

# Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 13 Issue 3



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**\$5.00**



# Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **UNTITLED** —Amber Orr graduated from the Alabama School of Fine Arts and earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Montevallo. Her work in mixed media celebrates the female figure, color, and abstract design. [orreoamber@gmail.com](mailto:orreoamber@gmail.com)

Back Cover: **BLUE UMBRELLA** — Gordan Cosic was born in Cacak, Serbia, in 1956. In 1975, he finished school for graphic design and since 1976 works as a graphic designer in Užice, Serbia. Cosic is the winner of the RK SSO "Daring Flower" competition for creativity. In addition to graphic design, he is engaged in painting and photography. [gordancosic5@gmail.com](mailto:gordancosic5@gmail.com)

## CONFUSION IN PARADISE

Mary Sood

“She’s threatening to kill me,” the man yelled into the telephone.

The woman beside him stared at him incredulously. The girl stood in the doorway screaming.

“He’s calling the police? On us?” the girl gasped tearfully between howls.

“You’ll make things worse if you keep yelling,” the woman whispered frantically. The girl did not calm down until the doorbell rang and the man welcomed two policemen into the living room. The woman told the girl to stay in the bedroom.

“Did you touch him?” one of the officers asked the woman.

“No!” she replied angrily.

“Did you threaten him?”

“He’s 6 feet 4 inches tall. I’m 5 feet 4 inches. This is ridiculous,” she screamed.

“Lady, if you don’t calm down, I’ll arrest you,” the officer threatened. “Now did you or did you not threaten to kill him?”

“Officers, we’re decent people. We haven’t been drinking or anything. My wife is a teacher at the school right across the street and a volunteer in the community. You’ve probably seen her photo in the newspaper a few times, but she was losing control and I felt it was safest to call the police,” the man said softly.

The officers asked a few more questions and told the man to call back if there were any more problems. They felt sorry for him.

The woman saw everything in flashbacks. Nothing made sense. She saw him dragging the girl down the stairs, kicking her along the way. She saw herself checking the girl’s head for bruises. She saw herself locked in a room with the girl, the huge headboard pushed against the door to keep him out. He, begging, crying, saying he wasn’t really going to harm them. She saw his fist waving in the air. The days and years blurred together. She saw him waving a knife, chasing her down the hall. She saw the day he locked them out of the house in the winter at midnight with no shoes on their feet. And the day he punched her in the face. How had those days led to this day?

He had followed her through the house before he called the police.

“You’re eating again,” he said when he caught her in the kitchen shoving a donut in her mouth.

“I can eat what I want,” she snapped as she scurried to the computer room to correct her students’ papers.

“He is right,” she thought. “I have gotten fat and ugly.”

“You’ve gained at least 30 pounds,” he grumbled, following her into the room. She stormed out of the computer room. She went to their daughter’s room. He was on her heels.

“You left all those papers in the computer room. Go pick them up!” he demanded.

“I’m going back in a minute.”

He looked at the girl and said, “You’re just like her, laying around doing nothing.”

“Ignore him,” the woman told the girl.

“She’ll grow up to be nothing. A big, fat nothing. I’m the only one in this house who has any discipline.”

The girl said she hated him. He smirked and she began to scream incoherently.

“I want to kill you!” the woman told the man.

He grabbed the phone from a desk just outside the girl’s bedroom. The woman slammed the door and sat next to the girl on the bed. She could hear him talking loudly on the phone outside the door.

“My wife just threatened my life, and I’m afraid,” the man said loudly.

The girl’s scream grew louder and louder. The woman opened the door.

“She is out of control and threatening to kill me,” the man said.

The woman stared at him incredulously.

He sounded frightened.

The woman begged the girl to stop screaming.

“He’s calling the police? On us?” the girl said between heaving sobs and terrifying screams. Then she screamed louder and louder and the woman wondered what the neighbors must be thinking and she ran to close the girl’s bedroom window.

While the policeman talked, she saw everything in flashbacks. She was so confused. She saw her husband following her into the kitchen. She saw him standing over her in the computer room. She saw him glaring at the girl he called useless. Days merged into weeks and years. She saw past conversations.

She had said, “If you hit her again, I will call the police.”

She had said, “If you raise your fist at me again, I will call the police.”

She had said, “We will not tolerate your abuse anymore.”

And the girl kept saying, "He should be in jail!"  
And the girl kept saying, "He tricks everybody."  
And the girl kept asking, "Why won't you tell on him?"

When the officers left, the woman felt fat and naked and disgusted with herself. They had threatened to arrest her. They thought she was a bad person. They would have tapes of the girl screaming. They would have those tapes forever. And they would think it was her screaming. If the girl hadn't yelled, maybe the police wouldn't have taken the call so seriously.

She saw him dragging the girl down the stairs, kicking her along the way. She saw herself checking the girl's head for bruises. She saw herself locked in a room with the girl, the huge headboard pushed against the door to keep him out. He, begging, crying, saying he wasn't really going to harm them. She saw his fist waving in the air. All the days blurred together. She saw him waving a knife, chasing her down the hall. The day he locked them out of the house in the winter at midnight with no shoes on their feet. The day he punched her in the face. If only she hadn't eaten those donuts.

The officers were gone. The man and woman were silent. The girl remained in her room. Finally, the man sat on the sofa, rested his feet on the ottoman and smiled.

.....

*Mary Sood is co-owner of Mom 'N' I Publishing, LLC, publisher of Freshman Fifteen: The Most Important Things I Learned in My First Year of College, and co-author of Success at Every Age: A Mother-Daughter Perspective. Visit Mom 'N' I Publishing at [www.momnipublishing.com](http://www.momnipublishing.com)  
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## WHALE WATCHING GUY

Eileen Malone - 2015 Hackney Literary Awards: 3rd Place National Poetry

He's okay, sitting cliffside day after day, the whale  
watching guy is harmless, though toothless, reeking  
sting-stink of cat urine and onions, won't bother you  
most of the time, except when he claps his hands  
of dirty ragged fingernails as he yells and shouts

if you say hello he will answer, then the only thing  
he will talk about is how once on a Wenersday  
yes it was a Wenersday, sun flashed and seawater  
flushing he sighted a normous gray whale

she lifted her huge heaving belly, shuddered off  
the blue Kool-Aid sea, lifted her head, looked  
around, saw him looking at her, yes, he'll tell you  
like nothing he'd ever imagined, he saw the all-seeing  
eye of the mother of all whales looking back at him  
loving him, understanding him

and it humbled him, made his teeth rock loosely in  
their sore gums, almost made him cry out how much  
he mattered, every time he thinks about her it belongs  
him more to her  
sometimes the ocean rumbles like freight trains backing  
up and waves rise like whales are hiding in them and  
they are, he knows they are, because he sees bits of shining  
barnacled scarred flukes smashing through the surface

he knows what he sees, krill spilling from baleens  
don't tell him he doesn't, he thinks it must be an effing  
miracle how his world doesn't simply burst itself apart  
on its own beauty, that's when he yells and shouts  
claps his hands, yells and shouts, can't help it, no harm  
done, he's okay, the rest of the time he won't bother you.

.....

*Eileen Malone's poetry has been published in over 500 literary journals and anthologies, a significant amount of which have earned awards including three Pushcart nominations. Her award-winning collection Letters with Taloned Claws was published by Poets Corner Press (Sacramento) and her book I Should Have Given Them Water was published by Ragged Sky Press (Princeton). [EibhilinMalone@aol.com](mailto:EibhilinMalone@aol.com)*

*“Write it in your heart that every day is the  
best day of the year.”*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson





### **DREAMING OF BIRDS**

Oil on Canvas/Oil Pastel on Board

36" x 48"

Garmann Gerberg

*Garmann Gerburg achieved the desired effect in this piece by merging two acrylic paintings, Fire Tree and Polynesian Woman, to create Dreaming of Birds. A native of Germany, Gerberg is a professor of German and French and assistant dean of Interdisciplinary Programs & Service Learning at the University of Indianapolis. [garmanng@sbcglobal.net](mailto:garmanng@sbcglobal.net)*



## HEAL

Ajise Vincent Tolorunju

the splendor  
of your glyph  
tends towards  
the countenance  
of ruin.

remold your anatomy  
with love.  
lest you become  
like worthless fossils  
adored by pyramids of dust.

.....

*Ajise Vincent Tolorunju is a Nigerian Poet. His works have been published in London Grip Poetry Review, Eureka, Kalahari Review, Sakonfa literary magazine, Synchronized Chaos, AfricanWriter, Jalada Africa, Black Boy Review, Literary Nest Review, Lunaris, Provo Canyon Review, PIN Quarterly Journal, 1947 Journal, Prachya Review, ANA Review, Asian Signature, Oddball, Indiana Voice Journal, Tuck Magazine, and Harbinger. He loves coffee, blondes & turtles. [jidecent@yahoo.com](mailto:jidecent@yahoo.com)*

*“Comparison is the thief of joy.”*

—Theodore Roosevelt

## FOOTSTEPS

Kenneth Hickey

In the darkness nine slow footsteps are heard. A long silence follows. The man sits in a large, high-backed, leather chair. Nothing moves in the ancient house. Nothing creaks. He is dressed in the surviving pinstriped trousers from the suit he was married in. He wears a dark threadbare cardigan over a grey shirt, dull from too many washings. His faded brown boots are worn and broken. Beside him the ornate wooden box sits on a small table. It is etched with a language no one can read. Secret syllables gouged in the hard wood. He stares straight ahead in the long silence, seeing nothing. At last he speaks.

“Is that you?”

The girl prefers the shadows. She too wears a dark cardigan over her grey shapeless dress. Her clothes are dog-eared and thin. There are ladders in her woolen tights. Her lifeless black boots are scuffed and splitting. She stares straight ahead. She will not look at him. After another long silence he speaks again. The words echo against the mountains of debris which surrounds them.

“Is that you?”

She waits a long time to answer.

“Who else would it be?”

“I thought it was you. I recognised the footsteps.”

“Were you expecting someone else?”

“No.”

He pauses, painfully aware of the implications before he offers his invitation.

“Please take a seat.”

She will not make it that simple.

“I’d prefer to stand.”

But he must continue with the ritual. The sacrament must not change.

“Can I offer you anything to drink?”

He remembers other meetings in other cities. Lost to his youth and fading memory. What had they drunk on those pale evenings he thought would last to eternity?

“Chardonnay?”

“No.”

There had been sacred breakfasts too. Mornings where the sun fell in dappled waves across young bodies.

“Earl Grey maybe?”

“No.”

“Water?”

“No thank you. I’d prefer to begin.”

Always so keen to be on with it. Such haste. Time had granted him much opportunity to repent unhurriedly. There was no need to rush anymore.

“Begin then.”

“From where?”

“Anywhere. Just begin.”

The girl reaches for the box. Peeling back the lid marked with words no one speaks. Releasing the secrets from within. She takes a postcard from inside waiting for the furies to reach their pre-ordained positions before beginning to read.

“Paris amazes me. You should see the streets here. The way the sun ...”

He interrupts.

“No, too early. Go to later. Much later.”

She replaces the postcard in the box, caressing the worn edges of the others with her fingertips before allowing fate to choose. She begins to read.

“I miss you so much when you are away. The days drift ...”

Again he interrupts.

“Later again.”

This angers her.

“Maybe you should pick.”

“No, you’re doing fine.”

The girl replaces the postcard in the box before taking a third. There is a faded picture of a country cottage on the back. Once more she begins to read.

“I finally realise it’s over now. And for all the wrong reasons.”

A sad smile crosses the man’s face. Memory softly glimmering in his milky eyes.

“This is what I want. Continue.”

She reads, reluctant and stammering.

“They say that love should be enough. But now I know they’re wrong. Somethings, bigger things can get in the way. Things that shouldn’t get in the way.”

Lowering the card she stops reading. The girl looks up at his face, bathed in the reverence of remembrance.

“Are you sure about this one? It’s not like the others.”

His eyes remain fixed on the past. He does not meet her inquiring stare.

“Very sure.”

The girl draws a breath before reading, anxious for the hour to be over.

Anxious to be freed from the room.

They said that things might change. Might come around. That things might resolve themselves in their own good time. What will be will be. But I don’t believe that.

Neither of us did.

His voice is low and rattling, barely audible against the silence of the night.

Again she looks up from the untidy handwriting, hesitant with fresh doubt.

“I really don’t think ...”

But he doesn’t want to stop.

“No. Go on.”

He draws a breath.

“Please. Go on.”

She turns back to reading the unexplained words. The man listens with his head to one side, eyes softly closed against the night’s shadows.

“They say to forget about you. To move on. To look forward to the future. New beginnings. I don’t want new beginnings. It’s all endings now. Nothing else. The end is important in all things.”

His words slide softly into the emptiness of the room. The girl is disturbed but she continues.

“As I said, wrong reasons. Too many wrong reasons.”

Suddenly he shudders and the spell is gone. Like a bird taking flight before a ravenous carnivore.

“That’s enough. Pick another. A different one.”

Moving her hand quickly to the box the girl replaces one postcard for another. One missal for the next. In the interlude the man tries conversation. He has attempted it before with little success.

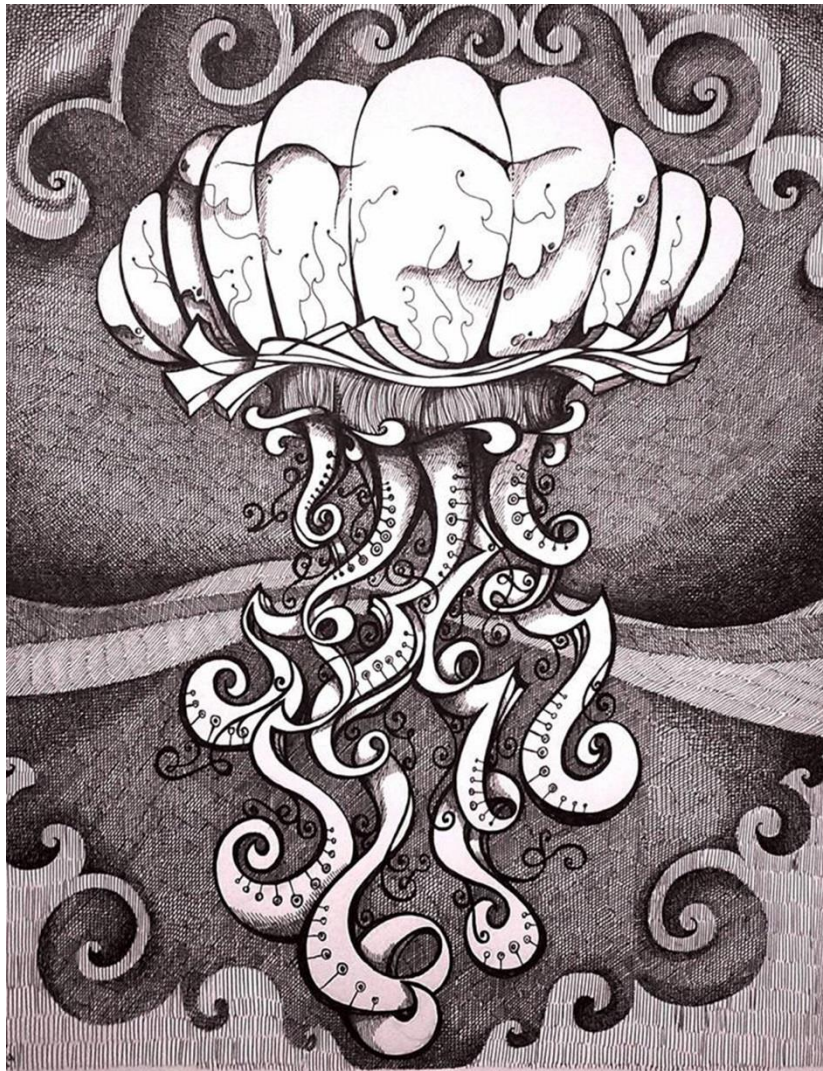
“How long have you been coming to read now?”

She despises such inquiry.

“Long enough.”

“But how long has it been?”

(Continued on page 12)



### UNDER THE SEA

April Muschara Harris  
Pen & Ink on Paper  
11" x 14"

*April Muschara Harris grew up in Central Alabama, attended Auburn University Montgomery and graduated with a degree in Fine Art. She is currently an award winning artist and professional graphic designer who works in acrylics, pen and ink, chalk, and pencil. [aprilmuschara@gmail.com](mailto:aprilmuschara@gmail.com)*

"I'm to read, not answer questions. That was the arrangement."

Again he has tried. Again he has failed. It is a thing of little matter. He will try again and fail again.

"Read then."

The girl begins to recite.

"It's the coldness that's strange. You were never like this before. You were angry but never cold. My letters unanswered. I wish it could be changed."

Nothing changed.

"There are times when I can't believe it's happening. Not this way. How could it come to this? Surely it can't come to this. I know there must be some way to fight. To cut my own path regardless of circumstance. The path I want."

She senses the man's impatience before he can frame the sentence. His eyes twitch uneasily.

"It's dragging a bit. Move on a few lines."

"The next paragraph?"

"See if it makes any more sense."

A clock strikes the half hour. They pause before the girl begins again.

"We'll find a way I'm sure." The man sighs heavily.

"Better." He sinks deeper into the ancient leather of his chair.

"We are too entwined for this to be broken. We'll just refuse to accept what they put before us. We'll just refuse. We'll make sure it's done our way."

Big words for a small voice. The girl glances from the card to his face but the man is no longer there, no longer in the room. The past has snared him. He converses with ghosts as she reads the next line.

"The way it should have been done at the start."

Suddenly he shifts and stirs, uncomfortable with memories which do not change with time.

"Enough, enough, enough."

He is eager for something different. Something unusual. But none of the words are new. Archaic, ancient, obsolete. Scribbled on parchment.

"Pick a different one."

The girl replaces the card in the box. In the half-light the etched words seem to mean something, dancing just beyond comprehension. She takes another from inside. There is a picture of a schooner on the back. In the recess between remembrances the man again reaches for connection.

"Do you hate me?"



She answers reluctantly.  
“Hate you? Why?”  
“For my weakness.”  
“Most men are weak.”  
He hears bitterness behind her words. He hears truth.  
“You don’t hate me then?”  
“Let me read. I don’t like questions.”  
The man nods slowly and she begins.  
“I never thought I could feel this way.”  
“Good. Good.”  
“I never thought I could be so much in love with you. I didn’t think it was real what they said. I didn’t think it was possible.”  
“Dreams do come true, if only we wish hard enough.”  
She recognises the quote from a different shadowy room at night. In a time before the one at hand. For her all of this has happened before, and will happen again.  
She turns her eyes slowly back to the words before her.  
Everything else seems brighter because of it. The sun seems to shine more.  
“Am I being foolish?”  
“Yes.”  
“I don’t know. I suppose I am. But it feels that way. Like there’s more colour to the day. Everything just feels brighter.”  
Brightness fades.  
The girl’s anger escapes her. Phantoms push the violent words from her mouth.  
“Will you stop interrupting!”  
The man senses the fracture, fearful it cannot be repaired.  
“Please continue.”  
Her rage still has a way to travel before rippling to peace.  
“First questions. Now interruptions.”  
He answers in a meek voice.  
“Just read.”  
Seething, she stares at him. He will never stare back. She lets the seconds die slowly on the threadbare rug before the fire. The girl clears her throat. She reads.  
“We can never be broken apart. Nothing will come between us. This love is too strong. Too strong. I don’t care what they try to do. It won’t work. We’re unbreakable.”

“Did I ever really believe that?”

The girl hears memories scratching between the words but will not stop to question, will not stoop to inquire.

“I long to be back with you again. Waiting for the minutes to pass ...”

Again he hears enough. Again he wishes for release.

“Put it away. It’s only descending into romance now. Put it away.”

Slowly the girl replaces the card in the wooden box, snapping the lid closed.

She will not read again.

“And what now?”

“Talk to me.”

There was to be no talking.

This much they had agreed. But he is old and it is late.

“Tell me something new.”

“Your time is nearly up.”

She has kept a close watch on the dying minutes. One after the one before.

“It can’t be that late.”

“It is.”

The lateness of the hour cannot be questioned. She moves closer, standing above him. The girl’s shadow covers the man, bathing him in darkness. He senses her movement but does not see.

“Tell me your name.”

She picks up the box, tracing her fingers over the etched letters, opening the lid slowly to run her fingertips over the archaic postcards.

“I will never tell you my name.”

Turning the box slowly in her hand she pours the cards over him. They fall like the first snowflakes of winter, like leaves in October, circling to perish on the autumnal breeze. Reaching towards his treasure he falls to the floor, trying to catch the cards as they spill beyond his reach.

“Stop, stop, you’re making a mess.”

There is no authority to his words. He is too old, too tired, too blind. When the box is empty she allows it to tumble from her hands to the floor and stands watching the man as he struggles to gather up the cards. For each his twisted fingers find another evades his desperate searching.

“Why do you get me to do this?”

He stops, head bowed, beaten.

“I like the sound of your voice.”

“Do I remind you of her?”

“Not really. She had more patience than you.”  
She has heard enough. Witnessed too much of his broken past.  
“I’m leaving now.”  
The girl turns towards the door, hidden in the darkness.  
“Will you come back tomorrow as arranged?”  
There is terror in his voice. A fear of being abandoned. The fear of ceasing to exist.  
She turns back to him and watches his stillness. A Rodin sculpture.  
“Why didn’t you post any of them?”  
“Would it have changed anything?”  
“Why go to the trouble of writing them all and then not sending them?”  
She waits for an answer.  
“Will you come back tomorrow?”  
The air grows heavier. His voice echoes once more.  
“As arranged?”  
Time stops. Time ceases.  
“Yes.”  
The girl turns and leaves his presence. He remains motionless. Turned to stone by the Gorgon’s smile. In the darkness nine slow footsteps are heard. A long silence follows.

.....

*Kenneth Hickey’s prose and poetry have been published in literary journals in Ireland, the UK, and the US. His awards include the Eamonn Keane Playwright Award in 2005, being short-listed for the PJ O’Conner Award in 2003, and the South Tipperary One Act Play Chapbook Awards in 2003 and 2004. He resides in Cork, Ireland*  
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*“Live one day at a time. If you try to live seven days at a time, the week will be over before you know it.”*

—Sally Brown

## THE SMALL BLACK CRICKET

Chervis Isom

The fog rises this morning,  
a thin diaphanous veil  
floating among the high rise buildings,  
then quietly drifting away.  
I watch in profound silence,  
reminded of the thin, sparse  
quality of my remembrances  
and how they too have drifted away.  
So strange how the mind works—  
all those many memories lost; the good  
advice my Dad gave me, time and  
time again—all plunged into the abyss.  
The things my brother did and said,  
my roommate for all those years we lived at home  
walking the railroad tracks, delivering newspapers,  
tinkering on motorcycles—so little I recall.  
And my sister, seven years younger and  
more or less housebound, obviously was a keen observer  
of life; for she recalls  
more of my adolescence than I;  
and my mother, beautiful woman,  
with dark, dark hair and  
piercing green eyes—so little left of what she said beyond  
her desperate yearnings for me and her church.  
And my first girlfriend—  
the girl on the Boulevard—I remember  
her shining black hair, her luminous hazel eyes,  
holding her hand in my uncertain grip, her warm kiss,

The memory of my hopeless longing,  
 I remember so well—yet what  
 in God's name did we speak of,  
 she and I?  
 Why, then, having forgotten  
 such matters of substance,  
 does that single insignificant moment  
 stand out so vivid to me?  
 I was a small boy then, maybe eight or nine years old,  
 and I was told to cut the grass out front,  
 a small lawn falling into a sidewalk,  
 grass between there and the street.  
 It was a push mower, the kind with two wheels  
 that rotate the curving blades between.  
 The handle was as high as my head  
 and I couldn't get my body weight behind my push.  
 I amused myself by pushing the mower on the  
 sidewalk where the blade whirled  
 enthusiastically, as if I were making progress,  
 Though in fact I was making none.  
 There on the sidewalk perched a small  
 black cricket, harmless and minding its own business.  
 I whirled on, thinking surely the lawnmower would pass harmlessly overhead, As  
 it had not yet cut a single weed.  
 And then—to my horror—a thousand small remnants burst from the whirring  
 blade,  
 a black cloud hovering a moment before my startled eyes,  
 and then settling on the sidewalk before my planted feet.  
 My heart sank . . . ; and I grieve the poor cricket  
 as if it had been a family pet.  
*Chervis Isom is an attorney in Birmingham, Al. He has an avid interest in literature and  
 when he can find time, he enjoys wrestling with words. [cisom@bakerdonelson.com](mailto:cisom@bakerdonelson.com)*

## THE GIRL IN THE BOOKSTORE

Daniel Slaten

He walks into his favorite bookstore, something he's been doing every Saturday morning for as long as he can remember, and he falls in love almost immediately. The new girl standing behind the counter is perfect, or maybe even more than perfect. She's everything he's ever wanted in a woman: tall, with long brown hair, and thoughtful, kind eyes.

He's been waiting for this day all his life. He always knew he would meet his future wife in a bookstore. Until now he'd expected to find her reading a book of poetry or flipping through the pages of something emotional and romantic—but not something in the actual Romance section. The kind of woman he would marry wouldn't read tawdry romance novels. She might read and enjoy something like *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, even if she didn't quite understand it all, but she wouldn't be interested in something with a title like *The Passion and the Price*.

This is how his own *Love in the Time of Cholera* begins, he thinks as he browses the shelves of used books. This is the moment when his life reaches that pivotal event that will forever define it. She is his purpose, his reason for being. All his previous life experiences have been preparing him for this, for her.

Their story will begin with a book, of course. But not just any book. It will be a book that captures who they are, what they're about. This is his gift, the ability to find the perfect book for every person and every occasion. He's been doing this for years, at birthdays and Christmases, combining his literary knowledge and observational skills to find the story that will move his friends and loved ones that way that good books have always been able to move him.

He reaches for a book, pulls it off the shelf to examine closer, and puts it back quickly; it isn't the kind of book she would read, he thinks, or at least not the kind that would change her life. And what kind of book would change her life, he wonders? What kind of book could be her *Of Human Bondage*, a book that had once moved him to tears? It would be something literary, something full of deep and sometimes hidden meanings, something artsy and intelligent. It would be a book that would reveal new insights every time it was reread — and she would reread it, two or three times at least over the course of their life together.



He finds one of those books sitting on the top shelf of the bookcase in front of him and gives it a thorough looking-over. Satisfied that it will impress the girl behind the counter, he takes it up front to purchase.

The girl behind the counter smiles, he smiles back, and she takes the book to ring it up. He watches her face closely, hoping to read interest there, interest that can quickly be transferred from the book to himself. He sees nothing. Nothing. It is just a book to those beautiful eyes and those perfectly formed lips; just a transaction, one of countless transactions she will inevitably make this day.

Has he misjudged her? Has he misjudged the book? Impossible, he thinks. He wonders where he went wrong, where the critical mistake was made. He thinks of the other books he browsed, flashing back to one that may have been a better choice than the one he's purchasing now, and then he sees it, clear as day.

She's wearing a ring.

His heart sinks, but at least his faith in literature is restored. At least he wasn't wrong about the book, he thinks as he reaches for his wallet and allows himself to move on. If he had been wrong about the book, he isn't sure how he would have coped. He would have been devastated, undoubtedly, but he wasn't wrong about the book, just the girl.

He takes the book and leaves the store, certain in the knowledge that someday he will find the woman who has been waiting all her life for the literary masterpiece he now holds in his hands.

.....

*Daniel Slaten writes short stories and poetry in small notebooks and on sticky notes. He currently lives in Montgomery, Alabama. [djslaten@aol.com](mailto:djslaten@aol.com)*



## THE BACK DOOR OF THE AMBULANCE

Tom Gordon

The back door of the ambulance opens at the rehab center  
and you look up from the gurney,  
your smile sleepy, apologetic,  
a badge of resignation to the waiting whatever.

Nothing in my control, everything coming apart.  
Hating my impotent self,  
I ask you,  
Who am I?  
You don't reply with my name.  
Just my initials.

You seem regret-free, but regret  
grabs my throat  
as I say, "We're going to get you—"  
tear tremor—"out of here."

I hate that you are no longer strong,  
hate the instant anger I had felt when visiting the house,  
an interest-bearing, penalty-free-withdrawal deposit of diatribes  
I was eager to expend on you  
because I would find something else broken  
but still working, some jigsaw puzzle way of your design  
that I could not fathom  
and I hate the way my frustration fostered more anger  
and how you and I would raise our voices  
and how I would stare you down,  
both of us knowing I had a power over you  
I had never wanted to wield.

If you walked in the door right now,  
I would break your back with my encircling arms  
and never ask God or anyone,  
“How can this be happening?”  
You had hairs growing out of your big facial mole  
when the ambulance brought you in,  
some of them almost long enough to lasso a spider.

They shaved those hairs and cut back your too-long toenails  
and one of the women there said if you would eat better,  
you’d feel better and you said, “Is that right?”  
as though you were telling her to go throw the switch  
on one of your broken appliances.

No need, though, to chain you to the bed like they did  
after your blackout at the restaurant,  
no need for me to spend the night and be sentry-ready to respond  
when you started shaking because of things you were seeing  
and force my way into your dreams  
and tell you not to worry about that oncoming car,  
not to worry because brother David  
was going to be all right,  
that we, you and I, could manage whatever menace  
was marbling around your mind.

You had called me several times before,  
drunk and desperate to hear any kind of voice in the darkness  
and what an effort you must have made, only to receive  
a tainted trophy of anger and indifference.

The questions I now have are stacked higher  
than the fire ant monolith you set aflame  
one summer night outside the house in Macon.  
Everybody's dad then had been in the war,  
and I wish I knew now what the war did to you—  
wish I had asked, no, lovingly demanded—  
instead of having every war movie,  
every gritty grain of real war footage  
scrape some scar tissue of regret.

One night, there they were, in gritty grains of gray, on the TV screen—  
MacArthur, Eisenhower, Patton, Bradley—long dead,  
and many of the young soldiers in some of the same frames  
now dead with them, the rest moving toward the grave  
like dandelion down in a strong breeze.  
A hidden hand was at my throat  
but my fingers were free to dial the number  
and when you answered, the hand loosened its grip  
as if it understood an imperative,  
my need to tell you,  
“I'm proud to be your son.”

.....

*Tom Gordon is a Birmingham-based free-lance writer and former reporter and editor at The Birmingham News. A native of Houston, TX, Gordon has an undergraduate degree in political science from the University of Alabama and a graduate degree in journalism from the University of Missouri. He has reported from Iraq, West Africa, and most recently, Cuba, and has written for Weld for Birmingham, B Metro magazine and Birmingham Watch. His poetry also has appeared in Aura and in an anthology, Einstein at the Odeon Cafe.*  
**tomgordon99@gmail.com**

## FISHING WITHOUT MY FATHER

Irene Latham

Like any good daughter,  
I cast my line,  
even after the water's  
turned tepid and still.  
Each day I fold myself  
into the boat,  
no matter how  
it cripples my knees.  
Sometimes hours pass  
with nary a nibble.  
The sun prickles  
my most private places  
and I hide behind  
my hat.

Since you've been  
                    gone,  
a hook stays lodged  
in my throat.  
Sadness laps  
my throat and earlobes.  
Every splash  
threatens to turn tidal.  
And then,  
just as I am ready  
to pack the tackle,  
a flying fish lands  
thrashing at my feet.

.....

*Irene Latham is wife, mother of three, poet, novelist, speaker, teacher and blogger, not necessarily in that order. Her latest book, Fresh Delicious: Poems from the Farmers' Market will represent Alabama at the 2016 National Book Festival in Washington, DC. [irenelatham.com](http://irenelatham.com)*



## CATALINA

30" X 48"

Acrylic on Canvas

*Erin Ashley is a self-taught artist whose pieces are informed by layers of chipped paint, rusted metals and old buildings "because they spark new ideas about color and texture." Her work has been widely published in home decor and art magazines. She lives in Florida. [www.erinashleyart.com](http://www.erinashleyart.com)*



## MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Robert Joe Stout

Hecklers waved “Go Home Beaners!” and “Illegals Are Criminals!” banners. Texas State Police and National Guardsman reinforcing local law enforcement had blocked access to the Capitol grounds, forcing the demonstrators to spread laterally through the adjoining streets. Twice those opposing the “We Are Americans Too!” congregation had sabotaged the sound system. Others shouted insults and waved Confederate flags. Unable to get close enough to see the speakers or the mariachis, elbowed, bumped, and shoved by those arriving and those leaving, Yolanda Roma grabbed her son’s shoulder.

“C’mon Jake, let’s get out of here!”

Dodging an arm-linked contingent of university students she stumbled against the curb and had to grab a sign pole for support. Jake, though only twelve, was more aggressive and knifed through a clot of banner wavers and gestured for Yolanda to follow. Clutching the purse that had slipped off her shoulder she stumbled forward, bumped into someone and felt them tumble against a travel agency’s plate glass window.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry!”

Translucent eyes blinked up at her from a tiny face bouqueted beneath white hair. Thin, bony fingers groped for the walking stick beside her.

“Let me help you up. Are you all right?”

“I, I’m fine.”

“I’m so, so sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“It couldn’t be helped.” The hand gripping the walking stick trembled as the frail woman tried to regain her footing. Jake, who’d shoved back through the crowd, grabbed her to keep her from again falling.

“Graci—”

The thanks caught in her throat as two men yanked Jake backwards, flung him against the sidewalk and kicked him with cowboy boots.

“F-- -- -- wetback! Leave her alone!”

Yolanda screamed and thrust herself in front of her son. One of the men spat, then lurched forward as a walking stick cracked over his head. His companion whirled, fist lifted to strike the assailant. He jerked backwards as the old woman jabbed the walking stick at him.

“Make my day!” she cackled.

Arm around Jake, Yolanda wedged forward to be at the woman’s side. Half a dozen university students crowded past to help defend her but the two ruffians, cursing and glaring at those laughing at them, stomped off.

“Thank you, so much!” The old woman’s voice trembled but her smile was angelic as she patted Yolanda’s hand, then confided:

“All my life I’ve wanted to do something dramatic like that.”

.....

*Robert Joe Stout lives in Oaxaca, Mexico, as a freelance journalist. His work has been published in Tishman Review, Emrys Journal and America among many other magazines and journals. **mexicoconamor@yahoo.com***

*“When laughing children chase after  
fireflies, they are not pursuing beetles  
but catching wonder.”*

—David George Haskell

## DEPRESSION

Jennifer Lothrigel

Outside my front door,  
the deceitful grass  
hides vixen Queen ants beneath its submissive blades.

Her frantic workers scurry around  
endlessly building new kingdoms,  
while worms feast on decaying earth.

Everything out *there*

and in here,  
is dry and aching.

The leaves question fate's motives—  
As their stems break loose,  
the wind takes them down the street to live in the gutter.

Avoided memories  
crawl around my body  
ravaging like snails in the vegetable garden.

I'm afraid that when I droop,  
my leaves withering and closing in on themselves—  
deep brown like animal eyes,  
that I will be forgotten  
like tree seeds implanted in the Earth's belly  
that were too afraid to weather the dark passage.

.....

*Jennifer Lothrigel is a poet and artist in the San Francisco Bay area. She creates intuitively, drawing from the mystery of body and soul, then weaves her findings together. Her work has been published in Trivia: Voices of Feminism, Narrative Northeast, Lavender Wolves, Firefly Magazine, We'Moon, Cordella Magazine, and more. [jenniferlothrigel@gmail.com](mailto:jenniferlothrigel@gmail.com)*

## A STAR FALLS ON ALABAMA

Richard Key

My driver's license expired, prompting a visit to the Department of Public Safety at the State Troopers' office. It's been a few years since I've gone through the rigamarole, and things have changed. For one thing, the initial part has become self-service, with the main processing area hidden behind closed doors. There are stacks of brochures and information sheets on a table, as well as a touch screen.

Among the applicants seated in the waiting room with me is an older lady wearing a nice dress and holding a clutch purse in her lap. Not being of the touch screen generation, I don't initially comprehend what I'm supposed to do, and absently begin filling out an application. Only after someone else comes in and goes through the touch screen routine do I realize I'm doing things in reverse order. After you answer several questions, you get a number, which eventually shows up on a flat-screen monitor showing your place in the lineup. Then you are to fill out the appropriate form.

"I guess I did things backwards," I say to the proper lady seated nearby. She smiles and says she wouldn't have known either if people there hadn't told her. A disabled man comes in slowly with a cane and starts the touch screen questionnaire. He stares intently at the screen like he's dissecting it with his x-ray vision, but he pauses too long at one question and it freezes up. He slowly exits, but ten minutes later returns with more energy and scores a number. I feel like there must be a psychologist somewhere studying us on closed circuit television to see who can figure out the system, and if we help one another.

I end up with B323. The letter part tells which service is needed. Most of the ones I observe get the letter A for re-locaters seeking an Alabama license. The proper lady's number is called, and she goes through the double doors into the inner sanctum, only to return minutes later, slightly flustered.

"I didn't have all my documents," she says to me. "I wanted a STAR license and they need all these documents."

"What's a STAR license?"

“It’s the new license that will be required in 2017.” She hands me one of the information sheets from the desk. I have some vague recollection of this law passing through the legislature, but 2017 sounds like a long ways off.

Secure, trusted, and reliable—that’s what STAR stands for, I learn as I await my number to be called. I look down at my current license which is not only expired, but now insecure, mistrusted, and unreliable. Oh, how the mighty have fallen!

“B323, please come to desk number three.”

The room is filling up with the after lunch crowd, and I’m happy to leave my seat to someone else. A blond uniformed lady takes my application and seems a bit irritated.

“If all you need is renewal, it’d be a lot faster to go downtown to the probate office. There’s a quick-line set up and you don’t have to sit out there with all the low-lives. We get the whole gamut in here. The last two men to come back were sex offenders registering. If you go to the probate office, there’s no vision test. It’s just easier. I tell all my friends and family to go there. Sometimes there’s forty or fifty people in our waiting area. It can get pretty hairy.”

The troopers’ office is so close to my house; I don’t know if it would have saved any time. And where else can you go to see real live sex offenders? While I’m sitting there, a young black lady officer returns from lunch.

“Did you miss me?” she asks her coworker.

“One of your country club buddies came in asking for you.” She shows her the paperwork of the older lady that just left.

“She didn’t have a Social Security card. Never worked a day in her life. Said she wanted a STAR license to make it easier traveling. I told her if she had a valid passport, she don’t need the STAR. Her passport is good through 2021.”

“That’s Mrs. D-- --. They go somewhere every month,” says the other trooper. She works weekends at the country club as a second job and knows some of the upper crust. “Her husband’s loaded, and she ain’t never worked a day. Must be nice.”

My trooper replies, “I guess I’m such an eight-to-five person. I don’t even think about traveling once a year much less every month.” She looks down at my application shaking her head, “Never worked a day in her life.”

I almost flunk the vision test, which consists of looking into a black box with blinders on the sides, like something that someone a hundred years ago might have peered into to see dancing monkeys or scantily clad showgirls. The object is to determine which side has the flashing lights.

"I don't see any lights," I tell her.

She sighs, and I suspect I'm beginning to get on her bad side along with the sex offenders and the well-to-do lady. Then, there they are, like those meteor showers where you don't see anything at all and then you do. I complete the application process and receive my temporary license.

"What about this STAR license business? Do I need to get one of those?" I ask.

"I'll just say I don't have one. I wouldn't get one 'til they make me. Lord, with our legislature, they're liable to change their minds about it next year."

"Oh good," I say, relieved not to have another hassle. "My wife needs to get her license renewed, too," I mention as I get up. "I'll tell her to go to the other office."

"You do that," she replies. "It's crazy in here. I tell anyone I care about to go to the probate office downtown."

.....

*Richard Key was born in Jacksonville, FL and grew up in Mississippi. He now works as a pathologist at Flowers Hospital in Dothan. His stories and essays have been published in Bacopa Literary Review, The Broken Plate, Crack the Spine, Forge, Penman Review, Tusculum Review, and others. [richard.key@pwdda.com](mailto:richard.key@pwdda.com)*





## MAN CASTING

Noel Conneely

The man casts into the river's depth,  
one hand on the rod,  
the other holding back the night  
and the water only vaguely aware  
that the sea is at hand.

A moth rises into the arc of its loss  
and the man not really waiting  
for fish to bite but for love to somehow  
not be a weed his hook will snag on,  
has an army scrambling through his brain  
over the inevitables of conflict  
and he is looking for a word  
that will keep him afloat another moment.  
He wants to walk beautiful as the river  
away from the old child of lost opportunity  
as another truth struggles to be more than  
a covering of mist on a moth's wing  
as it climbs inexorably to the flame.

.....

*Noel Conneely's poems have been published in Poetry Ireland, Willow Review, Cimarron Review, Coe Review, Yellow Medicine Review, and other publications in Ireland and the US. **noelscon@hotmail.com***

## NOT A LOVE LETTER

Derrick D. McKenzie Jr.

If you were real  
I'd tell you that I'm the luckiest man to walk the earth  
If you were real  
I'd show you all of the scars that were left behind  
If you were real  
I'd ask you to go with me to the moon  
Riding on a darling rose that bloomed in a dark room...  
Our love will be magical and cause a million sparks to fly  
Drifting away, we would be...  
Somewhere lost...  
Beyond the skies...  
Why  
Tell me why people say that true love will never die  
It's because of people like you and I  
You being the love of my life  
Potentially my wife  
It's scary to think about  
But I'm willing to make this sacrifice  
I'll sacrifice my heart  
After my heart will come my soul  
Let's just go to a place where our love will never grow old  
A place where the stars will never go dull  
A place where your eyes will glow like the moon  
A place where your smile will shine like the sun  
A place where the flowers continuously bloom  
So let's...  
Find a place of our  
Why should we waste any time  
Maybe in this place I'll stop dreaming  
I'll see that you are real  
And finally you will be mine...  
.....

*Derrick McKenzie, Jr. is currently an active duty Marine stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC. A Birmingham, AL native, he won second place in the 2012 WORDUP Poetry Slam Competition sponsored by Birmingham Public Library.*

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## THE ART OF FLOOR-TO-CEILING IMAGINEERING

Jim Reed

Jimmy Three is lying flat on his back in the living room of his family home. He is staring at the hard-plaster ceiling and contemplating the cracks that zigzag here and there, going nowhere in particular. Jimmy Three is just a kid, back here in the 1950's when this scene is taking place. Alone in the asbestos-shingled bungalow he shares with two parents, two sisters, two brothers, he is enjoying the silence of the moment and doing what he does best: ruminating and cogitating and fantasizing and thinking real hard.

Right now, Jimmy Three is wondering where his inspirations are buried. Over the years, he has hidden things so that he or somebody might find these things and gleefully re-experience them someday. For instance, there is a note squirreled away between the insulation and roofing in the back of the house, and he can no longer get to the note. He has no idea what this message to himself says, because it has been so long since he hid it there during construction of the room.

In the back yard is another secreted treasure—a small box with important but now forgotten objects that he wants to dig up. However, he is unable to locate the spot because the secret map to this burial site is also missing.

Jimmy Three blinks and stares harder at the ceiling, massaging ideas and poems and stories in his head but not yet being brave enough to set them down on paper. These compositions will float and flourish for decades until the day comes when he will regurgitate them in the form of columns and books and blasts and blogs and podcasts. Some will remain hidden. Some will inspire others. Some will simply exist.

Finally, life intervenes and motivates Jimmy Three to arise from the floor, dust himself off, grab a snack, pocket a pad of writing paper and a pencil, and leave the house before any family members return. They might not understand the significance of his lying afloat and appearing to be doing not a thing in the world. Another hidden note: Jimmy Three knows that these few minutes have been busy and activity-filled and reanimating for him. He knows, too, that those in the family who are not imagineers will think him idle. But he also is aware that there are fellow dreamers among them who will someday blossom and expose their hidden treasures to appreciators, too. Appreciators who will have not a clue as to how much floor-time goes into molding a work of art into something visible or audible

.....

*Jim Reed writes and ruminates at the Museum of Fond Memories in Birmingham, AL*  
**[www.jimreedbooks.com](http://www.jimreedbooks.com)**

## THE PECAN TREE

Danny P. Barbare

Walking on crackling flowers  
like paper shell stars  
covered with dew  
the moon falling up like a thump  
pecan limbs gray like rain  
hail rough like bark  
leaves like midnight sound.  
The week in the life of a tree.

.....

*Danny P. Barbare lives in Greenville, SC, where he works as a janitor at a local YMCA.  
He loves long walks and visiting the lowlands of South Carolina and the Blue Ridge  
Mountains of North Carolina.*

“I’m not going anywhere. I’ve already  
been where I’m going.”

—Jim Reed

## THE PROMISE

James Armstrong

The Queen of the Faeries rose up out of the sea and came to the knight.

“I love you,” she said. “Come, live with me, and I shall be your bride.”

The knight was enchanted by her sparkling eyes and readily agreed.

“But how will I know,” asked the Queen, “that you really love me? How will I know you won’t forsake me when you tire of Faerie ways, and return to the life you led before?”

“Test me,” said the knight. “Ask anything of me, and I shall do it.”

“Go back to your lands,” said the Faerie Queen. “Burn your fields. Tear down your castle so that not one stone remains on another. Then, come to the edge of the sea, and I shall return to take you away.”

The knight went back to his ancestral lands. He burned his fields and set torch to his storehouses of grain. Then he tore down his castle so that not one stone remained upon another. When the knight had done all this, he came to the edge of the sea, and waited... and waited... and waited....

.....

*James Armstrong is a New York-based writer whose stories have appeared in Concho River Review, The Chaffey Review, 34th Parallel, The Main Street Rag, Iconoclast, and The Rockford Review. His plays have been published in Arts & Letters, Yemassee, and The Best American Short Plays: 2012-2013.*  
**armstrongwrites@gmail.com**

*“Even massive empires begin with just a pair of hands.”*

—Jeremy Sorese

## HE MADE IT FARTHER

Charles K. Firmage

Pa gave me the news, Billy Joe fell at Verdun  
Before most Americans entered the war.  
Billy Joe was always a dreamer, he said,  
“Working at the mill, making  
cotton cloth for rich mill owners isn’t my dream.”  
Our high school friend, John Henry, drove  
his daddy’s 1913 Renault limousine, imported  
all the way from Paris, France, with leather seats  
and wooden running boards, while we walked home,  
barefoot and dirty, from another day at the mill.  
John Henry’s papa sent him to Atlanta to college,  
while my pa sent me to chop the cotton, or to work  
in the tobacco fields after my shift was over.  
But Billy Joe was a dreamer. He’d listen  
to the crickets chirp as we sat on a fence  
at the edge of a corn field. “Must be something  
more to life than working at the mill. A little  
fishing in the creek, hunting cottontails, begging  
for a nickel for the show. There’s lights out there,  
Bobby, brighter than Birmingham on a Saturday night,  
and I’m gonna see ‘em all!” Then soon as the fighting  
in Europe broke out, Billy Joe hopped a freighter,  
joined the Italian army, and made it to France.  
He even sent me a postcard from Paris. There’s  
a yellow photograph of nine of us back in 1910,  
dirty and sweaty, standing outside the mill.  
The town’s bigger now, and most of us have cars,  
families, and some even have great-grandchildren.

The mill's gone, what's left is now rust, and a few  
of us have died and turned to dust. Billy Joe  
still lives in France with others who fought  
in World War One, far away from cotton fields and mills,  
and whippoorwills that call in the night.  
Billy Joe left the mill; he made it farther  
than the rest of us.

.....

*Charles K. Firmage is a lyricist who writes Blues, Gospel, and Country songs. He is a member of ASCAP and belongs to poetry societies in Alabama, Arizona, Kentucky, Massachusetts and other states. His poems have been published in England (Moorside), Sandcutters (Arizona), Tennessee Poetry Journal, Long River Run (Connecticut), and Pegasus (Kentucky).*

*“Everywhere I have sought rest and found it  
not except sitting apart in a nook with a  
little book.”*

—Thomas Kempis



## I LOVE RED

Maud Belser  
Acrylic on Canvas  
15" x 30"

*Maud Corier-Belser is a native of Geneva, Switzerland, and long-time Birmingham, AL resident. She is a self-taught artist whose works in pencil, assemblage, collage, watercolor, oil, and acrylic are collected by many. She is the illustrator of Grace and Marie's Little Farm on the Hill by Birmingham writer Leah Webb.*

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## RABBIT

Andy Plattner

The man lived in a shotgun house on a bluff that looked out to a gentle bend of the Mississippi. One Saturday morning in the spring of 1967, he walked out to get his newspaper and noticed a run-over rabbit near his mailbox. He went to his tool shed to get a shovel, headed back out to road. The blood looked bright on the asphalt.

In the distance, down on the levee he noticed a black Cadillac driving on the slender dirt road atop its crest. The car stopped and when a back door opened, the man recognized the figure there as Elvis Presley. The man had stopped a few steps from the rabbit; he began to swing the shovel over his head in excitement. Presley stood by the car, didn't notice. He might've been interested in the bridge under construction further down the river. He was dressed in a royal blue suit and black boots. In another minute, he got back into his ride.

The trail of dust along the levee was slow to dissipate after the Cadillac was gone. The man was a hunter, but when he looked at the rabbit on the section of highway in front of his station the shovel now felt strange in his hands. He was trembling. He wondered, was it too late to change his own life? The rabbit's fur was beige, whiter near the paws. The man didn't need a shovel; he tossed that aside and picked up the rabbit with his hands, felt the fur and innards.

A car approached, a light-green, slow-moving Falcon, the driver old stone-faced Betsy Hopkins. She rolled by him like he wasn't there. She could've been heading for an emergency, her driving was always the same. He carried the rabbit to the deep grass on the far side of the road, placed it where birds and insects could have it. He stood across the road, considered his mailbox and his own house. His hands seemed to be itching.

The man wanted to talk about what he'd seen. His ex would use the sighting on the levee as a way to ridicule him; his daughter was always saying how she had a better life now as a librarian in Charlotte. He could have a beer with Clint and Odell but they'd gone fishing in Greenwood for the weekend.

The next morning, the Vicksburg Post reported Presley had been sighted by multiple residents and when contacted, his business manager reported that the singer had simply "wanted to get a look at that part of the river." It was not so far from where he'd grown up.

The man read the newspaper story, but by then he already knew he wasn't going to tell a soul about what had happened to him. He decided that when he was on his deathbed, he wanted his very last thought to be of Presley standing on that levee. At the very end, the man wanted to have the feeling that his own life still could change.

Twenty-six years later, the man was dying of cancer. He wasn't thinking about Elvis Presley. He'd become increasingly terrified with the knowledge his own life was about to end. Now that he was close to the end he could sense there would be nothing beyond it. His understanding and his terror consumed him. He had to be sedated because his cries frightened other people on the same floor of the hospice. Near the very end, he was in agony. At the end, it stopped.

.....

*Andy Plattner's Terminal was recently awarded the Faulkner Society's gold medal novella for 2016. He has also published stories in The Southern Review, New World Writing and Sewanee Review. He lives in Atlanta and teaches fiction writing at Kennesaw State and Emory universities. [Aplattne@kennesaw.edu](mailto:Aplattne@kennesaw.edu)*



*Dargan Dodd is a native Texan, an amateur writer, and a photographer. Previous work has been featured in Birmingham Arts Journal, on his mom's refrigerator and as lining to the birdcages at various PetSmart locations. [dargandodd@gmail.com](mailto:dargandodd@gmail.com)*

## THE RING AND THE GYPSY

Stephen R. Edmondson - 2015 Hackney Literary Awards: 2nd Place, State Story

I was on a week of rest and rehabilitation in the jewel of Spain, Granada. I needed a year. It was a year of the era we try to forget and years didn't matter as much then, when I had more or perhaps less of them to worry about than now. I was sitting under an umbrella that was shading my table from the late afternoon sun. The little Hotel Savoy and its wee courtyard sat at the foot of the hill below and almost in the shadow of the Alhambra. Tomorrow I would tour it. It has its ghosts, I have mine. Tonight I will chase my ghosts with wine until they fade away. And maybe tomorrow they won't come back. Tonight, the dark and deserted narrow street will invite reality and fantasy to merge.

If this is peace and there is no fighting, where am I on R&R from today? In 1970 it was from bombings and raids across a border we hadn't crossed officially. Reality was hard to see: flashes in the night, marked reconnaissance photos, and idle talk of what might have been.

Is this a fragment of my imagination? Not a figment, but a bit of something coming back? Which is my reality? I look at the ring, the one bit that ties it together, smile, and walk on. I have to tell you, and you separate the fantasy from the reality. The line goes away sometimes.

I was jaded, tough. Nothing scared me anymore. That's brave talk for being scared so many times so badly that I didn't understand fear anymore. The girl back home had tired of waiting and although she hadn't said so, it was real clear from the tenor of her letters. Topics had changed as had the letter frequency. It didn't matter. When you have adrenaline for breakfast and consider dying before dusk, movie-type love seems so distant. You live for the moment, not the morrow.

Sangria is a friendly Spanish drink. A large pitcher of red wine, fruit juices, slices of fruits. Late summer afternoon brings beautiful clear vistas to Granada, softened by the sun and pitchers of the soft sangria. A cool breeze has sent a shiver up my spine. More wine to warm my soul and keep the demons at bay. I want to forget the bombs. I don't want to see the end of their trail any more than I want to see the end of mine. A local comes by

(Continued on Page 44)



## BAGLIONI E PALACE

Jayme Barr Nobles  
Collage on Canvas  
9" x 12"

*A Missouri native, Jayme Barr Nobles, studied art at San Francisco State University and the California College of Arts and Crafts. She lives to create in Clearwater, FL.*  
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and wants to make me a good deal on bullfight tickets. The thought is abhorrent to me in the warmth and safety of this small sidewalk court.

I call for another pitcher of sangria. The proprietor obliges. I like him. As I checked in, he very politely advised me that it would be required that I take two meals daily at the hotel, as it was small and could not survive without guest patronage of the restaurant. It proved to be a convenient bargain.

In my reverie, revealed by soft sunshine and sanguine sangria, I relaxed almost, for the first time in months. The Moors had been gone from the Alhambra for a long time and I saw no evidence of anything else to harm me. I wanted no woman friend, no companion to talk to. I sought no entertainment. I wanted to go nowhere, to do nothing. I would sit in the courtyard and hold this moment. I would hope for yesterday to die and for tomorrow to be unseen.

My first clue of an impending drama was distant singing. Perhaps it caught my attention because it was in a familiar language, yet in a foreign country. Or was it a familiar country, a foreign language? I didn't really think on what I was hearing. Looking across the courtyard, across the tiny street, I saw a tiny alley that came down and joined the street almost in front of me. Wine softens the senses, yet in the late afternoon shadows in the alley, I saw a small tyke tripping down the way. I thought of home and someone else. I thought of myself as a boy, following behind my father as he plowed the cool gray dirt of our Alabama farm. Maybe the tyke and I shared something, something in my past or in his future.

The singing turned my thoughts back up the street. What the hell is this cacophony? I see a tiny Spanish SEAT auto, crammed with possibly five or six GI's, careening down the winding street. Hands out windows held huge bottles. I can't even recognize what they are singing. They are even drunker than I. They have their rest and rehabilitation to think of also. So many fine ugly Americans in this time. I looked away in derision, and in shame.

The tyke is continuing on down the alley toward me. He is alone, maybe two years old. He is chubby, with black curly hair and very black eyes, olive skin, bright red and green clothes. He is chortling, waving his hands and has a happy face turned to me. Why? Why, I wonder? And where is your mama? Don't come to me for me to take care of you. I cannot handle one more problem. I am dancing on the edge now and fear losing balance. Stay away, boy. Stay away from my world. Enjoy the bliss of your Gypsy ignorance!

The SEAT comes closer, and louder. I consider throwing my nearly empty pitcher at them if they pass close enough. Maybe I would, but I like my hotel proprietor, I say to myself I won't cause him trouble. The street is only two or three feet wider than the tiny car, and curves within scant feet of where I sit. During siesta, the pleasant and polite Spanish leave the street quiet and peaceful. I am resenting this interruption by my own people.

I look back at the little boy; the alley, all of four feet wide, ending just across the street from where I sit. He has spied me and acts as if he knows me. He is waving at me it seems. I look behind me and see no one there. "Brat," I say to myself, "how will I get rid of you?" Then an electric spiked through my sodden brain, "My God, they're going to do it for me." The careening car in about three seconds would pass in front of me just as the boy darts from the alley. They couldn't see each other and I could. They'll wipe him out just as surely as if he stepped on a Claymore mine.

A vision passed through my mind of one more death to witness, here where I came to escape. Am I to die again? The child? Why, why, why? And as my terrible tortured psyche predicted his death, a primordial force yanked me from my recline and threw me toward the little boy. I knocked him back in the alley with a sloppy block as the little auto knocked me against the whitewashed wall. I hurt, and things became peaceful and dark, then beautifully light and I relaxed. There was no pain.

"I'm dead," I thought, "but this is all right."

As in a piercing vision, I saw the tyke in the arms of an elder. I remember smiling to myself, "I can live with this, if this is death, and I went out in style, and the boy and his grandfather are together in life. Better than getting blown out of the sky by an unseen missile." Still, I longed for the God of my childhood, and to see my mother again.

I wasn't dead after all. I had been brought back across the street to the courtyard, propped up, and wiped clean. My head bouncing off the wall had knocked me silly for a bit. A little stream of blood flowed from my head and dripped on my shirt. My friend the proprietor huddled over me with more welcome sangria. It appeared I would be all right. The car had kept going, never noticing the minute drama that they and I had held in center stage for a moment. It was just as well; justice was about to be done.

As my head cleared and the anxious Spanish voices subsided at my arrival back into consciousness, I saw a man kneeling at my feet. I believed him to be the man I had seen holding the child in my dream of death. He was talking fervently, all the while looking up at me and then pressing his forehead to my feet. His Spanish didn't seem to be the same as the bit of the language that I

know, yet his appeal was genuine. I look about for help and the proprietor understands.

He kneels to interpret. "I am the prince of many families of Gypsies. People know and wonder at my travels, my wives, my horses, my jewels. My life is talked about wherever Gypsies stop and sleep and eat around the fire. I have no name to you because we are of the same name now. Our lives met once before, long ago, and no one knew. Our God and your God, being the same, have brought us together again tonight in this city. You will go from this city and you will learn many things and forget many things, but you will never forget this moment of this night. I will give you my blessing for saving my grandson, the prince, to follow you, and I seal this blessing with this ring." He pulled the ring from his finger, held it to his heart, his forehead, and then kissed it.

"For many, many generations in my family," he said. "The red stones and old gold have meanings that will come to you in time. Hold this ring to your heart, close and always, and you will know and see into the hearts of good people." He pressed the ring on my finger and rose after this and held me by the shoulders. He was perhaps 70, with flowing locks of silver and black curly hair. Nearly a foot shorter than me, he weighed as much. His clothes were leather with various trim in red and black. Silver on buckles, buttons, arms and neck. Dark skin, deep dark eyes.

I thought to myself, a classic Romany from the caves on the forbidden side of the city. Tears streamed down his face as he pulled me close and kissed my cheeks. My interpreter-proprietor looked to me, but then the Gypsy raised his hand as if to say no, and spoke a few words to my interpreter. Then he picked up the Gypsy child, pressed the child's hand to my cheek, pulled the child back to himself, gave a bow, and was gone in the dusky shadows.

I looked at my hand, at the ring. I looked at my interpreter, and I looked where the old man and the child had disappeared. I sat down and felt my head.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"It cannot be told but is the blessing of a Romany prince. He sends you on your way as a fellow traveler, a prince."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

He shook his head as if in trepidation, and scurried away. He wasn't there the next day, and I didn't see him again.

For forty-five years I have worn the ring. I have read a bit about the Romanies and found out that most every father or grandfather considers himself a patriarch and prince. And it is said most of their jewelry, if not

stolen, is made in instant antique factories for selling to gullible tourists. And some say the Gypsy blessing is a thanks for sending a sucker their way.

Gypsies believe that one of theirs was to the right of Jesus on the cross, and that Jesus gave the Gypsy thief forgiveness forever, to earn money from the gullible and the greedy. A Gypsy will tell you this earnestly.

“It is true, read it in the Bible!”

Gypsies don’t read the Bible or anything else, so they are innocent in their belief. But my ring is different. I don’t venture out without it for fear of being without its protection. Sometimes when someone sees it and mentions it I can suddenly see into their hearts, and feel their problems. And if I can touch their hands, I can touch their hearts. And I remember the small warm palm being held to my cheek, and I can feel it even now.

Just a few years ago, with wife and son now, I made it back to Granada. Without playing my hand I wanted to go by the little Hotel Savoy after the obligatory visit to the Alhambra. The hotel was still there, but I wasn’t sure of the proprietor. My family and I rested, then went down to the courtyard and then on to walk about the town. Out on the street a dark young man came up to us.

“Please sir, may I be your guide for the evening? I will take you places you will never see with others, and my only charge is what you feel I have been worth.”

I had fallen for this easy sales pitch before abroad, being led to family shops and then being charged for a ride back to known quarters. But, my wife and son were intrigued so we accepted. For hours we toured homes, churches, museums, shops, shrines. We were told tales of intrigue, of history, some beyond belief. We visited a closed portion of the Alhambra, pausing for a story. We rode to the Gypsy caves in the mountainside and were rested with strange drinks, being warmly welcomed. My wife thought we were expected. We were taken near midnight to a family home for dinner, and made to feel we were part of the Arabian nights. I couldn’t believe his hospitality. This was the night of a lifetime. My wife kept looking at me fearfully, “What is this ever going to cost?” I kept thinking I would pay anything for such a wonderful night.

Finally we knew the night had to end and I told my guide that we must go, tomorrow was a big day and we were all tired. He summoned a cab and rode back to the hotel with us. I felt close to him, for he had been so proud of all he had shown us, as if he wanted us not only to see and appreciate, but to understand. I remembered a similar guide at Michelangelo’s home, so proud,



so sincere. We sent the family up to the room, and he dismissed the cab. No fare was mentioned to the driver; he just left.

I turned to my guide, my friend. "How can I ever pay you for such a memorable evening for me and my family? What do I owe you?" I felt so pedestrian in my offer and I felt strangely cheapened by offering to pay. "Why is this," I thought. Suddenly, he gave me a quick hug, touched my cheek with the tips of his fingers, then grasped my hand, touched the ring with both hands and then to his lips and said, "Thank you, my brother, my prince." And he was gone. I stood there alone a long moment, not wanting to break the spell that seemed about me. How could this be?

I have no answer for you. The answer in my heart I cannot speak to you. But if there is good in your heart, I will know you. Touch my ring and I will tell you.

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*Steve Edmondson of Homewood, AL, writes about characters in his life, past and present, who represent values that may be slipping away: the handshake contract, a promise that endures, lending a hand to the lesser, people who take time to be kind. A collection of his stories has recently been published, TO LIVE AND DIE IN ALABAMA. [edmondsonstephen@bellsouth.net](mailto:edmondsonstephen@bellsouth.net)*

*"Our future is shaped by our past...so be very careful what you do in your past."*

—Ziggy



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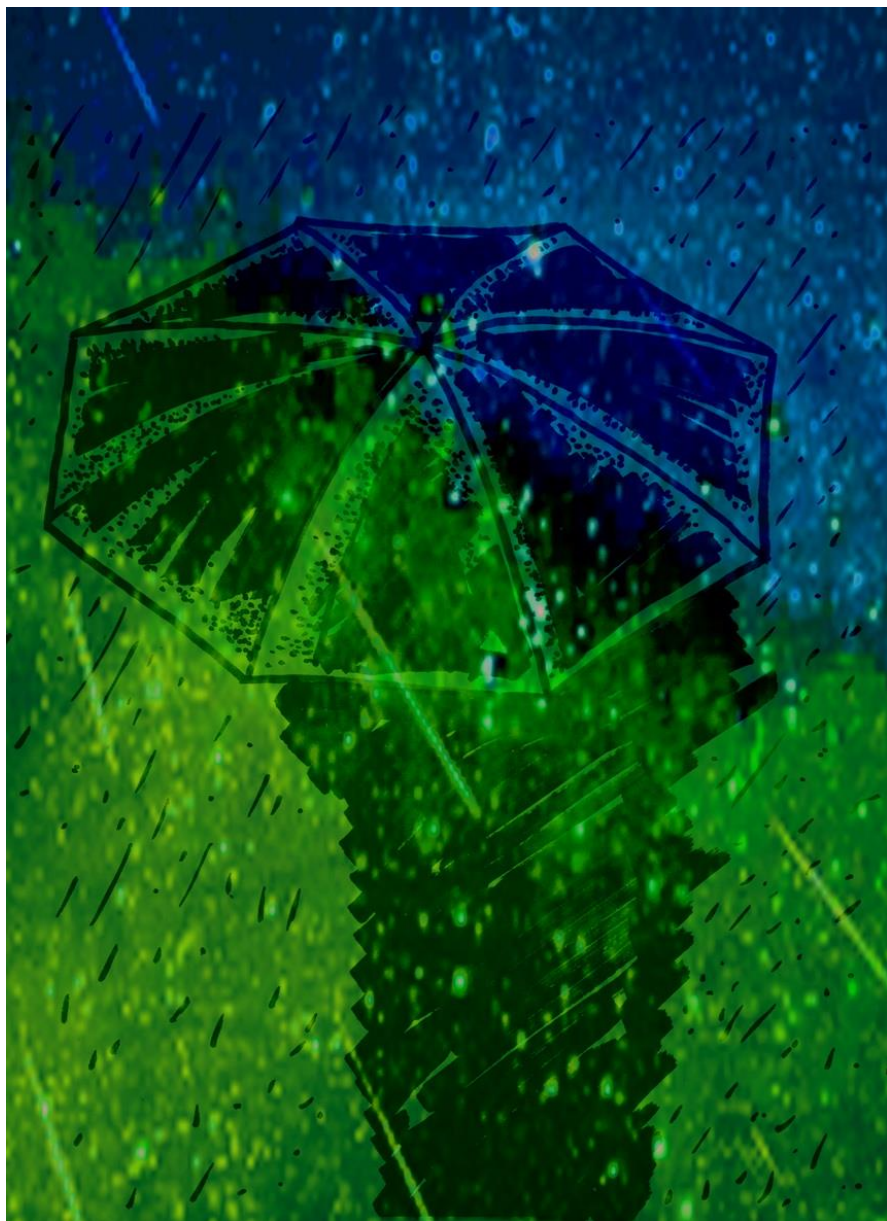
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