each thought lights up the dark, swirling night sky
Crackling with brazen energy, gone
In a matter of seconds. Sometimes,
We wish for the thunderstorm to stop.
We pray for the lightning to be still.
This happens to me as I lay
In bed, fizzling with energy, unable to sleep.
The lightning strikes burn the edges of my mind,
Keeping me awake.
And I ask the brooding clouds to clear; I ask the storm to stop.
And while it may subside,
It leaves the smell of thoughts on fire
And the feel of wet asphalt under my feet,
Making me slip when I think too fast.

I have dedicated myself
To the preservation and protection
Of these fragile lightning strikes.
I stand with a lightning rod in hand,
Its end encased in a little glass jar.
Each time lightning strikes,
I close the jar as fast as I can,
My hands slipping on the lid
As I trap the lightning within glass walls.
It glows bright bronze and bounces,
Never touching a surface for more than a second.
Other people avoid trying this, I believe,
Because they think they will be burned.

But I never am.
The lightning only burns brighter in my hands,
Warms the tips of my fingers that are perpetually freezing,
And runs faster around the jar when I smile at it.
I am proud to be a thought-pursuer
A thought-protector,
A thought-preserver.
I am proud to be a lightning-catcher.

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Xochitl Luna is in the 10th grade at the Orange County School of the Arts, Santa Ana, CA, in the Creative Writing program. She loves writing short stories, poems, plays, and more. In her free time she enjoys dancing en pointe, playing classical piano, and watching "House, M.D." on Netflix. She is a huge fan of Gabriel García Márquez and anything magical realism related.

"Write it in your heart that every day is the best day of the year."

–Ralph Waldo Emerson

BLUE COLLAR AND A SHORT CHAIN

Ben Thompson — *2015 Hackney Literary Awards: Third Place, State Story*

"I'm calling in tomorrow," I said.

"Are you drunk?" Crystal asked. I grabbed the last beer from the refrigerator and left the empty cardboard carrier beside the milk.

"I'd rather put a gun in my mouth than walk into that building tomorrow," I said tossing the beer cap in the direction of the garbage can.

She spoke without looking at me. "You planning on laying on the couch all day?"

"I was thinking we'd go to the beach."

"We can't afford the beach," she scoffed.

"We could if we got a cheap place off the water."

"What about the grass?" she flicked drips of water from her fingers into the sink before drying them on a hanging towel. Then she fixed her eyes onto me for the first time.

"The lawnmower won't crank."

"I thought you fixed it."

I sat down in my chair and thought about the little flakes of varnish that kept clogging up the pinhole-sized jets inside the carburetor. "I did fix it," I said.

"Doesn't sound like it." She yanked the garbage bag from the can. The bottles I had contributed that evening clanked from inside the bag. She opened the door and dropped it on the porch.

"Why don't you just say you don't want to go?" I asked.

She spun around ready for our big scene. The one we'd been rehearsing for months. "Look around," she said. "Someone has to be the adult."

I let my eyes fall towards the rag that had been shoved up under the refrigerator to catch the leaking drips. By morning it would be saturated and a puddle would finger out to create a tiny lake at the low spot in the middle of the kitchen floor. Too many mornings I had walked into the dark kitchen and soaked my socks before the day had begun.

"Do you still love me?" I asked.

"Here we go," she rolled her eyes.

"Well do you?"

She leaned back against the wall and crossed her arms. Her eyes were fixed where mine had been earlier, at the foot of the leaking refrigerator. "I'm not answering that right now."

"Why not?"

"Because, I won't answer it the way you want me to."

We both held our poses, refusing to look at each other. The neighbor's dog finally broke the silence.

"You don't have to stay here," I said.

"Neither do you," she answered just before walking out.

I stayed at the table until I heard the bathtub filling with water. I considered sitting there until she got back, but the door was standing open letting bugs in. She'd done that on purpose so I would finish taking out the trash. I flipped on the porch light as I walked out.

It was after seven but still not full dark. A slight breeze was blowing and the lightning bugs were flashing along the edge of the pines. I parked the trashcan on the patch of dirt in the grass alongside the end of the driveway and carried my beer out into the middle of the street.

If I had had a cigarette, I would have smoked it. Instead, I just stood there listening to the ebb and flow of cars on the freeway until the bottom half of my beer had gone warm in my hand. By then the darkness had thickened and a white fingernail moon had risen; but only the pale road seemed to notice. It stretched out ahead of me, glowing as if it had been paved with dust from the moon itself. If I waited till morning I knew where that road would take me. But if I left right then the only thing I knew for sure was where I wouldn't be and that seemed good enough.

I was climbing into the driver's seat of my truck when I saw her. She was standing beneath the yellow glow of the porch light staring at me with my mother's blue eyes. Her long black hair, still wet from the bath, had been brushed straight back from her forehead and hung glistening down her back.

"Daddy," she asked, "where you going?"

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

RECORD SETTING SERVICE

John Williamson

Much to my dismay I seemed to have misplaced my 2016 sticker for my watercraft. Well, the only way to get another one is to go to Jefferson County Department of Revenue. I'd rather visit a proctologist and get a root canal in the same day.

So at lunch off I head to the Hoover Annex dreading what lies ahead. I park, walk in the door, and a voice immediately says, "May I help you, window 11."

"Thud" is heard across the room as I hit the floor, fainting from the utter shock of no one being in line. Once I came to I walked straight to the window, conducted my business, and was back in my car headed home in less than five minutes. Yes; park, walk in, faint, revive, get sticker, and pay—all in less than five minutes. That has never happened in the history of all visits by all persons to the Jefferson County Department of Revenue.

And to top it all off she had a joke. Didn't know such thing was even possible. Surprised at the lack of a line I said, "Wow, don't think I've ever seen no line before."

To which the clerk replied, "Well, if you like I can have you go through the queue and I can call you when you get to the front."

Prompt service and a joke. Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore.

So, how do I get in touch with Guinness? Because a record was surely broken today!

Maybe two.

.....

John Williamson is an information systems project manager. He enjoys music, wine, food, travel, and the idiosyncrasies of life from his home in Sterrett, AL.
cyberwino@gmail.com

MOVEMENT 1
Mysti Milwee
Acrylic on Canvas
30" x 40"

Mysti S. Milwee is an award-winning artist from Southside, AL. Her heart is passionate for creating visual art, poetry, and photography. Her artistic visions are expressed through brushstrokes, pen, and the lens. Movement 1 *was created as a vision of expression and musical interpretation while listening to Mozart-Symphony No.41, C-Major KV 551 Jupiter "Allegro Vivace." This piece is No.1 of her movement collection*. **mystiart21@gmail.com**

AUTUMN REVERIE

Frank Dawson — *2015 Hackney Literary Awards: 2nd Place, State Poetry*

When autumn comes and gently minds us how
we ought to lay aside our winter's store,
we motor south to cousin's Thorsby grove
to gather sacks of each year's pecan crop.
And underneath the barren limbs, my heart
retreats to treasured days of long ago.

The tree in my back yard was more than shade.
In summer heat it gathered family chairs.
We'd settle in to snap beans in a pan
and drink from jelly glasses jangling tea
with little thought to what may come to pass.
Our childhood fancies plied the grassy base
of what became a friend throughout the year.

That tree – we like to think it knew us well,
(full tasseled in the golden spring)
was telling us that future holidays
would bring us taste delights from its rich store.
How often I have climbed it to the top
of its wild pirate's perch to spy
the neighborhood around from chim to chim,
and yell, "Yee-haaa," and feel the brittle limbs
beneath my foot go snap like supper beans.
All summer long we'd Kool-Aid in its lap
with cardboard boxes stagecoach replicas.

But when its leaves had flown to neighbor yards
and radios predicted summer's through –
with chill delight we'd feel the hidden crunch
of secret hardness under barefoot toes.
The gathering became a hunter's scene
with kinfolk come to join the picking fun
and share the haul when years were plentiful.
The tree still stands, with strangers in our house.

The neighborhood's so small, it seems to me
all's changed. We never go there now.
I'm wondering if pirates spied this year
from crow's nest while the wind blew hard
or if the crop was good or tea was served
and holidays were filled with meaty treats.

So now the ones we pick this year must do.
They'll send the mind back far through misty years.
But would that tree still know me if I came
to sit a while and pull the grass some day?

.....

Frank Dawson lives on the Cahaba River near Leeds with his wife, Joan. He likes to paint, draw, and write short stories and poems. He and Joan host the Leeds Area Open Circle Poetry Group. **jdawson@uab.edu**

"It is only possible to live happily-ever-after on a day-to-day basis."

—Margaret Bonnano

THE DAY I REALIZED LIFE WASN'T FAIR

Harper Evers — *2016 Winner: Glenn Feldman Historical Essay Competition*

My story begins on a bus when my mother and I see a colored woman standing up. I asked why she was standing and my mother explained that a colored person doesn't have the right to sit when a white person wants a seat. I asked my mother why because it doesn't seem fair. She told me, "That's how the world works." My name is Jack. I am a 10-year-old white boy and I live in Montgomery, Alabama, with my parents and my older brother Peter.

When my mother and I got home I thought about what she said and I thought it was unfair. I tried to talk to Peter but he really didn't care about it. He said, "Well, it doesn't affect my life."

The next day Mother had errands to run so I was going to spend the whole day with Nanny, our maid. I like spending a day with Nanny. One time we went to a secret fishing hole that only she and her family knew about. Her sons, John and Martin, met us once and we all fished together. We had a good time. We skipped rocks and climbed trees. We all had a great day, but Nanny said I should keep this a secret because most people think it is wrong for a white boy to play with colored boys. Nanny knew I would never tell because then I would never get to play with John and Martin again. I think it is silly that white children and colored children can't play together.

Nanny was a full two hours late getting to our house that day. I could tell that something was wrong with her right when she walked in. She seemed to be in pain. She was definitely out of breath. Mother was mad because she didn't get to her hair appointment and her other errands. Mother demanded to know why she was late. Nanny explained about the boycott. She told us about a colored woman named Rosa Parks who would not give up her seat to a white man. The woman was arrested. Now the colored people have agreed to boycott the buses until the law is changed. Nanny was late because she had walked miles to our house. She was tired and her feet were bleeding. After hearing Nanny out, Mother just walked out of the house. We didn't know what to think. We heard some noise that seemed to come from the garage. Peter, Nanny, and I walked outside. Mother was rolling an old bicycle out. She wasn't mad anymore. She had been doing some thinking about fairness since our bus ride yesterday too. We all love Nanny, even Peter. Mother told Nanny that she could use the bike until the boycott was over, which would help Nanny a little bit at least. Nanny was thankful for the bicycle and rode it every day until the boycott ended over a year later.

The U.S. Supreme Court ordered Montgomery to integrate its bus system. The bus boycott was the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. The world was changing and becoming fairer for all people.

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Harper Evers is a 5th Grader at Southminster Day School in Vestavia Hills, AL. The Glenn Feldman Historical Essay Competition is dedicated to the memory of its namesake, a professor of history at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

FOLLOW MY LEAD

Digital Photography – Recklinghausen, Germany

Joshua Lim

Joshua Lim is a self-taught artist, designer, and photographer currently studying at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Though not pursuing art academically, he enjoys the field and works in his free time to produce unique photographic works that include surrealist, minimalist, landscape, cityscape and street pieces.

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THE HEALING HEEL

Jim Reed

I'm sitting at breakfast many decades ago, watching me watching my family. My sister Barbara is talking about her upcoming speech before a Northington Elementary School gathering, worried about what she'll wear and how she'll do.

Brother Ronny is helping Mother pack his lunch as he carefully picks over his food. I'm grabbing for the next-to-last slice of bread from the wrapper on the table, but one of the slices is the heel, so it doesn't count. Everybody knows that the heel is the most undesirable piece of light bread, and everybody avoids it. I hesitate, unwilling to take the final non-heel slice, because Mother has taught us never to take the last of anything. I decide I can do without bread this morning.

But Mother always notices everything—especially those things you wish she wouldn't notice. She quickly pulls both slices out of the wrapper, places the "whole" one on my plate as if unconsciously, and starts buttering the heel for herself. Or oleo margarine-ing it, to be more precise.

I sigh in relief and treat myself to a nice jellied sandwich to go with my brown-sugared oatmeal and salt-and-peppered eggs, while Mother makes do with the piece of bread nobody else will touch.

It is at this moment that I recognize the curse with which I will be saddled the rest of my life. I can't help seeing things. The small invisible camera over my shoulder records everything—everything I wish to see, everything I wish I'd never seen, everything I imagine I'm seeing, everything I wish you could see, everything I've ever seen and will in time see. Other writers and would-be writers have confirmed this curse with me—they have it, too.

The jellied bread doesn't taste quite as good as it should, because I recognize my selfishness, and I recognize Mother's sacrifice—one of a hundred small sacrifices she'll make on behalf of her family this week and most of the weeks of her remaining life. My shoulder camera records more than I will ever be able to write about how Mother gives up part of her social life to raise her family, how she denies herself a new dress and instead makes a dress for Barbara, how she saves the
flour sacks to make shirts for us boys, how she gives up some of her own aspirations so that we can live ours.

Down all the days, wherever I travel, I and my camera keep noticing the beauty of other mothers, other people, whenever they take one step back to allow me my moment of stepping high, how they are there to help me without even asking

for or receiving credit, how they come and go from my life with such grace and ease. How they never ask our thanks.

Mother constructed me, nurtured me, stood by while I fluttered from the nest, then kept up with me and my accomplishments and tribulations for many years, waiting patiently until I was mature enough to appreciate her aloud or in my writings.

Now she stands behind my camera, occasionally reminding me of her wisdoms, now and then chiding me when I forget who I am and who I came from. And she still grabs the heel first, just to gift me with one more small, unselfish favor…hoping I'll pass the wisdoms and favors on to others

.....

Jim Reed writes and recalls at his bookshop in Birmingham, AL.
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"All grown-ups were once children, but only a few of them remember it."

–Antoine de Saint Exupery

WHAT SAVES YOU

Ann Gengarelly

…and what saves you is a single light
Lighthousekeeping, Jeanette Winterson

She was born from the womb
of a woman who couldn't wholly love,
a woman splintered like cracked wood.

And as she aged she dreamt
herself back in time, dreamt
she could meld the different shapes
of mother into a new geometry;
a different equation of light, but

the mother who loved Schubert and flowers
embraced the dark figure
whose nails
tore at her heart.

Light and Shadow.
Shadow and Light.

"A poultice on the heart…" that's what
might have grown had all her parts
come together like different movements
in a sonata

whose composer hears light every ten
seconds, radiating from a distant lighthouse,
light within the vast dark sea.
But the mother listened
only to *The Death and the Maiden,*
while outside thorns grew on daisies and tulips.

Maybe if a star had sailed
towards her through the fog…
maybe if light had scrubbed the past
and the flashes flickered over the waves,
As markers and guides and comfort and warning.

Maybe…

But she was born from the womb of a woman
who couldn't wholly love,
and from that brokenness, all she wanted
was to become a boat with a shining
sail fluttering in the dismal winds,
a boat others could safely swim towards.

And for that to happen
she needed to open
herself to the one phrase in the music,
the star that lost its way to her mother.

…….

Ann Gengarelly is a poet/teacher. She lives in Marlboro, VT, where she writes and teaches the art of poetry. Over the past fourteen years she has been invited to lead poetry workshops at Little Singer Community School on the Navajo Nation. Her background includes an MA from Goddard College and an honorary doctorate in the fine arts from Marlboro College for teaching excellence. **agengar@sover.net**

RED HOT FACELESS SAX MAN

Digital Photograph

Central Park South, NYC

William Crawford

Bill Crawford is a social worker, writer and photographer living in Winston-Salem, NC. He was a combat photo-journalist for the Army in Vietnam**. bcraw44@icloud.com**

From: GLEANINGS, a novel

J. A. Bernstein — 2015 Hackney Literary Awards: Novel

- 1 –

Two hundred ninety-six hours before his death, Corporal Ivan Belkin was sitting on the toilet in the barracks of the Rachel's Tomb Outpost, playing a game of Tetris on his phone, obscured by his Marlboro's smoke, when the half-attached knob of the door started jangling.

"The hell do you want?" Ivan said.

"Patrol's in twelve," said his friend, speaking in Russian.

Ivan flicked his cigarette, which sizzled in the shower's rank stall. Then he reached in his vestpack, which was slung around the sink, and pulled out a small silver flask. He took a long sip of his honey pepper vodka, leaned his head back, and sighed.

Outside the sun burned a hole through the clouds and the tall cement beams of a base, the neighboring one up the street. Blinking, Ivan followed the procession of soldiers, each a shade darker, as they bounded up Derech Hevron. Then he closed his eyes and smelled the bright Bethlehem air: the scent of sweet diesel, Arab cologne, rotting roadkill and smoldering trash.

"Ivan," yelled Shaul, his platoon leader, in front, "keep a watch to the rear and stay close."

The men treaded forward. They were heading for the graves down below, a small terraced hillside, adjacent to their base, that was layered with Ottoman tombs. Ivan was spinning. His eyes settled back in his head.

He heard a boom. He would later describe this as the turning point in his mortal existence. But when he heard it right then, it sent a shock wave inside him. Beside him, a whooshing explosion, like some bright, congealed force, flared up majestically, and in those squirming waves, he swore he saw the face of a god. Not a Jewish one, exactly, but some roiling figure, like a fluttering angel of death. Then Liav, who was the fourth man in line, walking about four or five paces ahead of him, turned to find a sparkling flash on his shoulder, as if something licked at his neck. He started swatting at it frantically. Before Ivan could react, let alone anyone else in the vicinity, he heard a sharp bang. Then another one, in fact. It was coming from up the road, beside a parked truck, where his commander had run with his rifle. He was bursting out rounds in quick fire.

Thirty minutes later, or what Ivan would take as thirty minutes—it was in fact four or five seconds—an Arab lay sprawled on the road's graveled edge, his chin at his nose, the thin sucking maw in his clavicle burbling what could only be described as a mulberry jam—this had been Ivan's favorite in Russia. His

commander stood over the body, gasping like some great winded boxer while the others provided cover from the blocks. At some point during these last thirty minutes, Ivan found himself running to a large cement barrier, a chipped guard block at which they would check Arab cars—none were now present, owing to a curfew—and, as he knelt on the pavement, two or three shots rang out from the hood of a Humvee ahead, where his platoon leader had run and, strangely enough, acted bravely. The rest of them froze.

Ivan, being the platoon medic, found himself obliged to act. Witnessing Liav on the pavement, about four meters down, he saw that the fire had sparked and receded. Liav was dead. No, he wasn't dead, Ivan told himself. He was only superficially burnt. The guy was still breathing. And whatever this thing was that had been hurled at him—a Molotov probably—contained fire and nothing else. Perhaps molten wax. Nothing that would disrupt his insides. Liav was still clutching his CAR-15. What was he hoping to do with that, Ivan wondered. Before he could resolve it, Ivan found himself running to the sandbagged caboose of their outpost, through its thick steel frame, and down to the barracks below, where he proceeded to remove his gray blanket, gather it up, consider folding it briefly—though that was beside the point now—and unhesitantly run, re-sling his gun, and pounce towards the checkpoint outside, where he proceeded to swaddle his friend with this bandage, which was undoubtedly reeking of sweat. Nevertheless, Liav seemed to appreciate the gesture, as if he were being bid goodnight. Beyond, his commander continued his firing. Or maybe he had just started it at that point. It was not immediately clear, and time had just enveloped itself in some ill-construed form, a sagging gray heap of bruised cotton reeking of semen and sweat, while above him, in this gray pewter day, with its evanescent sun and hewed clouds, dusk folded over the horizon like a lid sealing mulberry jam.

Ivan ran in haste now down to the foot of the road, where he attended the Arab who was sprawled like a kill, was a kill, in fact, the first they had seen on the line.

It was 17:40, 22 March, on this, the tenth day of *Nisan*.

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Seven nights later, on a damp Friday evening, beyond the west hill of this base, a small cemetery choked with Aleppos, and blue garbage bins stenciled UN, a sultry wind gathered and bounded off the laundry-draped homes, clacking tin, overhead water tanks, rattling the loosely-set panes. This was the Aida Refugee Camp. Population: 4,012.

Inside one of the warren's north buildings, a two-story, poured cement home, a young girl peered through the curtains of her room at the purpling wash

of a sky. She had delicate features, and her downy cheeks glowed in the light. Outside, the muezzin's call echoed, though Leda didn't care to pray.

She rolled out the mat. Since the curfews had started, it wasn't easy, because she had to keep her head below the window. That's what her father had told her. And he had boarded it up once with a long sheet of wood, but then she had a hard time breathing. She had asthma. The yoga was good for her. That's what her mother had told her. And her mother knew well. She was a doctor. Or, at least she would give out the medicines. But everyone called her doctor. Her shop was downstairs. Sometimes she'd come up and join her. Right now she was across the hall arguing with her dad. They were talking about her uncle.

She could hear them yell as she spread out the mat, using her hands and her feet. And she didn't see the point of yelling all the time when people were standing right by you. But it's all they would do, yell at each other. Sometimes her mom would make pudding. Her dad would complain that the pudding wasn't sweet, and her mom said they were all getting fat.

Leda wasn't sure if she was fat or if she was one of the thin girls. She felt in between: round in some places and long and bony in others.

She stretched out her arms and lay along the mat. She could feel the cool sponge on her cheek. It felt crinkly and soft, kind of like her dad when his beard wasn't coated in pudding.

She kissed the mat, and she kissed herself—at least, she blew a kiss in the air. She grabbed it with her hand and put it back on her cheek. Then she breathed in some more air.

Lately she hated doing this stuff, but she felt like she still had to do it. They couldn't go outside or even walk around and her kneecaps were starting to tighten.

She wished she could jump up and cling to the walls, bounce from the floor to the ceiling. She would swing from the light-set and pounce at her desk, claw at her bed and the carpet. But this was much better. Better for the house. To her mom, that was really important. They had lots of guests—people who'd come and visit her family's apartment.

Most of these men were friends with her uncle, and her mom didn't like them at all. But her uncle's home was no longer around. At least, that's what her father had said. She wondered if maybe she could go live in the sky, because there was plenty of room up there. Plenty of birds and pheasants and swans, and no Jews that she'd have to be scared of.

Sometimes the Jews would come from the graves and point with their guns at her window. And she wasn't really scared. The boys from her school would throw rocks in the graves, and they were the ones who were scared. They would hide behind tombstones, dash down the rows. A couple got hit with a bullet. One of them died. That's what she heard. Though she hadn't seen anyone since school closed.

She liked being home, drinking tea with her dad and doing yoga right here with her mom. But she wanted to go outside and take a break from this place and maybe get a bottle of Pepsi. Her mother wouldn't let her drink Pepsi at home, though sometimes her father would sneak it. He brought her a bottle early last week, and she was saving it under her mattress. She also enjoyed Coke, but she liked Pepsi more, because that was the one with Britney. She had seen the ads on the television set—back when they still had the antenna.

She remembered the night when they got rid of the antenna. Her father came home with a dish. He put it up outside of her room, and that's when her mom started crying.

This was over two years ago. This was when she was four. And it was weird, she thought, how she remembered these things, because she barely remembered her brother.

Her younger brother had been in the hospital then. He had some kind of problem with food. He stayed away for over one week, and then her mom said he was gone. And when her parents came home from the hospital that night, her dad brought the dish for the set. It had lots of cartoons, and some really good shows, but her mom said that they couldn't have sugar. Her father got mad, and he threw down the dish. Then her mom went to live with her aunt. She decided to come back early last year, and since then, they hadn't had sugar.

Sometimes her mom would make honey-syrup cakes or this pudding that tasted so weird. She used this gray bottle of liquidy stuff that took a long time to come out. And afterwards Leda had to go to the toilet, which she really didn't like to do. So she stopped eating sweets. And she didn't really mind. The only thing she missed was the Pepsi. And Brittney Spears, who wasn't even on. Now they only watched the news.

She took out the tape with the Asian music on it and set it down by the mat. Then she clicked on the lid of her new cassette deck, which her dad had brought

from work. He had said she could keep it for as long as he was here, because the post office closed during curfew.

The music began playing soft and then loud. It sounded like blowing wind. Then water crashed down against some far rocks, and she could hear the tingle of stars.

She lit up a candle, which she kept by the chair. The candle smelled like banana. She liked banana; it wasn't too sweet. Not as sweet as the melon.

The air smelled nice. It was pleasant and warm. She no longer heard all the shouting. It might have been there, but she tried not to think as she breathed in and out of her lungs.

She sat along the mat with her legs spread apart and her toes curled up from her feet. She took a deep breath and she thought of the stars—the ones that she heard on the tape.

She could still hear the shouting outside from the hall. It kept interrupting her breathing. The men were still there. They were talking about war, or whatever it was they discussed.

The power flashed off in her room and the hall. The music and lights went off. The waves stopped crashing, and the candle flame flicked, hissing along the table.

This was not good. It happened last week. But at night, it always took longer. Then her father called out:

"Leda, you okay? Stay where you are, sweet. I'm coming."

"I'm fine," Leda said as the flashlight approached, spotting the door, then her face.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," Leda said. The flashlight was right in her eyes.

"I'm gonna run down and get gas for the stove."

"Can I come?"

"No, stay where you are. I want you to sit at the table."

The flashlight left and so did her dad. Leda sat down at the desk. She drew on her hand with a rose-colored marker: two circles and then a diamond. She held up the face and talked to her hand. She asked herself how she was doing.

"Fine," she said. "It's warm in this place. I want to go out for a walk."

"You can't do that," her hand mumbled back. "You know there's still a curfew."

Well, f___ the curfew, she wanted to say, but her parents would never allow it.

."F___" is what the boys all said—the ones she used to chase. But they weren't interested in her. Not anymore. Maybe it was because of the cola. She needed the drink to give her some life. It made her whole head feel sparkly. She thought that the boys probably felt the same thing whenever they threw rocks at the Jeeps And they hadn't lately. Things here were calm, especially outside of her home. She didn't understand why she couldn't run out and get a quick drink from the store. Her cousin's shop was down on the corner. They also sold Bissli and nuts. Her mother had said she could have plenty of those. Maybe she'd go get a package.

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J. A. Bernstein's stories and essays have appeared in Shenandoah, Boston Review, Kenyon Review Online, *and other journals. He lives with his wife and daughters in northern Minnesota, where he is an assistant professor of English at the University of Minnesota Duluth and the fiction editor of* Tikkun. **jbernste@d.umn.edu**

"Good friends, good books, and a sleepy conscience: this is the ideal life."

–Mark Twain

I SAW THE LIGHT
Ben South
Acrylic on Canvas
54" x 42"

Ben South's art combines the sophistication of French Post-Impressionists with the simplicity of Southern folk artists. His work may be seen at the Gallery of the Mountain Brook Bohemian Hotel in Birmingham and other galleries in the South.
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MIRACLE STRIP

Matthew Layne-—*Hackney Literary Awards: 3rd Place, State Poetry*

Three teenage boys stand in the bed
of a Ford truck that cruises
slow as a shark in warm water
down the Strip of Panama
City Beach. A hand-painted
confederate flag drips down
their hood. They whoop and whistle
as they roll past a school of girls
outside Alvin's Island. Pink
mopeds flash in and out again
of the slow current of cars
and trucks. Tinny horns honk
as Skynrd blares, and the air
is thick with humidity and salt
and curious desire. The moon
floats into the purpling sky,
a pale yellow dot against
the blaze of the Vomatron's lights.

Out past the Sandpiper Resort,
arm in arm, a couple skirts
the water's edge. Noctiluca
blooms green starlight in the sand
beneath their bare feet. A bale
of turtle hatchlings totters
to their first dark gulf. Further out,
a nudity of jellyfish caresses
one another below the waves.
Their tendrils weave an ecstatic
orgy of forgiveness.
Forget the metaphor for now.
What you need to know is this:
love the world with all of you,
love the world through sorrow
and shame, and when your love is
over,
then give the world away.

Matt Layne is a poet from Birmingham, Alabama. He is the young adult librarian at The Emmet O'Neal Library, and when he's not working with young artists and poets, he's reading the latest, greatest, young adult literature for the 2016 Best Fiction for Young Adults Committee of the American Library Association. **mr.mattlayne@gmail.com**

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