

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 14 Issue 1



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\$5.00

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Front Cover: MDTOWN RUSH – Erin Ashley - 24" X 36" Acrylic on Canvas - *Erin Ashley is a self-taught artist whose pieces are informed by layers of chipped paint, rusted metals and old buildings. Her work has been widely published in home decor and art magazines. She lives in Florida.* www.erinashleyart.com

Back Cover: CALLING THE BIRDS – Gerberg Garmann – 24" x 36"

Acrylic & Charcoal on Canvas – *Gerberg Garmann is a painter, poet, and composer. Her multilingual poetry and paintings have been published around the world. 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.*

SHAWERMA, ARGEELEH, AND BARGESE

Karim Shamsi-Balsa

My Syria is crying

My Syria is dying

Does anyone care?

Little children have nothing

Daddies and mommies gone

Memories are bombed out

Little children have new reminiscences

Not of dinosaurs and trucks and toys

Not of soft hands on their backs at night

Not of hush little baby don't you cry

But of death and gloom

Of blood and tears

Everyone is gone in my Syria

Who will grill the *Shawerma*?

Who will smoke the *Argeeleh*?

Who will play *Bargeese*?

There are plenty of dead ghosts

Roaming the empty streets

Tripping on bomb craters

Shawerma smells like burned flesh

Argeeleh gurgles with blood

Bargeese pieces are shrapnel

In my weary flesh

They took my peace

They took my joy

My love and my freedom

They tried to take my soul

And gave me tears

Then they gave me bullets

To put in my gun

And kill myself

Who will bury me?

.....

*Karim Shamsi-Basha is an award-winning photographer and writer. Born in Damascus, Syria in 1965, he immigrated to the US in 1984. He has written and photographed for publications including National Geographic Traveller, Sports Illustrated, People, Time, Southern Living, The Alabama News Center and the Birmingham News/al.com and others. He's now working with agent Mark Gottlieb on his novel, *Despite the Thorns*. **karimshamsibasha@gmail.com***

*“I could never contemplate suicide.
I have so many houseplants.”*

—Christopher Davis

BIRTH OR THE EXQUISITE SOUND OF ONE HAND FALLING OFF A TURNIP TRUCK

S. T. Gulik

Over the hill and down a bit they came upon a flat, circular clearing, which was empty except for two small figures standing side by side directly in the center. The only flora in the circle was a tall thin grass, which gave off an azure glow, illuminating the clearing with dusky electricity. Wind spiraled slowly around the figures, making rings in the ankle-tickling grass.

“Max, allow me to introduce you to the twins,” Guido said with a bombastic gesture. His boastful grin turned down in disappointment when he saw that Max was bored as ever.

“You should probably go alone. I’ll keep an eye on Cheeky.”

Cheeky growled at Guido. He shot Max a ‘be careful’ look and hunkered down at his feet.

Max offered a reassuring smile and tromped toward the figures that stood with quiet disinterest in the eye of the storm. As he approached with a cool yet cautious swagger, the twins’ features became more pronounced. The girl’s high, white pigtails framed pallid flesh, stretched too tight across her sharp Germanic features. Her mouth was a little too small, her lips too dark, but nothing was so peculiar as the absence of eyes. High cheekbones framed a fleshy vortex the size of a fist. The girl, face swirling like peach taffy, stood motionless in her dainty strawberry-print dress as he drew closer.

From a distance, the boy’s appearance was relatively normal. He shared the taut Germanic qualities of his sister, standing almost at attention in his little blue shorts and suspenders. Though unusually severe, the children somehow leapfrogged the totalitarianism of Hitler youths and instead gave the impression of immutable purpose. They showed no signs of acknowledgement as he approached other than the boy’s tracking him with an unpleasantly intense gaze.

Nodding politely, he closed the gap with his hands clasped behind his back. “Hello, my name is Max. What’s yours?”

The children remained motionless and silent, but the boy’s eyes took on a look of snide amusement. Max had accidentally used the adults-talking-to-kids voice despite being unsure whether they were children at all. For all he knew they were six thousand years old. He reverted to his usual strategy of blunt sarcasm.

He looked the boy directly in the eye and continued, "I'm a little delirious so let me jump right in. Everybody seems to know more about what's happening to me than I do. I have some kind of inflamed destiny thing and I keep getting assaulted by Night Noodles who, as I understand it, aren't going away any time soon. So please answer me this one question. What the hell?"

"That is not a valid question," said the children in perfect unison. Their voice was small and cold like an early AI voice box sewn inside a dead cat. Max was not impervious to creepiness after all.

Shivering visibly, Max rephrased the question. "Just tell me what I need to know."

Again, they spoke in unison. "Come into us, that we might taste your soul."

The girl's whirlpool spread, swallowing her nose. It spun faster, generating a powerful suction, threatening to draw him in. He braced himself against the rising wind and let out a small gasp as he noticed the boy had little whirlpools where his ears should be. He cocked his head to the left and Max was no longer able maintain his footing. He instinctually thrust his hands forward and found himself elbow deep in the girl. The boy's auditory orifice was smaller and tighter, only sucking his hand to the thumb, which was bent painfully back and groping for leverage.

On the verge of panic, Max struggled unsuccessfully to free himself as the wind, now full of brush and inconsequential life, whipped like razors through his hair. It was only due to his close proximity that he was able to hear them chanting over the roar of the tempest, "Come into us."

The whirlpools slowed and loosened their grip. When he was finally free, he stepped back and quickly took inventory of his anatomy.

"What the hell was that?"

The boy answered alone this time, as the girl's swirl had swallowed her mouth, "You wanted us to tell you what you need to know. To do that, we must taste your soul. Otherwise we would not be able to find the true question, let alone the answer."

"So, what's the deal?"

"The deal is coming."

.....

*S.T. Gulik writes absurdist fiction in Birmingham, AL. This is an excerpt from his new novel. **fnord33@gmail.com***

ADIRONDACK CHAIRS, A PAIR

Joy Godsey

Slatted seats slant
 at impossibly sharp angles
 butts cozy up in perfect comfort
Arms broaden at ends like
 short canoe paddles
 accommodating arms, legs, drinks,
 plates of barbecue
Wooden legs are buried in autumn leaves
Chinks and gaps stockpile dirt and grit

The pair is
 slick after rains
 green with winter mildew
 placed differently daily
 requiring whitewash each spring
 as old as a marriage
 as new as each dawn
 as enduring as the western sunset
 as common as crabgrass
 as endearing as a mountain lodge

And provides extensive views of
 tomato plants, summer afternoons,
 children riding bikes, ponies behind fences,
 fallow fields, a silent country road,
 the river beyond, and
 dreams of what's to come.

.....

Joy Godsey pursues photography, painting, and pastels as an avocation. She was once a professional artist/ceramicist and owned Hand-Crafted Tiles in Birmingham. There are over 700 residential and commercial installations of Joy's hand-painted and hand-made ceramic tiles in Alabama and across the US. Since 2011, Joy has provided graphic designs for Cracker Barrel Old Country Store tote bags. jgodsey@me.com



DREAM

Ceramic
Alan Burch

Alan Burch is a ceramic artist in Florence, AL. His work focuses on wheelthrown traditional forms with a modern approach to surface decoration and construction. Alan earned a B.F.A. degree from University of North Alabama in ceramics, and though he has lived most of his life in Texas he considers himself an Alabamian because of the formative years spent here. abnxs@bellsouth.net

ROOMIE-ZOOMIES FOREVER

Sylvia Weiss Sinclair

We have been friends forever, Roomie-Zoomie and I. Thrown together as roommates in 1966, in a dorm room at the University of California known for being a party school. We were so different; we had nothing in common, except this was our first year at the university and we knew no one. Roomie-Zoomie Lisa was 19 years old, petite, shapely and blonde, worldly and serious. She graduated with straight A's from a private high school in Chile, spoke fluent Spanish, and loved to read. Lisa was an army brat, whose strict Marine Sargent father relocated his family with him every two years. She was always in vogue, setting trends for her two younger sisters, wearing the latest mini-skirts and Cleopatra eyes. And shoes; she had shoes in every color and shape. She had a tiny foot to show off the latest styles.

I was 20 years old, tall, thin, and redheaded, ready to be wild and crazy, but extremely naïve. It was my first time to live away the home. I transferred with a C+ average from a community college in Los Angeles. I wasn't a brainiac, but I knew how to study for tests and made good grades in math and science. My two older brothers laughed at my meager attempts at fashion. My size ten foot only fit into sneakers and the only make up I could apply with any expertise was lipstick.

We were the oddballs, but desperate to fit into the whole dorm scene. Fate stepped in as the semester wore on. We meshed together amid making buttered popcorn and chicken soup at midnight, brewing red wine out of little bottles of Welch's grape juice, smoking *Tiparillo* cigars at frat parties, staying out way too late, and studying all night for final exams.

We remained steadfast friends through marriages, children, divorces, remarriages, and deaths of parents and spouses.

Fast forward fifty years. I am retired, living in a little cottage in Solana Beach. Roomie-Zoomie is living in a loft in New York City. It is a sweltering, hot day in August, even for Southern California. My sixteen-year-old granddaughter, Nikki, is spending the summer with me. This summer's creative project is jewelry making. We have all the silver wire and tiny colored crystalline beads spread over my oak draw-leaf table. I show Nikki how to carefully pick up an aqua Swarovski crystal with tweezers and tread silver wire through the opening of the bead. Then

holding the wire chain-nose pliers, wrap the wire into loops to get the design for the earrings.

“Grandma, this is really hard to do,” Nikki says looking up from her masterpiece of twisted wire and bright blue beads. She puts the earrings down carefully and lifts the glass of frosty tart lemonade to her lips, the ice tinkling against the glass as she finishes it off and wipes her lips.

“Practice makes perfect, Nikki. You will get it, just take your time,” I reassure her.

“Hey Grandma, the mail is here. Maybe there’s a letter from my mom,” Nikki says excitedly.

“I’ll go get it.” She runs out the front door, letting it slam behind her. Opening the mailbox wrapped in climbing fragrant sweet peas of blues and purples, she yells back to me, “Grandma, you got a letter. It’s from New York. Who do you know from New York, Grandma?”

There is only one person I know in New York, and that is Roomie-Zoomie, my old college roommate. She has more money than God from writing a series of young teenage books and lives comfortably in the trendy part of Manhattan in a large loft above 5th Avenue. But this letter has a different return address. In fact, the printed return address on the envelope reads, “Tranquil Gardens”. Puzzled, I ran my finger under the flap of the envelope and pulled out the lined paper letter. Unfolding the letter written in red crayon, I read, “HELP ME! I am being held captive against my will. Come save me, Roomie-Zoomie, you are my only hope.” I look up from the letter and stare at Nikki.

“Wasn’t that ‘...you’re my only hope’ from Star Wars?” Nikki asks staring back at me.

“Well, you know, Roomie-Zoomie was always dramatic,” I reply. “But still, maybe I should call this place and talk to her and hear what’s happening.

Actually, I haven’t talked to Roomie-Zoomie for quite a while. But why is she in this Tranquil Gardens place? I thought she has her own place in New York.”

“Yes,” Nikki prods, “call her.”

“Yes, of course.” I said.

I picked up the phone and called information for the phone number of Tranquil Gardens.

“There is no such number,” the operator replies. “Are you sure you have the correct spelling? I’m sorry. We have no listing for Tranquil Gardens,” the operator replied again.

Again, I stare at Nikki and Nikki stares back.

“Roomie-Zoomie’s in trouble,” I whisper to Nikki barely audible. I feel the hair rise on the back of my neck.

Just then I heard my cell phone ring. “Hello?” I answered after two rings.

“Hi, Stella?” the voice on the other end of the phone says. “This is Alice Sterling, Lisa Ewing’s daughter. Have you heard from my mother lately? She’s disappeared...”

“Alice, do you know of a place called “Tranquil Gardens?”

“Tranquil Gardens? Yes, it’s a cemetery on the lower east side.”

“Alice... that’s where you’ll find her, or what is left of her....Sorry.”

.....

Sylvia Weiss Sinclair writes in Bay Minette, AL. sylsinclair@gmail.com

*“The books I buy I like to read. The books
I read I like to buy.”*

—Thomas Hutchinson

BIRDS BECAMES HYMNS OF SMOKE

Daniel Edward Moore

If you think adding flesh to thought
will brighten memory's musty recollection

of foliage failing to protect what love couldn't,
colliding one morning with fumes of regret,

every bloom choking in the vase of his throat,
every light twisted in the cracks of his face

resting in the car seat's lap, then I could
drive home in the car you don't see:

a blue-eyed interruption, drooling and dazzled
by hands that changed tires the way women change men

after deciding to say something quiet
between songs only the birds can sing

after turning their heads from the smoke.
When he added flesh to thought everything disappeared:

blooms became fumes, light became leather, women traded
screams for wings as birds became hymns of smoke.

.....

Daniel Edward Moore lives in Washington on Whidbey Island. His recent book, "Confessions of a Pentecostal Buddhist," can be found on Amazon. His work has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His writings have been widely published.

danieledwardmoore.com

I DREAM IN ENVY

A.J. Huffman

of eyes that can truly close
to the ghosts of every night,
that do not count sheep
or the number of ticks before every tock,
that take comfort in nothing
but the embrace of pillows
as midnight plays a commemorative dirge
they were never meant to hear.

.....

A.J. Huffman has published many poetry books and is a frequent nominee for distinguished literary prizes. She was founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press.
www.kindofahurricanepress.com

*“Every person has a scheme that
will not work.”*

—Howe’s Law

WRITER'S BLOCK

Jonathan Harris

He sat in the corner of a small, rented room in front of a tiny roll-top desk with shades of neon masquerading as the color of night stuttering through the partially boarded window. The desk supported his elbows, a well-used Underwood, and a modestly filled glass. His elbows supported a weighted brow cupped by a pair of stiff, weathered hands. "Meat hooks", his parole officer would have called them. A bottle sat on one of the few level slats in the floor, immodestly empty. The middle of the room was lit by a single bulb dangling from a tangled noose of wires, animating shadows with its gentle sway.

The Underwood typewriter had seen better days and those days were clearly not in this dump. He had found it in the other corner of the room stuffed as far back under the bed as it could go. A pawn ticket was still wedged inside its carriage. Probably the remnants of some down and out writer looking to redeem his life's worth by pecking out the next great American novel in the slums. Or perhaps it had been used as a weapon of convenience then abandoned in hopes the truth would never be discovered.

"Bludgeoning by typewriter," he had hazily mused. One could only speculate. It would explain why several of the keys were missing, including the "Shift" and the "e". He noticed the absence of the latter when the muscle memory of his ring finger had been met with a sharp stabbing pain to its tip instead of the gentle *chunk* sound he had been expecting. Rather than musing over the irony of the finger involved, he quickly set out to retrain its memory using the closest alpha-numeric replacement.

"thx bxginning's xnd wastxd no timx to bxgin again," he slowly pecked, laboring against the stiff mechanics of a reluctant machine, *"as if to sxarch for thx original sin."*

But that was nearly a full bottle ago and now a droplet of condensation finished forming on the side of the empty glass...and ran down his cheek. Falling against the faded surface of the tiny roll-top desk in the corner of a small, rented room. Christening the writer's block.

.....

Jonathan Harris is a Birmingham artist, poet and sometimes writer of fiction, a lifetime stutterer and the eternal chaser of hopes and dreams. artistjharris@gmail.com



TWINKLE ORCHID IN GARDEN ROOM

Ben South

24" x 30"

Oil on Canvas

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. He lives in Cullman, AL. sthrnss@bellsouth.net

LITTLE ATLAS

Charlie Ritch

Do you sometimes feel the earth is standing on you?
That your feet are weary shoulders
and every task, every care, every reprimand
is your eternal burden?

There is a hero who will take it away.
That is not me. I am only Hercules, the trickster.
I will give it back and go on to my labors.
But let's think:

What would really happen if we break the myth
and just let the earth and sky fall? After all,
aren't we already plummeting through space like
a defiant comet?

And aren't we just one comet among many? Me, I'll send
a letter to the Lord of heaven, telling him I quit.
It was this work that brought the insanity to begin with.
Now I think straight.

Let's lay our burdens down—and our differences—
and stroll to the edge of the universe, like the gods
we are.

.....

Charlie Ritch lives in Birmingham, AL, with his wife and three daughters. He teaches humanities and rhetoric at the Westminster School and repairs old books on the side. He has degrees in philosophy and theology from Wheaton College.

critch@westminsterknights.org

THE DINING ROOM

Beth Tillman

It was 9:30 p.m. when I arrived at Hotel Borgo San Felice, a converted winery in the remote mountains of Tuscany. I stepped from the bus with my lone bag, and trudged up the dirt pathway to the entrance where I was greeted by a well-dressed, middle-aged man. He led me to a cramped room, with a single electrical light hanging from the bathroom ceiling and a single window open on the back wall. Once I placed my things on the bed, he spoke, in a dark accent, motioning first to me and then to the door, “For you—in dining room. This way.”

The dining room was in the cellar, down two flights of stairs through which orchestral music faintly echoed. On its white-washed walls, he was projecting a black-and-white horror film. As I entered, the woman in the film was running from a crazed man in a lab coat. To my dismay, the other diners remained comfortably seated, paying no mind to the unsettling projection behind them. Uneasily, I found my place at the table, and my host declared,

“Now, you eat!”

From a large bowl taken from behind the bar, he served a traditional penne pasta in red sauce, garnished with freshly chopped parsley. I nodded my head in what I hoped meant an understood *grazie*.

He walked back to his place at the bar, where he began slicing paper-thin pieces of pink prosciutto. As he maneuvered the knife, his gaze fixed upon me. I could feel his stare burning into my skin with every bite I tried to take. The other guests became more invisible, the film more disturbing, the music more haunting, the walls whiter, and the sauce redder. I became transfixed with fear—fear of this bizarre place and fear of this host who had taken an alarming interest in me. When I was sure he could not see, I slipped a fork into my pocket—for *protection*, I thought.

Dinner was finished leisurely, leaving plenty of time for my imagination to get the best of me. As my host cleared the tables, he approached my seat, and I was barely able to hide my wide, panicked eyes. I excused myself and rushed past him to my room where I lay awake for the rest of the night, clutching my fork like a scared little girl.

For breakfast the next day, I found myself in the dining room once more—exhausted, unshowered, and ready to get back on the road. To my relief, there seemed

to be no sign of my host, but I had my defensive utensil stowed just in case he appeared. The morning proved uneventful, and I wondered if the previous night had only been a bad dream—until I began to leave, up the stairs. From behind me, an unforgettably dark accent asked, “Do you have any further use for your fork, Beth?”

.....

*Beth Tillman is the pseudonym of an Auburn University at Montgomery (AL) undergraduate student. Behind closed doors, she’s an adventurer, an author, and an award-winning artist. **writebethtillman@yahoo.com***

MISUSED

Mike Wahl

Abused by my self-taught memories, I
refused to consider alternatives, and instead
accused those around me, innocent. Then,
bemused, they defied me, and never looked back.
Recused to my self-imposed prisoned room, there
infused with non-comprehension and foolish pride -

confused now by thoughtless interjections that were
excused by nothing less than my own ignorance, I became
amused to think that my trials were due to an imagination
overused.

.....

Mike Wahl is a poet of opportunity, grabbing concepts and phrases from observations in his rural northern Alabama surroundings, and from the intrigues of family, politics, and religion.

FOREPLAY AMONG THE COLORS

Richard Weaver

Blue yearns for orange
and green longs after red.
Perfumed blood

renounces the earth's
calloused touch.
A menaced whole

folding into itself
before rain's incessance
-- a lone bird recalling

the glistening white
and the haunted black
lifting out of stilled air

where mountains are the point
where color seizes darkness
and praise fails,

seeking the eye's
dark-side to hold,
or lingers in refrain.

Rich light quivering.
Each star an apostle,
a dilated moon.

.....

Richard Weaver writes from Baltimore, MD. This poem is part of a book-length series based in part on the art, writing, correspondence, and life of the German Expressionist painter Franz Marc (1880-1916), who co-founded the Blue Rider Movement. Other poems have appeared or are forthcoming in 2River and Clade Song.

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LOOKING FOR LOVE IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

Steve Slavin

Back in the 1950s, there was one clear dichotomy in the teenage social world-- “good girls” and “bad girls.” If you *did* it, you were a “bad girl.”

And guys? Nearly all of them *wanted* to “do it.” But few of them “got lucky.”

Johanna was a *very* good girl, but not really out of choice. Somewhat shy, she had a nice smile and an attractive figure. Still, by her eighteenth birthday, she had had only three dates. And as luck would have it, the boys were even shyer than *she* was.

Had she ever been kissed? Not really. The only guy who had ever tried was her friend’s fifty-year-old drunken uncle who accosted her at a bar mitzvah. She slapped him so hard, he spilled his drink all over himself. Then she heard his wife yell across the room, “Morris! *Again?*”

Her two best friends, Carmella and Eileen, were not a whole lot more experienced than she was. One evening, the three of them decided that it might be fun to go into the city and do a little bar-hopping. They had heard that a bar was a good place to meet guys. They went from bar to bar, but none of them even got into a conversation. The guys were either disinterested, or maybe too shy to talk to them.

Just before deciding to call it a night, they looked into the window of a dimly lit bar just off Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village.

“Look, Johanna, this place is full of gorgeous guys.”

Carmella was right! One guy was better looking than the next. They decided to give this place a shot before they took the subway back to Queens.

Music was blaring from the juke box. Elvis was singing, “Love me tender.” A guy came over to Johanna and asked her to dance.

Why *not*? He was quite handsome! His name was Michael.

He pulled her close. She could smell his aftershave lotion. She rested her head on his shoulder.

Where had this guy *been* all her life? Then she *felt* something pressing against her. Oh, my *God!* Could that be what she *thought* it was?

What should she do? Could *she* actually have this effect on a man? And such an *attractive* man? Michael could have *any* woman he wanted. So why did he pick *me*?

She decided to just go with the moment and enjoy it. Maybe *every* woman excited him. Maybe he was some kind of sex fiend.

She laughed to herself. The last way she would have ever described herself would have been as a “sex object.” Then she realized the song had ended. They just stood there, their arms around each other.

Another song came on, and they began to dance again. It was Elvis again, this time singing, “Don’t be cruel, to a heart that’s true.”

Elvis could actually sense her hopes, her fears. She wondered if Michael also could. She felt his erection growing and tried to imagine how big it could possibly get.

Now he was kissing her neck. She began to sigh. Michael knew exactly what he was doing. She couldn’t wait to see what he would do next.

A shock went right through her when she felt his tongue dip into her ear. It was all she to do to not scream out. Where had she *been* all these years?

She began to shudder as he went deeper into her ear – in and out, in and out. Then he switched to the other ear.

Soon, very slowly he moved his hands down her back, pausing every few seconds to rub, and finally reaching her butt.

What was he going to do *now*?

He did not make her wait. Placing one hand on each cheek, he began to very tenderly squeeze each of them. She had never dreamed that anyone could touch her this way.

“Don’t *stop*! Don’t *ever* stop!” she silently begged.

He heard her loud and clear.

She had no idea what he could possibly do next. If he had wanted to take her right there on the floor, she would have *let* him. She would do *anything* with this man.

She wondered how many women in the world were having done to them what she was having done to *her*. Especially, in a crowded bar with her two best friends nearby. What could they *possibly* be thinking?

For a few seconds, she imagined what would happen to her reputation.

She didn't care. The only thing that mattered was what *he* was doing to her. Just then, she felt him tense up, and a second later there was a shout!

"Michael, you *whore!*"

She felt him being yanked away from her. What was *happening?*

Michael and the other guy squared off and looked like they were going to rush at each other. But quickly, several other guys pulled them apart.

Carmella and Eileen rushed over to Johanna.

"Time to go home!" declared Eileen, as she and Carmella hustled Johanna out into the street.

After they had walked a block, Carmella summed it all up.

"Johanna, just in case you didn't notice, that was a *homo* bar!"

"But he ... he"

"Look at it *this* way," said Eileen. "He found you so attractive, he couldn't help himself!"

The three of them began to laugh hysterically. Then Johanna looked at her friends and asked in a mock serious tone, "So I'm still a '*good* girl,' right?"

.....

A recovering economics professor, Steve Slavin writes math and economics books in New York. His poetry and prose have appeared in dozens of literary magazines.

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"Your intellect may be confused, but your emotions never lie to you."

—Roger Ebert

THE VANISHING

Joel Fry

Attention is the only thing you have to pay,
the only currency. In fact, I don't even demand
that of you since I don't demand it of myself.
Instead, let us walk through the garden among
the salads at night. The warmth that keeps us
going penetrates the core of me, as if you are
talking me out of a maze. We take
this moonlight seriously. Never mind the feedback
loops from foreign shores, the way ships crash
among the Great Barrier Reef with rules and laws intact.
We hear about all these things as they pass. We listen.
Our breath smothers everything with a kiss
where moonlight plays among the concourse
of ferns. This is what it means to be alone, to take
the phosphorescence of friendly eyes to bear,
to be without peers on a warm night when I hear
you approaching on a gravel road, when my only
response is surprise and your fingertips vanish
into my skin.

.....

Joel Fry lives in Athens, AL. He has had poetry published in Off the Coast, Iodine Poetry Journal, Birmingham Arts Journal, Stirring, and several other places.

"I can't go on. I'll go on."

--Samuel Beckett

DEEP FREEZE

Ricky Garni

Tonight there will be a deep freeze.
Take care to cover your hydrangeas.
There also will be snow in Pennsylvania.
And dancing bears in Alaska.

This afternoon I will be busy buying hydrangeas.
Because I like to cover things and live a life of secrecy.
I mean, they do. Until it's warm.
And they don't.

When I buy goats, which I do
I feed them to the doctors
because of what the doctors do
to the goats. It's a long story

From a movie I saw which was quite good:
let me tell you all about it.

An entrepreneur, his unraveling.
His wife who loved him living
in their crumbling mansion.

His son who shot himself in the living room.
The people who believed and then didn't.

After the movie, we had a hamburger.
And listened to quiet Beethoven.
It wasn't frozen yet.

We quietly pulled up to where we were
and before you went away
you shined the light on my door
so I could see where to put the key

And so I put the key there
and then I said I think I'll stay here
and then I did I stayed there
I stayed there forever
and then I left

.....

Ricky Garni was born in Miami and grew up in Florida and Maine. He works as a graphic designer by day and writes music by night. COO, a tiny collection of short prose printed on college lined paper with found materials such as coins, stamps, was recently released by Bitterzoet Press. rgarni@gmail.com

"Carbonation is the greatest invention
since gravy."

--Harlan Sanders



THE CRAWDAD HUNT

Andrew Tyson
Colored Pencil on Paper
18.5" x 26.5"

Andrew Tyson is an award-winning, self-taught photographer and artist in Birmingham, Alabama, whose degree is in computer imaging and visualization. His medium of choice is graphite, but he has recently begun experimenting with pastels; he also works with stained glass. tysona@bellsouth.net

THE FLAG

Jessica Sampley

I grew up with it hanging above
the biggest window in my bedroom.
My older sister left it there
when she moved out in '84;
then I just never took it down,
left it there to rot, never really thought
about the Civil War or what that flag meant
until I was a teenager and saw it flying
on the back of four-wheel drives
in Panama City Beach, racial slurs lighting
up the Strip, "Sweet Home Alabama" blaring.
A vacation of stereotypes.
The sun lit up my skin like fireworks
blew up the sky that week.

On Sunday, when I stepped foot in my house,
I stood on a chair made by my great-great-grandfather,
William Demetris, a veteran of that war,
and I removed each push pin, folded the brittle
flag like I'd seen them fold the American flag
at my uncle's funeral. I thought about burning it,
burying the ashes in the backyard.
Instead, I tucked it into a box, ignored the screams.

Eventually, I tried to run from it and my dead father
to North Carolina—Oh, you're from *Alabama*?
What's that like? Isn't it still like 1965 there?
Sunday, Bloody Sunday. I bet you're glad you got out.
And I thought of that flag, and how Daddy
never pledged allegiance to anything, including us.

How I grew up in a county African-Americans
were scared to even drive through, where the annual
KKK rally still backs up traffic, in a state where the
past is never forgotten, where this infection is not going
away unless it's faced head on.

Now, I may have stopped running, but have I come
to terms with my history? Is this really my legacy?
What I will forever be known for every goddamn time
someone asks where I'm from? I think of that flag
folded up somewhere, some box in my old closet with
some ancient love notes, holding on. At my momma's
house, the outline of it still visible above sheer white curtains.

.....

*Jessica Sampley teaches English and is a coach at Gulf Shores High School in Gulf Shores, AL. Jessica grew up in Arley, AL, and her love for language started at a very early age. Her poems have appeared widely. **Jec_S@yahoo.com***

*"The camera is an instrument to
teach people how to see without a
camera."*

—Dorothea Lange

DARING NOT TO DIVE

Michael A. Calvert

I saw Gunga Din in the mirror as I passed through the living room. A tan, shirtless ten-year-old with a shaggy turban returning from battle. My turban was a shirt wrapped around a scalp wound. The front fender of my bicycle had cut into the top of my head after I flew over the handlebars. Dad would shake his head and say it was probably not a good idea to ride down a two-story, rough-graded dirt pile at a construction site. My head no longer hurt much, and I was relieved to make it home on my bike.

“What in the world!” Mom said as I stepped into the kitchen. “Is that blood in your hair? And on that shirt?”

“Maybe it’ll come out in the wash. I fell off my bike,” I replied with a quick shrug, opening the refrigerator door. “I’m dying of thirst.” Soon, Mom was slowly unwrapping my blood-soaked turban. I winced and grunted as she pulled the fabric from the dried blood forming over the wound.

“This gash is deep. It’s a wonder you didn’t bleed to death. You may need stitches,” she said as she washed the blood from my hair. “Were you riding on those ski jump ramps you and Bernie make?”

“No. I just hit something and went over the handlebars. I’ll be OK. No stitches needed. My hair will hide the scar,” I said with as much nonchalance as I could muster, recalling Mom’s concern about a scar on my sister’s thigh when she sat on the scissors.

“Hold this on your head.” Mom said as she handed me an improvised icepack, ice cubes wrapped in a dishtowel. Mrs. Jordan’s car is in her driveway. She’ll take us to Dr. Schrieber’s.”

Before she returned with Mrs. Jordan jangling her car keys, I assured Mom that the bleeding had stopped and made another plea to forego the stitches. I argued it was unnecessary as I masked my fear of a needle stitching my scalp the way Mom darned socks. In an hour, I was carefully combing my black hair in an attempt to hide my stitches.

That evening Dad interrogated me like Perry Mason until I admitted that my fall occurred when I rode down the steep side of a big dirt pile at a

construction site located beyond my boundary. When he pressed me on why I did such a stupid thing, I could only respond that Mike dared me and Bernie double-dared me. I studied the pattern on our linoleum floor as I responded with acceptance to Dad's rhetorical questions about jumping off cliffs if everyone else did and using my head next time my friends did something crazy. I escaped by holding my hand to my bandage and saying I needed to rest.

I stared at the ceiling in my shadowy room and recalled the dares and double-dares that began on the playground. Kids chanting, "Jump off the swing. Stand on the swing seat. Swing as high as the crossbar and make the chains go slack."

"Dare you to stand on the whirling merry-go-round. Double dare you to walk across the top of the monkey bars. Are you chicken? Cluck, cluck, cluck, Michael's a chicken. Michael's a chicken," they continued in sing-song taunts.

When I was a little older, Bernie, Ronnie, and my buddies tramped through our wilderness—the woods between our subdivision and Alum Creek. We challenged each other to walk over small streams on dead tree trunks instead of hopping from stone to stone across the ankle-deep water not far below and scramble up the muddy bank.

With arms extended, we slowly put one foot in front of another like tight rope walkers under a circus tent. The worst logs were smooth, silvery gray, and narrow. Our buddies already safely on the other side, offered advice:

"Walk faster."

"Don't look down."

They also hurled taunts and threats.

"Losing your nerve?"

"You're going to get wet."

These low crossings were training grounds for bigger challenges.

The high banks of Alum Creek were topped with large trees that slanted toward the light above the creek. Vines as thick as a boy's upper arm stretched to the treetops where they were entwined with small upper branches. Two of us hung on the vine to test the strength of the

entanglements in the treetops. If the vine didn't pull free, we'd try a short ride.

Gradually, we extended the arc of each swing until we were flying over the creek banks and the water itself. With a running start, we propelled ourselves in arcs high above the creek and imitated Johnny Weissmuller's long, modulated cries of Tarzan though our wails were a couple of octaves higher than his. We all understood that taking a turn was not optional. No dares or shaming required. Everyone knew he had to soar high into the air above the creek.

The *Columbus Dispatch* inspired an expedition to Eckel's Lake near Delaware, twenty-five miles north of Columbus. Photos of athletes flying over the water on rings like circus performers looked like fun with a bit of danger. Joey, Ronnie, Dick, Bernie, Mike, Johnny, and I chose a day and gathered on Mock Road with rolled towels, a sack lunch, and our swimming trunks. We paired off, stood beside the road, and stuck out our thumbs. The last pair arrived at the lake just before noon. Inside, we ate our sandwiches and appraised the equipment.

The small, spring-fed lake nestled between steep hills was a gymnasium over water. People were swinging from one ring to another to travel across the lake. From a platform on the hillside, athletes grasped the two flying rings and launched themselves on an arc far over the lake, let go, and did somersaults before knifing into the water. Towering above the rings was 16-foot diving platform that appeared to be two or three times as high as the 10-foot board at our neighborhood pool. We decided to eat our sandwiches and observe the stunts on display before attempting the traveling rings, the flying rings, and the diving platform.

Several rounds of rock, paper, and scissors decided who would go first on the rings and the high dive, but we all solemnly pledged to take a turn. I was first on the flying rings, but thankful to be last on the high dive. Dick led on the traveling rings, and Ronnie was first on the diving board. I released from the rings too soon, splatted painfully onto the surface of the water, and glowed lobster red for a while. Dick clumsily fell into the lake stretching for the second ring.

Ronnie surprised us by walking to the end of the diving board, crouching, and falling headlong to the water. He surfaced complaining about his sore head with profanity which prompted a whistle and an eviction threat from the lifeguard. Everyone had mustered the courage to take his turn. Johnny reached the other side on the traveling rings, and Bernie managed an awkward flip from the flying rings. The other guys kept their hands together when they dove to avoid Ronnie's fate.

I climbed the long ladder to the diving platform staring intently at the rungs in front of me. I repeatedly assured myself.

"I can do this. I will dive. I've got to dive. All the others did it..."

Dad's words about jumping off cliffs if everyone else did flashed through my mind. When I stepped onto the platform, I gasped aloud. The lake was so far below that Ronnie, Dick, and the others were tiny children with upturned faces. They were chanting, "Dive. Dive..." I stepped up onto the board that bent slightly with my weight. I looked over the trees on the hillsides around the lake and felt a strong breeze at this height. I risked a glance at the water so far below.

"You gotta dive! You gotta dive! You gotta..." yelled my buddies.

I took slow, deliberate steps to the end of the board that bounced a little with each step. Alone at the end of the lively plank, I looked toward the distant horizon beneath the bright sky.

"I don't gotta do it. I don't gotta do anything. Screw 'em. I'm going to do it my own way."

I calmly launched myself into the void and dropped feet first to the surface. I heard booing before my feet smacked the water. The soles of my feet still stung as I climbed to the dock, but I smiled and shrugged at my buddies as they jeered and hooted.

Ronnie encouraged me to try again to dive. I calmly shook my head. I did not need to redeem myself.

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*Michael Calvert, a native of Ohio, is a retired urban planner in Birmingham, AL. He is pursuing memoir and short-story writing and has been published previously in the Birmingham Arts Journal. **michaelalancalvert@yahoo.com***

A STARTLE

Bill Brown

A startle of quail rose
 from the winter field,
 chilled my shoulders,
 as if a gust blew them

from broom sage and thicket
 to the leafless birches
 guarding Crooked Creek.
 Once I filled a bag with

birch bark to keep textured
 curls beside my bed. On
 sleepless nights, I rubbed
 them between fingers

and dreamed of water
 searching rocks.
 My father called them
 God's paper haunted

with messages.
 To me they whisper about
 morning light, another day
 to witness beauty even in

desolation—how the stark
 and lonely repeat a life-song
 in February. Beneath forest
 loam bloodroot longs

to rise above the soil.
 Joy and sorrow are
 about living,
 interpretation,

even in
 a universe
 dancing
 in darkness.

.....

Bill Brown is the author of poetry collections and a textbook. He was awarded the Writer of the Year 2011 by the Tennessee Writers Alliance and is a Scholar at Bread Loaf and Fellow at VCCA. He has published extensively.

*"Other people were young once, just like
you...they broke their hearts over things that
now seem trivial. But they were their own
hearts, and they had the right to meddle with
them in their own way."*

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

TIGHTLY WOUND

Beth McKim

Bong Bong. Click Click. These symphonic clock sounds either kept me awake or lulled me to sleep when I spent the night at my city grandmother's boarding house. *Ding Dong. Cuckoo. Cuckoo.*

Her large home served as living quarters for the men from rural areas who came to work at large steel factories in Birmingham in the early 1960's. Spending time there, my cousin and I helped her fix meals and prepare box lunches, and in turn, she allowed us to drag out her fine china and we all sang and played the piano when she wasn't teaching lessons to neighborhood children.

But Grandmother's real passion was her clock collection, an interesting phenomenon for someone who was not especially time conscious. She had these antiques proudly displayed in her big dining room and the living room, the two rooms where the boarders, who were trying hard to adjust to city time, gathered. She loved to tell them about each clock. One pendulum clock she had gotten as a present from a family relative in Scotland. Another, her neighbor, Mrs. Scudder, had brought with her when she emigrated from Germany. She gave it to Grandmother when she recognized her passion. There was a tall, stately grandfather clock that I thought of as a symbol of the grandfather who died before I was born. Also I remember several pendulum clocks, a clock that cuckooed, and two decorative mantel clocks. They all made different sounds. In the daytime they were barely noticeable. But at night they staged concerts that either caused my cousin and me to giggle or put pillows over our heads. I was always interested in hearing the grandfather clock strike midnight because it meant a new fun day at Grandmother's house had begun.

After her death, the clocks were dispersed between my aunt and uncle and my parents. My dad, Grandmother's middle son, either because of genetics, fond memories or the desire to tinker with things he could control, became the next generation clock enthusiast. Mother, who originally just wanted to make Dad happy, also grew to treasure the clocks. We showcased in our den, living room, bedrooms and kitchen

various forms of them. Instead of the occasional pleasure of hearing ticks and bongs at Grandmother's, I felt surrounded by noisy antique wall intruders led by a different grandfather clock, none of which seemed to have the correct time.

Some of the more common words spoken in our house were:

"What time is it actually? All the clocks are different."

"Would somebody please go around and wind the clocks?"

"Who wound the clocks last? Whoever it was, they're too tight."

"Will somebody help me take this clock down? It needs to go to the shop."

"One of the clocks is making a funny sound. Which one is it?"

Friends who came to stay sometimes complained about the clocks keeping them awake at night but somehow those of us who lived there had quit hearing them.

Mom and Dad had truly become collectors and regularly purchased, fixed up, and traded old clocks.

Later, as my brother, sister, and I started our own families, our parents gifted us with clocks even though none of us had expressed an interest. A topic of parental phone conversation was often, "Have you wound the clocks? Not too tight, remember." And we repeated these words to our spouses because it seemed like the thing to do.

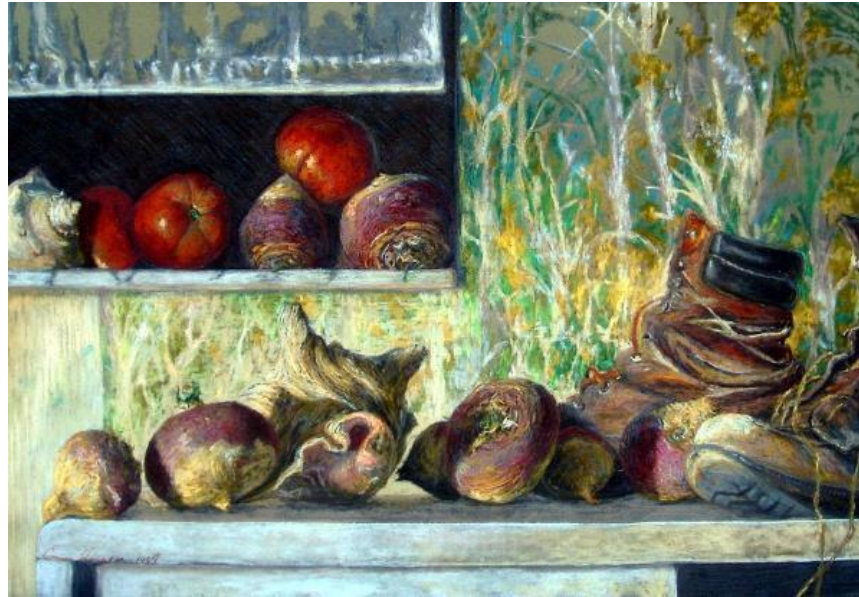
As our parents got older, they began to point out which of their clocks were valuable. They urged us, "Don't fight over these once we're gone." We were fairly certain this would not happen.

Today, none of us have antique clocks in our homes. We all prefer dogs instead. The old clocks fell to estate sales or clock shops or other collectors. If I want a clock, I go to Pottery Barn and search for a non-ticking one. If I want to know the *exact* time, I look at my phone. At our shared family vacation home, at night all ticking clocks are "debattered."

The bongs, thumps, dings, and cuckoos have passed from our lives along with the generations before us.

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*Beth McKim grew up in Birmingham, AL, but now resides in Texas. Her poetry, essays, and short stories have appeared in various publications, including the Birmingham Arts Journal. Beth misses Birmingham and reads and writes about it whenever she can. **bethmckim@me.com***



GRANDMA'S KITCHEN

Cameron Hampton
Pastel on Paper

Cameron Hampton is a Gold Medal Circle Member with the International Association of Pastel Societies, a Signature Member of the Pastel Society of America, the Southeastern Pastel Society, the Alabama Pastel Society, and a Juried Member of the Degas Pastel Society. Her work appears widely. She lives in Madison, GA.
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FLASHING BEFORE MY VERY EYES

Jim Reed

The short-haired middle-aged dog trots—shall I say doggedly?—right alongside my advancing automobile. For a moment, we are progressing at the same speed, but my metal monster wins the race and leaves Mr. Mutt behind. In the rearview glass, I can see him diminished but unwavering in his journey.

He is focused and quite unaware of me and my vehicle. He is on a quest. All I can think is, Just how does a dog with a mission wind up? Where is it that a dog has to go?

Like a white rabbit, is he late and flustered?

Do dogs have appointments?

How will he know when he has completed his trek?

What stories will he tell his pups when he returns?

And what if he is wondering the same things about me and my species?

And will we ever communicate with one another on a level playing field?

Are we destined to be Us and Them, Alien and Other?

Can we co-exist and simply get off each other's cases and just live out our lives on a beautiful but damaged planet? Scientists know that there are bunches of planets nearby that could be as sustainable as ours. If there are sentient beings scattered about the galaxy, are they better than us? More vicious than us? Do they even care whether they ever meet us?

Do they have appointments and pups? Do they get along?

Or are they, like us, trapped within their own domains, faced with trying to find a way to live out their time with the least pain and most caring they can muster? Or are they, are We, just figments in a cosmos that, like Mr. Mutt, is not even aware that we suspire?

Maybe we will always be able to view afar, imagine afar, dream dreamy dreams of what could be, always planted in our fertile

imaginations...but forever separated and forbidden by physics from visiting one another. And maybe, just maybe, we will someday learn to be satisfied with this idea.

Maybe someday we will decide, To heck with it—let's just take care of each other, let's just behave, let's just enjoy the ride, with or without the metal monsters

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Jim Reed writes books and stories and sells old books in Birmingham, AL.
www.jimreedbooks.com

*“Bumper sticker: We Are the Proud
Parents of a Child Whose Self-Esteem is
Sufficient that He Doesn’t Need Us
Advertising His Minor Scholastic
Achievements on the Bumper of Our Car.”*

—George Carlin

FOR DOROTHY LORENA DAVIS

Kwoya Fagin Maples

It opens in black and white:
 my seventeenth summer,
 Eight Mile, Alabama.

I was dancing an old dance deep
 in my grandmother's arms.
 That cymbal summer

I wore a maroon dress
 I'd be grounded for wearing
 like a second skin.

Those red dust days in Eight Mile were so hot
 people stopped saying it was hot.
 We all smelled like outside.

My grandmother— not subtle with love—
 made saucepans of Cream of Wheat,
 the right amount of butter stirred in.

I didn't really know
 how to take the love.
 With a grain of salt?

Eight Mile: the rotted oak that still held
 three tire swings,
vulture always eating the remains of a dog.

My grandmother,
 a warm habitation,
 a lemon pound cake baked.

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Kwoya Fagin Maples is a poet from Charleston, SC. She teaches creative writing at the Alabama School of Fine Arts and lives in Birmingham with her husband Marcus and her three daughters, Eden, Vivienne and Maya. kmaples@asfa.k12.al.us

THE CONCRETE BLOCK WALL

Mary Palmer - 2016 Hackney Literary Award Winner State Story, 1st prize

When I read his name in the obituary, I stepped through my French doors onto my patio and stood staring at the concrete block wall behind a huge holly bush full of red berries. My stoic background made me want to control my emotions, but the intensity of the moment gripped me. Tears streamed down my cheeks.

My feelings rapidly changed from sorrow to being outraged by life's inequities. "It's unfair. In his whole life, Mr. Mac never really had anything for himself," I said to my Collie, Champ, who was clamoring for my attention by rubbing up against me. A rush of memories filled my brain.

I'd met the MacNairs under stressful circumstances. Mr. Mac was my best friend Ellen's first husband's father. Five years before, the MacNairs had lost their only child when his car skidded in the snow and hit a tree. Finally, they'd saved enough money to come from Texas to Mobile, Alabama, to visit their grandchildren, Freddy, fourteen years old and Kathy, twelve, and their daughter-in-law and her new husband, Sarge. But a week after they arrived, Ellen succumbed to a heart attack and the MacNair's vacation came to a tragic end.

More problems arose. The day after the funeral, my telephone rang at nine o'clock in the morning. "Mona." The caller's voice was so stern that I didn't know who he was until he announced, "this is Sarge. Could you come over to my house now?"

His urgency forced me to say, "Sure. I'll be right there."

Mrs. Mac met me at the door. Her solid white hair, usually tied in a neat bun at the nape of her neck, hung loose on her shoulders. No greeting. Breathlessly, she managed to get out the words, "Did you and Ellen ever discuss how she'd want the children brought up if something happened to her?" The lines in her brow deepened.

Realizing storm clouds were brewing, I still told the exact truth. "We did, Mrs. Mac. The main thing Ellen wanted was to keep them together."

Mrs. Mac sighed and squared her shoulders. "That's what I needed to know. Last night, Sue was talking about splitting them up. She'd take Kathy and her mother could take Freddy." She shook her head. "Since Sue

is Ellen's sister, I was scared it was all going to be settled right then and there." Her lips parted in a smile. "Then Mac—oh, I was so proud of him—he stood right up to them. Don't separate the kiddos,' he told them."

Before she could continue, Sarge came in the room, his face drawn and haggard, with a slight bend to his normally rigid stance. Wavy gray hair fell in a part on his forehead as a crease formed between his very bloodshot eyes.

"Sarge," I asked with a frown, "are you all right?"

He finished lighting a cigarette and dropped the match in a glass ashtray already full to overflowing. "I'm going to make it," he said solemnly. Even though I knew he'd been badly injured in Korea and had spent five years in and out of military hospitals, resulting in loss of function of his left arm, I could tell he'd never been more upset in his life. He'd adored Ellen; she was his one and only wife and his whole life. With her help, he'd overcome his sensitivity about that arm. Now, it was sad to see him so lost without her. I hoped what he said was true—that he could get over this terrible blow.

Even though he'd summoned me, without a word, he just walked right back out of the room.

Mrs. Mac plopped her two-hundred-ten-pound frame in a chair and motioned me to do the same. "Ellen knew Sarge asked us to live with him and the children." Her eyes widened as she spotted her husband coming in from outside. She beckoned to him, saying, "Explain to Mona what happened last night, honey." Years of affection were evident in her gentle voice.

He sat on the edge of Mrs. Mac's chair and loosened the top button of his plaid flannel shirt. A stubble of gray beard didn't hide his ruddy complexion. "The way I see it," he said in a slow mid-western drawl, "we ought to do what Ellen wanted—let the kiddies stay here together." His eyes filled with water. "I know that's what my son would've wanted. Besides, Ellen's mother is here and they got their friends." He rubbed his temple. "The kids just need something to hang onto."

I wasn't completely sure whether Sarge could do a good job of raising Freddy and Kathy. He and Ellen had often disagreed on their discipline. I just hoped he wasn't using his stepchildren to hang onto Ellen's memory, even subconsciously.

Mr. Mac puffed on his pipe and squinted his left eye. As I watched the wrinkles in his face deepen, I had a crazy, inappropriate thought: *Fifty pounds lighter and he'd look just like Popeye.*

Forcing my thoughts from the frivolous, I responded, "I agree, Mr. Mac."

Folding his arms, he looked straight at me. "Anyways, Sarge asked me and Mama to move in. We ain't got much in Texas; it won't be no hardship on us."

.....
*This is an excerpt from Mary S. Palmer's award-winning story. An established author, Palmer teaches English at Faulkner University and Huntingdon College in Alabama. She was recently awarded a grant from Faulkner University to write New Literary Journey: Tourism Writing. **mlsp0121@gmail.com***

*“When ignorance gets started it knows
no bounds.”*

—Will Rogers



HIBISCUS

Ted Openshaw

8" x 10"

Acrylic on Canvas

The late Ted Openshaw loved to paint at his home in Lipscomb, AL.

FLAMING SOMMELIERS

J. D. Frost

I shifted the two wines, a California Merlot and an Australian Shiraz, to the crook of one elbow and pushed the button. She swung the door aside. Her blond hair hung like curtains in a grand theater. She'd pulled the left side behind her ear. The right dropped across her forehead, catching part of her brow. She peeked at me from behind that line. She'd been attractive when our friend introduced us four days before but now she was breathtaking.

"Come in," she said. "I was just watching the news. There's a fire north of us. It's no wonder; Birmingham hasn't seen rain in forty-four days." She plucked the wine from my arm. "Let me see! First glances are just that, but this is promising."

She hit the controller and the TV went blank.

"Here I am." She made a sweeping gesture across her kitchen bar. I leaned in and peered at the dark red in a carafe and the empty bottle beside it. A Grenache.

"It's from the Languedoc-Roussillon region of southern France," she said.

Beside it stood an unopened Cabernet from Chile, both more desirable than my meager offerings.

"You've had a French Grenache?" she asked.

I confessed I had not. She said a friend visited Collioure, a touristy beach town on the Mediterranean, just north of the Italian border. The French are experts, she said, in two of life's pleasures. Instead of enumerating, she reached in the cabinet for stemware. She hooked her fingers under the large bowl of a sparkling glass and offered it to me.

She uncorked the other vintages, then without a word she poured us each a healthy portion of the Grenache. Her eagerness startled me. She tilted and swirled the dark wine. If it clung to the glass, she wouldn't have seen it. Her eyes searched mine over the rim. I took in the scent of the Grenache: the raspberries, the more

subtle blackcurrants, coffee. With it, for the first time, came a hint of something from the outside—smoke.

The Shiraz breathed while we took our introductory drink. Deep breaths. She filled a clean glass and lifted it to my lips. I covered her hand on the foot and tilted it to my mouth. The fruity wine bathed my tongue. A hint of spice filled my senses like a trumpet signaling the coming of some scintillating moment. She laughed when I took more than she meant to give.

Seizing the lead, I poured the Cabernet. I held back, letting it slide down the edge of her goblet. Chilean cabs have less tannins than their stateside counterparts, but this one pursed my lips like a wicked lemon. She felt it, too, and she curled the tip of her tongue to her teeth at this surprise. Light from flames somewhere up the mountain danced in her eyes. Yellow and orange fluttered across the walls of the dark room.

“Is this dangerous?” I asked.

“Maybe,” she said, “but don’t you dare leave, not with the evening so incomplete.” Her fingers closed around the neck of our last bottle. “Even if you live a millennium, you will have no other chance to taste this little bird (Merle is blackbird in French).”

Her head came up. She ran a hand through her yellow hair and raised her glass. Her teeth caught her lower lip. She closed her eyes, as I watched her inhale the dark, earthy red.

I drew in the bouquet of black cherry, plum, and clove. Then I told myself the lie: the unmistakable smell of burning wood came from my glass. I opened my eyes. Behind her, more yellow, more orange and, now, red danced off the ceiling.

“We should leave,” I said.

“Not yet,” she rebuked me.

I wanted to turn away, but she held me as surely as the wine, or the desire for it, held her. The smoke flowed past the windows in twirling ribbons of white, rushing away like our reason. I heard the crackle of flames, the resounding pops somehow matching the rhythm of my racing heart.

Her house, when I'd driven up, looked like a box jammed into the slope. Now I feared it would give way and somersault to the valley, trailed by smoke and sparks.

Before we closed our eyes one last time, there came a pounding at the door. Firemen axed their way to us. They dragged me to the outside. My eyes stung and watered. When I finally opened them, I saw a waiting ambulance. She walked to the open doors, her back to me, shrouded in a blanket.

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J. D. Frost is the author of three novels. His short fiction has appeared in anthologies and journals, including the Birmingham Arts Journal. He writes from his home in Arab, Alabama. jdfrost4@gmail.com

BEFORE AND AFTER

Mark Jackett

Testing rubber-band racers in the hall
She fails, snaps, collapses, that's all

Unnatural as bees lost heading back to the hive
Unnatural as blue whales forgetting how to dive

I feel myself go limp when I first hear the news
World of pinks and purples now tainted deep blues

What to say to a daughter whose
best friend has just died.

I love you.

(I'm so happy you're alive)

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PARROT

Sam Meekings

I love you, he said, late that night. Then there were a few seconds of silence, during which Karen frantically tried to calculate how awkward it might be if she said *I love spending time with you*, or else simply pretended she hadn't heard him. But she did not want to hurt him, and she did not want to wreck such a nice evening, and so she gave in and said it back.

It was only after she had said it that Karen realized that perhaps it was true (at least in part). She found herself blushing, despite the darkness and the fact there was no one there but her and him. Maybe it really was the first sting of love after all, and lying there Karen began to imagine the two of them at some distant point in the future where both their rough edges had been rubbed smooth against one another and they had found that point where the awkwardness of the first few weeks had been swapped for a deeper need between them.

Two and a half years later (to be precise, eight-hundred and seventy-four days that she later estimated she had wasted on him), it ended much the same way. They were having the same argument they had been having for weeks, rehashing the same accusations about money badly spent, emotions ignored, and opportunities trampled when Karen found herself saying, just to spite him, *If that's how you feel then maybe you'd just be better off without me!*

As soon as the words were out she saw that she could leave, and maybe she should, and it was therefore only a matter of time until she did. But it seems such a shame to leave them there, at the moment when Karen stopped listening to him and started pulling her clothes from the wardrobe and stuffing them into her suitcase. Let's rewind instead and return to the beginning, to that night when everything still lay ahead of them and Karen first began to grasp the idea that all it took was saying the words to make a possibility harden into fact.

Don't pay a blind bit of notice to those cynics who don't believe in magic, Karen said to her friends in those blissful early weeks. There are simple spells all around us. She had not quite understood, however, that it was neither her nor him who had cast the spell. She naively believed, as most of us do, that she controlled the words she used. In fact it was the other way round. It was the words themselves that changed reality, that

brought some hidden potential to life. Language is not at our mercy; it only tricks us into believing that. It is like a virus or infection that makes us slaves to the ideas it plants within us. Things really are just as we believed as children: as long as we say nothing, as long as we keep our secrets and worries unspoken, they will never become real – but the moment someone says something out-loud it will find a way to come true.

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*Sam Meekings is a British poet and novelist. His first novel, Under Fishbone Clouds, was called "a poetic evocation of the country and its people" by the New York Times. He has spent more than a decade living and working in China and the Middle East. **www.sammeekings.com***



INNUENDO

Peter Schwartz
Digital Photograph

*After years of writing and painting, Peter Schwartz moved to photography. His work has been featured in many print and online journals. He can frequently be found collaborating with other artists and pushing the borders of creativity in his mission is to broaden the ways the world sees art. **www.sitrahahra.com***



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