Birmingham Arts Journal

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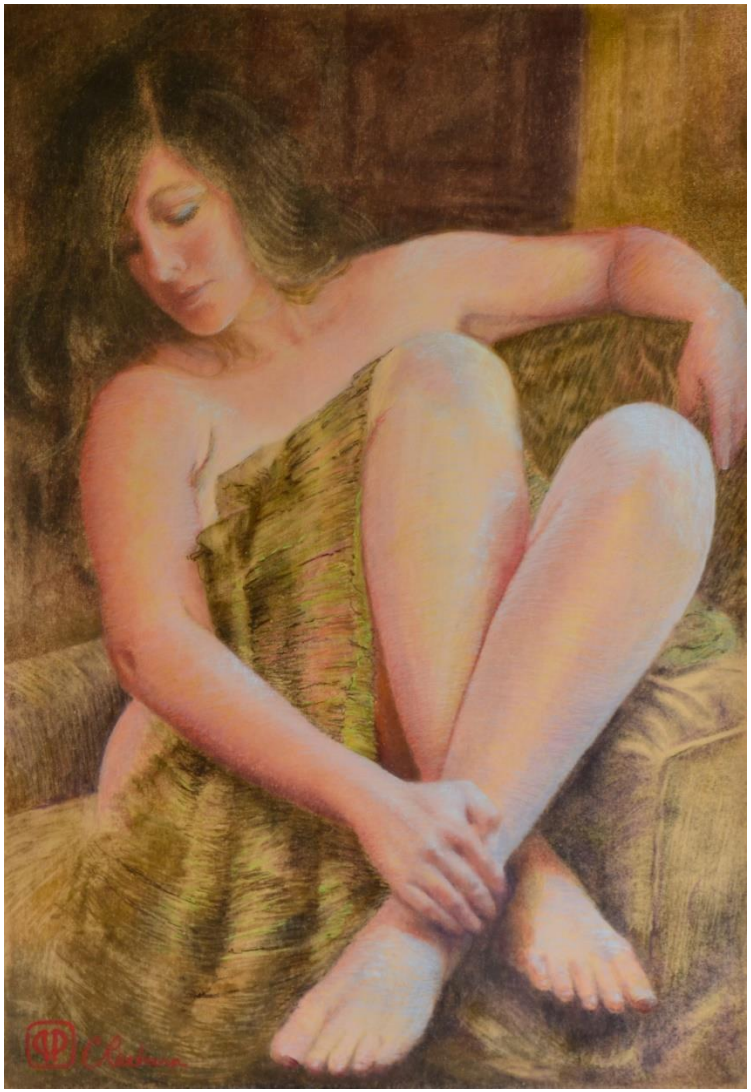

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$6.00

Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: DAYDREAMING – Carrie Raeburn - 25" X 38" Soft Pastels and Pan Pastels on PastelMat paper. *Carrie Raeburn is a Pastel Society of America Master Pastelist; a juried member of the Salmagundi Club, NY; and the Degas Pastel Society, New Orleans; a Member of Excellence of the Alabama Pastel Society; and President of the Pastel Society of North Florida. Her work is featured in Art Journey Abstract Painting: A Celebration of Contemporary Painting (2017). She is the 2017 recipient of the Alabama Pastel Society Birmingham Arts Journal Publication Award.* **carrieraeburn30@gmail.com**

Back Cover: GIRL IN A BLANKET – Marla Kenney – 18" x 24" Pan Pastel on Canson Paper *Marla Hope Kenney moved to central Alabama as a teen in the mid 1970's and attended the University of Montevallo (BFA '81 and M.Ed. '96). Marla works in multiple painting media. She is an award-winning artist and advanced art instructor at Hoover High School in Hoover, Al. She is a member of the Alabama Pastel Society. Her work may be seen at* **www.marlahopekenney.com artisin59@yahoo.com**

WHEN THE WORLD LEARNED TO DRIVE (FOR ERIC)

Irene Latham-*2016 Hackney Literary Awards Winner-State Poetry, 3rd Prize*

- after Patricia Lockwood

When the world learned to drive
he started on back roads, trim neighborhood streets,
his eyes watchful for trash cans and cats.
At first his foot came down hard,
his hands slick against the wheel,
right turn right turn right turn
until he was, thank God, back home.

When the world learned to drive,
he grinned at stop signs, their bold-print
and eager faces familiar as his reflection,
and equally as maddening –
until he learned the feather-art
of rubber sole *easy-easy* against rubber pedal.

When the world learned to drive
he couldn't wait to take the interstate.
He dreamed of long ramps and fast, smooth mergings,
was unruffled by the *whoosh*
of semi trucks or the red Mustang rushing his back bumper.
The world simply thumbed the wheel
and adjusted his rearview mirror.

And then there was no stopping him:
he craved city traffic, *stop-and-go*, cloverleafs and flyovers.
His faith steamed like asphalt
after a summer shower, he studied maps
for sinkholes and mountains,
strapped himself in and didn't look back.

Not soon enough he learned to navigate Highway 280,
it's ant-lines and zipper lines and no lines
a language he could understand:
hip-hop lyrics, piano, drumbeat –
with a little reggae thrown in.
To celebrate, the world bought four pair of sunglasses,
kept both hands on the wheel.
Didn't text while driving, or eat,
or cry, though sometimes the sunset
was so striking he had to clear his throat.

The world was a good listener,
had always been a good listener.
He believed each yellow light was a message from God –
sometimes, *Hold On*, sometimes, *Let Go*.
He knew and his mother knew
and every song he would ever write knew
that somewhere there was a road with his name on it,
and if there wasn't, the world would build it.

.....

Irene Latham is the author of more than a dozen current and forthcoming poetry, fiction and picture books for children and adults, including Leaving Gee's Bend, 2011 ALLA Children's Book of the Year. Winner of the 2016 ILA Lee Bennett Hopkins Promising Poet Award, she also serves as poetry editor for Birmingham Arts Journal.
www.irenelatham.com

"If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."

—Shirley Chisholm

DISENGAGED

Sylvia Williams Dodgen-*2016 Hackney Literary Award Winner-State Story, 2nd prize*

His eyes seemed different. Always a warm brown, there was a subtle difference; the morning light did not seem to penetrate nor enliven them. Like flat wall paint, they struck me as matte. Besides being physically thinner, his eyes were the most visible change I noticed when my husband walked through the door from the disembarkation point. He smiled, but his eyes did not smile.

I cried, "Mac," into his chest and felt his arm squeeze me to him while he reached for our small son Will with his other arm. We were in the airport arrival area, reunited after months of endless days, watching television news, wondering where in Afghanistan he was, not allowing myself to wonder if he were alive from hour to hour; however, in the weeks following his return, as our relationship deteriorated, I kidded myself that our connection was strong, that we would eventually resume our former existence, the two of us and Will, our small circle.

It was an unusually warm December on the coast yet still too cool for me to bear the rising damp from the water beneath the dock. Mac had returned from Afghanistan a couple of months earlier and we had come down to the coast to visit our families. I sat in the pickup and watched him gather a dripping net into sections then give one section to Will and count down from three with him before the two of them tossed it into the bay. Jug, Mac's black lab, cantered, horse-like, to the end of the dock, large ears flopping as he jumped at a rising sea gull. There were only a couple of trailers in the boat ramp lot; most of the tourists had left when the seasons changed.

Two young men backed a trailer hauling a small live bait boat down the boat ramp. I thought how Mac had shrimped on weekends during high school and often said being out on the water was the most peaceful feeling on earth. He had also surfed when the waves in the Gulf of Mexico were high enough, which was usually during the stormy winter and spring seasons. I recalled watching him from the shore, my hair damp, toes red in the white, cold sand. His form was almost indistinguishable in a dark wet suit, riding gray spray against a metallic sky. Mac was never afraid of the sea; like a marine animal, he seemed at home in the water. Now in the warmth of the pickup I mused over the young man I married the summer after our high school graduation.

I was pregnant with Will that summer, which meant Mac had to get a job that would pay well enough for Will's delivery and our medical needs. The United States Army solved our financial problems and Mac seemed to fit the military. He liked the comradery of the troops and excelled. When Will and I were able to join him in Georgia after basic training, he located a small two-bedroom apartment on a shady street that had been the carriage house of an early twentieth-century home. Mac liked to take Will for late afternoon strolls when he came in from work. Frequently, I walked with them, holding Mac's arm as he pushed the stroller and helping him lift it over the upheaval of live oak roots in the broken sidewalk. We avoided talking about his impending deployment, discussing plans for our future instead.

We both wanted to return to the Gulf Coast, when Mac's military service ended. I thought we could save money while he was in the Army; he wanted to buy a small boat for charter fishing which could lead to a larger boat in time.

"I may need to work on an offshore rig for a while to save enough," Mac had said.

"And I could work, when Will is older."

"What would you want to do?"

"The wait staff in the restaurants along the coast do well."

Mac stopped walking and looked down at me, "But would you want to do that? How about going to college, if we can swing it?" Mac knew I had planned to attend college when we were in high school but Will had surprised us. I had wanted to teach and still hoped to work toward a teaching certificate someday.

Gazing at him now, throwing the net with Will from the dock, I realized that in the weeks since his return from Afghanistan, he seemed to avoid talking about the future or our earlier plans to return to the Gulf Coast. Whenever I brought up old friends or high school memories to pique his interest, he shrugged and said, "We were just kids."

From the cab of the pickup I saw Will tug at his father's jacket. Mac turned away and continued to gather the net. Will tugged again, looking up at his father then hugged his small arms around Mac's leg. He seemed to ask his father something to which Mac did not respond. He stared at the net in his hands, ignoring his son. Slipping out of the truck, I called to Will and asked if he were cold. He ran to me and jumped into my arms. Taking Will back to the truck, I called over my shoulder, "Will is cold. I'm going to keep him in the truck with me."

Mac did not turn nor did he answer. He simply stood and looked out at the water as though he were not conscious of anything around him. Curled up beside me in the warmth of the truck Will fell asleep as I watched the sun set. Will was three years old, independent and large for his age, but I still thought of him as a baby and hoped Mac's expectations did not exceed Will's development.

When the truck grew cold, I rolled down the window and called to Mac, "Hey, the sun's setting; let's go." Mac seemed not to hear me until I honked the horn, then he turned and looked at me; I had the feeling he did not know who I was nor why I was calling him. After that, I tried not to leave Will alone with Mac even long enough to go to the store. I did not think Mac would neglect him; I simply believed he was increasingly too distracted to tend to him.

Mac never seemed to sleep and began smoking again, a habit he had quit when he enlisted. I would wake in the night and find him sitting on the porch swing with a plastic bottle full of cigarette butts beside him. I tried asking what he was thinking, but he would only say, "I'm okay. I just don't need much sleep anymore." Or he would feign sleepiness and send me back to bed, saying he would follow in a minute or as soon as he finished another cigarette. When he finally came to bed, I would seek his body, folding into him, as we had slept during the early days of our marriage, but Mac lay with his arms behind his head and stared at the ceiling, the whites of his eyes visible in the dark.

I understood from other army wives that he needed time to reconnect, that in war soldiers often disengaged from their emotions in order to survive. Even though I desperately missed his affection, I was determined to give him the time he needed. Mac had several more months to serve and was not allowed leave again until the spring. As we drove to the coast on a rainy day, I read while Mac listened to the radio. I hardly noticed when Mac reached down and turned up the volume until I heard the announcer say something about an explosion on an ultra-deepwater drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico which killed eleven and spilled millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf. The oil company had not yet capped the well at sea bed, approximately 35,000 feet deep, and had no contingency plan to stop the spill. Agitated, Mac banged his palm on the steering wheel, "Why do they ruin everything?"

I was startled. "Who, Mac?" I asked. He shook his head. "The ones in charge, the ones who have the money, who set the rules."

Hours later when we took the exit ramp off I-10 west of Pensacola, Mac said, "Hey, watch this." I looked up to see an elderly hitchhiker with straggly hair and beard, carrying a backpack near the bottom of the off ramp. Mac swerved the car and stopped several feet in front of the man, slinging gravel. The man began running for the car, brushing mud splatters from his face and shifting his backpack. Just as he reached for the door handle, Mac stomped the accelerator causing the hitchhiker to stumble into the mud. Looking in the rear-view mirror, Mac laughed. "Did you see the look on his face?" he said and laughed again. I was shocked. I had never known Mac to deliberately cause someone else to suffer, particularly someone less fortunate. Mac insisted the incident was funny. I could not believe this was the same person I had married a few years earlier.

I sat in silence the remainder of the trip, feeling sick that Mac would take such a cheap shot at another human being, particularly one in vulnerable circumstances. Before we arrived at Mac's parents' house, he apologized for "upsetting" me but did not apologize for what he had done. His parents were happy to see us and excited that we intended to return to the coast to live as soon as Mac completed his military service. I decided to put the incident with the hitchhiker behind me. Mac's mother suggested we stay with them until we could find a place of our own, and his father offered Mac the use of his boat for inshore fishing charters. Mac did not respond to either of his parents. We talked in the kitchen while preparing dinner. Mac's mother stirred something on the stove; I made a salad; Mac's father mixed a rub for the meat; and Mac leaned against the counter, holding a cigarette and a beer. The cigarette was unlit; not thinking, I said he should smoke it outside. Mac frowned and mumbled, "Right, mom. Does this cigarette look lit to you?" I hated it when he called me "mom," and he knew it, but I tried to change the subject. Since Mac had not thanked his parents for their offers I explained, "Mac may apply for a job on one of the Gulf oil rigs so we can save some money for a while." His father looked disappointed so I added, "Will and I can find a place to rent around here and Mac can come when his schedule allows."

Mac's father said, "I don't like the idea of you and Will staying alone in a rental house or apartment when you could stay here with us. There's plenty of room. Besides, having someone to help you with Will, you could save money living here. And Mac, what about this explosion out in the Gulf? Maybe you shouldn't rush to get a job on an oil rig until they figure out what caused it."

Abruptly, Mac said, “It’s not up to you. It’s really none of your concern what we decide.” Mac’s father looked away. I could see that his feelings were hurt. “He’s just trying to make it easy for us, Mac,” I said. Mac seemed to explode and shouted, “I’m tired of everyone telling me what to do. I’m tired of feeling hemmed in.” Then he pointed at me and said, “And I’m tired of you talking to me like I’m a child.”

He pushed out the door, slamming it behind him. “What was said to cause such a reaction?” Mac’s father asked.

“Does this happen often?” asked his mother.

“He’s just been tense for a while.”

“How long is a while?” asked Mac’s mother.

“I don’t know,” I said.

I was visibly shaken and added, “I need to feed Will,” as I stepped through the French doors into the sun porch where Will was playing.

Later, recalling this incident, I felt as though I had been slapped. I was completely unprepared for this behavior. From the day we met him at the airport my way of handling things had been to deny anything was wrong. I ignored indicators that he was not adjusting, that he was not reconnecting. I thought things would be all right once we moved back to the coast and picked up our lives in surroundings familiar to us, in surroundings we loved.

From the house, we heard Mac start the boat at the dock. Through the trees I could see him backing out into the bay. I felt excluded. Mac had not asked me to go but I assured Mac’s parents that he sometimes just needed to be alone.

“Has he talked with you about anything in particular that might have happened to him over there?” Mac’s father asked.

I shrugged not wanting to talk behind Mac’s back and not wanting to admit that he refused to talk with me about his time in Afghanistan. The only person I knew he talked to was an old buddy from basic training named Thomas who called occasionally. Mac usually took his calls on his cell phone outside.

After I put Will to bed, I tried to watch television but could not seem to focus. The national news picked up the story about the oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico, calling it the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Scientists, interviewed by newscasters, predicted the oil spill would have far-reaching effects on the environment. They repeatedly showed pictures of coastal birds covered in oil at the site of the 1989 Exxon Valdez tanker spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska.

Unable to bear the horrific sights, I went to the porch and waited for Mac, falling asleep in a rocker sometime after midnight. Around daybreak I walked down the path to the bay. The dock was deserted; Mac had not returned. Worried and angry that he had left me I ran to the house…

……

Sylvia Williams Dodgen writes in Orange Beach, AL. She is an award-winning writer of prose and poetry who earned undergraduate and master's degrees at the University of Alabama.
dodgen.jean@yahoo.com

A NEW BEGINNING

Jill Billions
40" x 30"
Acrylic on Canvas

Jill Billions lives in Vestavia Hills, AL. She studied medicine and art at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. When she is not practicing medicine, raising a family, volunteering, gardening, and visiting Italy, she finds time to paint. Her work may be seen at Artists Incorporated Gallery in Hoover. **jillbillions@mac.com**

THIS IS A CITY

Shana Nicholson

This is a city that keeps secrets, secretly. Imposing trees swallow hills,
bridges, farm houses, and roads while steamy air consumes
the empty spaces in a sodium pentothal fog, holding the
petrichor and magnolia close to our noses.

This is a city where bones grow strong to hang our history.
Our calloused hands picked cotton,
weaved rivercane baskets, forged factory steel, and
sculpted Ram-headed storytellers.

The crickets and locusts chirp electronic white noise hypnosis
that leaves an era that sent four little girls hurtling into a sky abloom with
heat lightning forgotten and dying on the sidewalk along with
lungs boot-black with coal, and the blood-stained dress of a whipped octoroon.

This wet, red earth will cradle my own parents as it does my grandparents
and the three generations of my family that came before them, slowly
ingesting them along with the Koasati, Confederate, Union soldier, miner,
slave, and Freedom Rider.

This is a city where blood, bleeds;
sweat, sweats; breath, breathes; and time
slogs heavily in a
headwind against modernity.

.....

Shana Nicholson is a native of Birmingham, AL, who has lived in Lafayette, LA; Houston; and Los Angeles, but has found her way back to Birmingham. She has been published in many newspapers, magazines, and journals: Verse Libre Quarterly*,* Lung*, and* The Red Booth Review *among them, but this one is her favorite.* **shananicholson@aol.com**

CHAINS

Dannye Romine Powell-*2016 Hackney Literary Award Winner–National Poetry, 3rd Prize*

For hours, heading home
in our '73 Ford, we'd skidded
and slid through a whistling winter storm,
our two-year-old son asleep
in the backseat.
Yes, we had chains
in the trunk but we were clueless
how to attach them, inept as we were
at so many things back then -- love,
parenthood, the tricky footpaths
of a marriage
that wouldn't last.

But that night, after miles
of white-knuckled fright,
we pulled into the back driveway
of the Victorian house where we rented
three upstairs rooms,
and saw that the yellow porch light
had transformed
the frozen landscape
into burnished gold.
He turned off the engine
and we clung to each other, certain
we had made it home.

.....

Dannye Romine Powell is the author of four collections of poetry, the most recent, Nobody Calls Me Darling Anymore. *Her poems have appeared in* the Southern Review, Ploughshares, Poetry, Blackbird, Bellevue Literary Review *and many others. She has won fellowships from the NEA and the NC Arts Council.*
dannye700@aol.com

AMBIENT LIGHT WAITING

Jeanie Robertson

28" x 36"

Watercolor on Paper

Jeanie Robertson is a watercolor artist in Birmingham, AL.

THE LIVES OF CHILDREN DURING THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

Oliver Trolard - *2017 Winner - Glenn Feldman Historical Essay Competition*

My eyes popped open today and I couldn't think about anything but what happened on the bus last time I rode it. December 1, began like any other Thursday. I got up, got dressed, packed up, said "Bye!" to my mom and walked to school. School went by like every other day. My favorite subject is math. After school, I walked to the bus stop to wait for the bus that would take me to my mom's work. She works in a fabric store downtown on Dexter Avenue.

I got on the bus and went right to where I'm supposed to sit–the black section. Once I got to my mom's work, I hugged her and headed to the back of the store to entertain myself for the next hour. I found the jacks I kept in a drawer and entertained myself until my mom got off her shift.

At 5:00, we gathered up our stuff and headed to the bus stop to take us home. We got on the bus and once again went right to where we were supposed to sit–the black section. Except for one lady in the group, Mrs. Parks. I recognized Mrs. Parks because she came into my mom's work almost every day to buy thread, needles, and cloth. The bus was warm and the chilly breeze from the window felt good on my face.

My mom always quizzes me on math problems as we ride home every afternoon. At the next stop, a bunch of people got on the bus. Most of them were white and I was glad my window was still open as the bus got more crowded. Mrs. Parks was still sitting up front in the white section. She should have gotten up to give her seat to one of the white men standing, but she just kept on sitting! I was surprised at how confident she was.

My mom tried not to pay attention, but I could tell that she was mad. We just kept on waiting for Mrs. Parks to get up and she didn't. The bus driver said he would call the police and soon, the police came and took her away. I thought it was silly; making a black person get up and if they didn't, arrest them.

Since that day, I've had a different feeling about how black people are treated. I had always thought that a black person's seat was at the back of the bus. But, since that day, so much has changed. My mom and I have gathered in crowds of people to hear the Reverend Dr. King speak and have gone to meetings about the bus boycott.

We haven't ridden the bus in months! I've had to wake up a lot earlier for my mom to get to work and my afternoons are a lot different. Mom and I have to walk

several blocks to catch a taxi car. My mom and I still do math problems in the taxi. Some days we have even had to walk all the way home.

Lots of people are going to need new shoes soon! I hope soon the bus boycott will be over and Mom and I won't have to ride in the black section. Maybe we can ride up front, kinda like where Mrs. Parks sat.

Oliver Trolard is a fourth-grade student at Southminster Day School in Vestavia Hills, AL. The Glenn Feldman Historical Essay Competition is dedicated to the memory of its namesake, a professor of history at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. [Sources: Back of the Bus *by Aaron Reynolds*; The Montgomery Bus Boycott, a Historic Perspectives Book *by Martin Gitlin*; The Durrs of Montgomery - APT Documentary Movie]

"A billion stars go spinning through the night, blazing high above your head. But in you is the presence that will be, when all the stars are dead."

–Rainer Maria Rilke

WHAT WAS THE WORLD AT THE END OF IT, WERE THE DAYS THE SAME FOR ALL?

Tom Pescatore

quiet here in the dark,
and the snow,
beneath me,
and tho my window closed, I can sense it
as something cold,
vast,
unforgiving, as it stretches white
over miles, highways,
fields.

my cat won't talk to me.
he slinks under table
to lick at his fur
keeping me in the corner of one amber eye.

outside,
the street lamps are golden
the light cast through my window,
is golden, there's no sound but no sound,
a heavy absence, a feeling to be gained
and lost. and found and
lost again.

my cat stalks ghosts
into the bedroom
breathes heavy, groans,
whines, implores me
to sleep.
but I am not ready to give up yet.

in the morning all this,
will be gone.

.....

Tom Pescatore can sometimes be seen wandering along the Walt Whitman bridge or down the sidewalks of Philadelphia's old Skid Row. He might have left a poem or two behind to mark his trail. He maintains a poetry blog: **amagicalmistake.blogspot.com**

TIERNAN'S LAST STAND (special excerpt from a longer story)

Richard Rook-*2016 Hackney Literary Award Winner-National Story 3rd prize*

The Honorable Roberta Abigail Hillman, better known as "Hang-'em-High" Hillman, was the toughest and probably the smartest trial judge in Massachusetts. Her honor started as a dewy-eyed public defender, but became a prosecutor after her own car was stolen from a courthouse parking lot. And she made sure the perp had plenty of time in the cooler to wish he had taken the next car over. I was covering the hearing for my law partner, Glenn Bradley. He had gotten a devastating diagnosis from his doctor two days back, and rushed off to the Mayo Clinic for a second opinion. Glenn's clients, Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez, lived in a one-traffic-light town an hour west of Boston. Their house was hit by lightning and burned to the ground. An Act of God, the insurance company called it. In insurance world, God gets blamed for a lot of bad stuff. Good thing the Sanchez family wasn't home. Paying extra claims would really have annoyed the insurance company. Under the town's zoning bylaw, the house was nonconforming. It was on a tiny lot, only inches from a property line. But the bylaw gave Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez a casualty exemption from current zoning requirements, as long as they got an occupancy permit within two years. No exceptions, even if God did it. Tick-tock, tick-tock.

Mr. Sanchez had trouble getting all his permit approvals. Everything took longer than he expected. He didn't apply for a final permit until twenty-seven months after the fire. The Building Inspector denied the application as untimely, and Glenn appealed. He hoped to work out a deal. But the town immediately filed a motion to dismiss the appeal. Glenn's response was due last week, but with all his bad medical news, he never got around to it. In the House of Hillman, that was like poking the lioness with a stick. In my younger days, I had appeared before some intimidating judges. Judge Carter would doze off and ask his clerk to wake him up if I said anything intelligent. Judge Rooney offered to continue a case while I re-took the last year of law school. You put on adult diapers before you stepped into their courtrooms. They might have put on their own adult diapers if they had to appear before Judge Hillman. But I was beyond intimidation now. After thirty-seven years in the trenches, my candle was burned out, the ticket punched. Five more months. Stick and jab, duck and cover. I had no dog in this afternoon's fight. I was only doing Glenn a favor.

I sometimes looked back on my days as a young public interest lawyer, full of piss and vinegar. I was a crappy lawyer then, but I never left anything on the table. Now I was a good lawyer, doing things that didn't mean anything. Life overtakes

you, I guess. I wasn't a young Turk any more, and there were bills to pay. I ran into opposing counsel Jeff Guerin walking into the courthouse. I liked Jeff. Nice kid, still thought that justice was blind. Fact is, it's more likely to be deaf and dumb. So, I had given up litigation. I was a desk-jockey tax lawyer now.

It had been four years since I last stepped into a courtroom. The smell hadn't changed. They all smell the same. I once heard a lawyer describe it as the stench of rotting dreams. I liked that, although I had no idea what he was talking about. Neither did he. He was on his third drink. We were the only case on the docket. Except for a clerk and a court officer, the courtroom was empty, smelly, and stifling hot. What a fun way to spend a Friday afternoon in July. My first court appearance had been in this room. I was covering a motion for another lawyer, just like today. It was a simple motion, requesting an extra week to finish pre-trial discovery. But there are no simple motions in the world of the newly-minted lawyer. I wrote a twenty-page brief. I bought a new suit. When my case was called, I stood confidently, prepared to tell the judge how this popcorn motion fit into the essential framework of American law. He never looked up. He glanced at my motion for three seconds, and grunted "allowed." Allowed? How dare you? I am here today to educate you and all you can say is "allowed?" I made fifty dollars covering that motion, less the cost of gas, parking and the suit. That was more than I was making today. I had no business being here. Sure, Ted Williams hit a home run in his last career at-bat. How many other losers say that to themselves just before they get smoked? And I was never a Ted Williams. The court officer brayed his mournful "All rise." All two of us rose. Judge Hillman stepped out of chambers and up to the bench. She was sixtyish and tiny, with oversized glasses that reflected back Jeff and me standing at the counsel table. It was like watching myself on television. She picked up a stopwatch and shook it.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. Let's go over the starting lineups. I know Mr. Guerin. He's here so often he must have a Hillman rewards card. But I don't recognize opposing counsel. I was expecting Glenn Bradley."

"Good afternoon, your honor. Attorney Michael Tiernan for the Sanchez family. I'm Mr. Bradley's law partner. He took ill and could not be here today."

"Such a pity, so many lawyers with cases before me seem to take ill. Welcome to hell, Mr. Tiernan. At least that's what it feels like in here. Maybe the county could afford one more window air conditioner. Please be seated. Mr. Tiernan, I don't see any brief telling me why I should deny Mr. Guerin's motion. So, you'll have to win me over today with your silver tongue. And it looks like a depressingly simple case. But let's see if you can surprise me. You're up, Mr. Guerin. Keep your

opening statements succinct, gentlemen. We don't want this case decided by the last heatstroke."

She hit her stopwatch and leaned back. Jeff stood up. "Good afternoon, your honor. The town's bylaw gave the Sanchez family two full years to rebuild their house. It took them twenty-seven months just to apply for a final permit. This law should be enforced as written and intended. Thank you."

Jeff sat down.

"You just redefined succinct, Mr. Guerin. So, Mr. Tiernan, the argument to you is that words mean what they say. Can you beat that?"

.....

Richard T. Rook grew up in Rhode Island, and graduated from Georgetown University and Boston University Law School. He hopes "to be a retired lawyer and working writer."
richardtrook@gmail.com

"If the universe is so vast, and its age so old, and its stars so plentiful, where is everybody?"

—Enrico Fermi

HELGA

Cainon Leeds–*2016 Hackney Literary Awards–National Poetry, 2nd Prize*

I like to pretend
A pudding and fish Swedish woman
Named Helga
Lives up on the hill
With God. I'd like to think
She's really just sad
And lonely when she beats
The blankets out with a paddle
And makes a thunder storm, or when she
Pours out a pulpy glass of lemonade
Without any sugar,
Offers it
To herself, and
Puckers up
The ground with weeds, or when she
Silently purses her lips, raises her eyebrows,
Flattens the white sheets
Of snow
On her half of the bed, and
Packs ice underneath to make sure
Her husband slips and falls
In the snow storm.
Maybe it's just a natural
Part of every Swedish woman's life.
Sour dreams, Helga.
Just the way
You like them, ja?

.....

Cainon Leeds is an IT consultant and aspiring writer in the Des Moines, IA area. He grew up in a small Iowan farming community and drew the inspiration for "Helga" from Swedish influences in his home town as well as the sudden changes in weather in the Great Plains. He hopes to publish a book someday.

mr.cainonleeds@gmail.com

60 MINUTES AUDITION TO REPLACE ANDY ROONEY: TAKE ONE

Seth Cortland Tanner

In these contentious times, I think if we can agree on one thing, one issue dividing us…despite viewing the same evidence, well, we probably won't unite behind a single cause, but it'll be a start. [turn to camera 2].

Let's take this glass here, clearly marked, scientifically verified. Here's the 25% mark, the 50%…you get the point. There, I've poured enough water to reach the half way mark. [turn back to camera 1]

That's 50% for those who hated their math teacher. I understand hating a math teacher. Mrs. Hoffman kicked me out of algebra class regularly– something about my bad attitude. [turn back to camera 2]

Anyway, the glass of water, clearly half has water, half doesn't. It's neither empty nor full. [turn to camera 3]

And I can see you rolling your eyes thinking I've missed the point. The lower part: clearly water. The upper part, it isn't empty. Ask any physicist or chemist. [turn to camera 2].

They're easier to find than you think. Try your local high school. I'm fairly certain there's a teacher standing in front of a science class. They can tell you there are particles we can't see, some can't be detected without that huge particle collider underground in Switzerland somewhere. [turn to camera 3]

There's oxygen, carbon dioxide, quarks and some theoretical thing called the God particle all dancing about. [turn to camera 2]

So, the next time someone asks the question, you know the one. [turn to camera 1]

Have you noticed only optimists and Charlie Rose present this dilemma? [turn to camera 3]

Is the glass half empty or half full? Remember to answer, it's a half-a-glass of water.

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YELLOW MAMA

Donna F. Orchard

I open the drawer to find my will and add a request. “Please do not bury me 100 yards from where I am left for dead.”

The newspaper report says she will be buried in that same cemetery where she was strangled with a towel and tied down with her own shoestrings. My mind goes to a macabre scene in which I see her body being pulled a short distance, then thrown into the nearest hole for convenience. Her spirit gets an icy chill.

I pick up my cup of coffee and the morning paper, the Press-Register in Mobile, Alabama, on November 14, 1977. Under the big news about Auburn beating Alabama in the Iron Bowl, the headlines are striking: “Prichard Man Charged Shortly After Finding Nun Dead.” The details are all there since the murder of Sister Ann Hogan, a native of Keokuk, Iowa, a member of the order of the Daughters of Charity. Sister Ann left Providence Hospital where she worked two days ago about 2:00 p.m. to go to the Catholic Cemetery in Prichard to pray for her dead sisters.

The report continues, “Walking was her favorite pastime, so it was not unusual for her to make the one-mile trek from the hospital to the cemetery.”

Someone remembered Sister Ann entering the cemetery about 2:30 p.m., so she made it there in thirty minutes. Tomorrow I am going to try to walk that route since it is in my neighborhood. I want to know where she walked, what streets she had to cross. She was expected back at the hospital at 5 p.m. to help another nun cook for a party. It was unusual for Sister Ann, who was always punctual, to be late for the birthday party that afternoon at the hospital.

“When she fails to return to Providence by 5 p.m., Providence officials launch a search and later notified the Mobile Police Department.”

A teenager? Nobody would worry about her for a couple of days. Just figured she had found a more exciting party. But Sister Ann–in a graveyard praying for dead people? The police waste no time.

As they walk near the swamp next to the cemetery at about 6:30 p.m., a policeman sees something light blue, a shawl among some of the gravestones. More officers are called in. At around 7:30 p.m., Sister Ann Hogan’s body is found lying under a pile of logs, stones and bricks.

The newspaper says Sister Ann will be buried in that same cemetery where she was strangled with a towel and tied down with her own shoestrings.

Two years ago, I opened the door for an interview and saw Grace Bolden, a tall, stout African American woman who walked in with shoulders back, dress freshly pressed, claiming respect. In her dark eyes, an infectious love and a spiritual calm. Grace was to be the caregiver for my two boys, hired to get my six-year-old off to school an hour after I leave for a long commute. She would also care for the newborn. No cooking or cleaning–just rock the baby.

Grace and I became firm friends. We are both large women so I went to my closet and held up a blouse, giggling, "This will look better on you than me!" But I could get only so close. She had a far-away look about her.

It is a week later, and already police arrested Cornelius Singleton and charged him with the murder of Sister Ann. The biggest piece of evidence they found was the nun's watch at his grandfather's house.

When Grace steps through the screen door at the back, I know something is wrong, bad wrong. Her eyes are swollen, and her hair that is always in a tight, neat bun is spiraling out of control all over her head. *I wonder if somebody is dead*. I hear a moan before she says, "I can't come to work today, Miss Donna. They've arrested my baby, Neil, for killing that nun."

"Oh, no. I just read about it. But the man is a Singleton."

"I'm Grace Singleton Bolden. I was married to a Singleton."

"Let me get a cool rag for your head. Sit down, Grace. Sit down. Don't worry about anything around here. Tell me what happened. Why do they think your son would do such a thing?"

"I love the Lord, Miss Donna. Taught all my children to love the Lord."

"Oh, I know you do, Grace."

"I know Neil wouldn't do anything like that. He doesn't even know any nuns. Why would he do something like that? He's slow. He's always been slow in school. He stutters. But, he wouldn't go and kill somebody dead."

"Of course not. Of course not."

He must have heard they were looking for him. They found him hiding under a house right over here on North Ann. He told them to throw him the handcuffs. He knew if he crawled out, he would be shot dead."

"Why do they think he did it? Oh, Grace, you have to get a lawyer."

"They went to his granddaddy's house and found the dead nun's watch. That's all they got. That's all they got on him. But anybody could have given him that watch. He's like a child. If it was bright and shiny he would have took it. That don't mean nothin'. Somebody could have passed it off on him."

"Of course, you don't have to work today. Can I do anything? I don't have any money, but can I vouch for you? Can't anybody do anything? They probably had pressure to find somebody because a nun is dead. They'll probably figure things out and let him go. Give me a hug, Grace. The police had to come up with somebody. They'll get it all worked out. You don't worry about Al and Benjamin. I'll go next door and pay Darlene to keep them. You take off as long as you need to. What can I do?"

"I'm gonna need lots of prayers–to God, to the Saints. Just pray for Neil real hard."

I watch Grace go out of the front door and onto the porch of the little mission-style brick cottage, under the archway, and down the walk. She turns around. "He's slow, Miss Donna, but he's not a killer. Not my boy. I know my boy. No, not a killer. I'm going to walk down to Metro (jail) and find out if they've let him out. They won't let him call me. He would have called me."

"Oh, I'll take you, Grace. Come on, Sweetheart."

"No, I'd rather walk. I need to get some peace about me before I get there."

Grace turns around one more time on the walk and mumbles, "Not my son. Not that mean. Dead."

That was the last time I saw Grace except the day when she came by to pick up some dressy clothes I thought she could wear to the courthouse. I had to respect her wish to grieve in private during the trial.

The wooden electric chair in Alabama was ironically built by an inmate, a London cabinetmaker, in Kilby Prison, in 1923. It was named "Yellow Mama" by the inmates because of its garish mustard color.

Even though there was a confession and overwhelming evidence, Neil had a strong defense—his IQ was 67, a 6th grade reading level. Mild retardation implies an inability to connect actions to consequences.

After fifteen years, his appeals ran out.

A 36-year-old man by now, his mother, Grace, was not on the list of those to view his execution. He refused his last meal.

"Cornelius Singleton was electrocuted at 12:20 a.m. on Friday, November 13, 1992, at Holman Prison."

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Donna F. Orchard writes in Robertsdale, Alabama.
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BEHAVE!
Brenda Burton

"It's not your turn! And you only rolled a two. You moved six spaces. You cheated!"

"It was *my* turn. *You* cheated! I'm taking my game and going home!"

I started counting to see how long it would take Jimmy to grab his Dungeons and Dragons game pieces, stuff them into a baggie, storm down the stairs, and slam the front door, a frequent occurrence since my son Jason and our neighbor's son, Jimmy, became best friends.

Instead, I heard what I took to be the thunking sound of plastic wizards, golems and elves hitting the wall, followed by, "Now you've done it!" That was immediately followed by muffled grunts and thuds which meant they were rolling around on the floor, flailing at each other.

I was tired and really didn't want to climb the stairs to break it up nor did I want the UN crawling all over us, so I walked to the foot of the stairs and yelled, "Jason! Behave!"

There was a pause in the altercation and Jason yelled, "What?"

"I said behave!"

"I am being have," he answered.

It wasn't the last time I had to remind him to behave but it was the only time I ever heard him try to conjugate "behave" on the fly.

If you think about it, if everyone just remembered to BEHAVE, the whole world would be in a lot better place. I know I would. If only I had always behaved…

Luv Guvs, Presidents, Attorneys General, Mexican drug lords, Syrian dictators, racists, misogynists, serial killers, Black Panthers, Klansmen, three-year-olds. There is probably no one who wouldn't benefit from being have.

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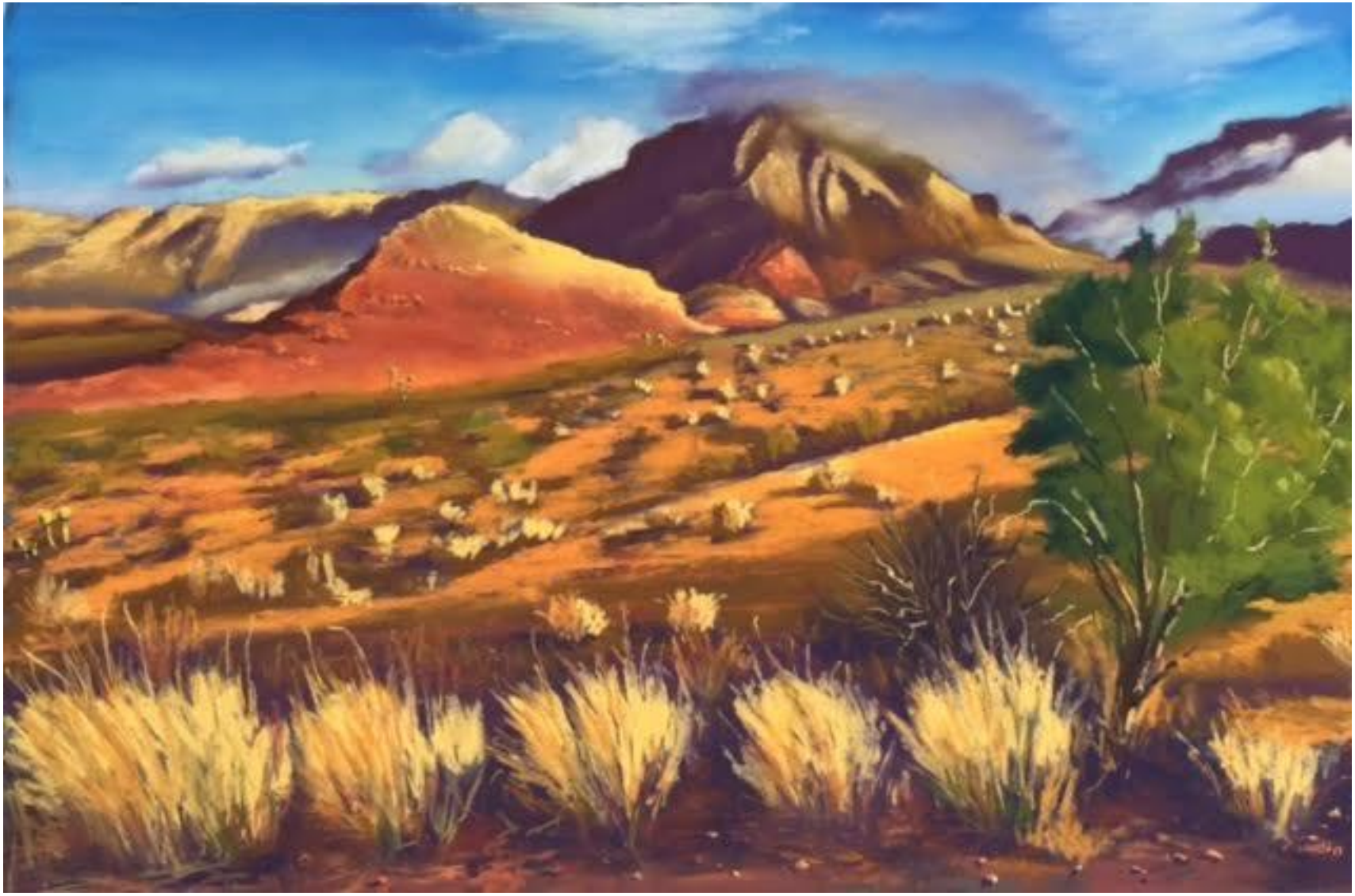
Brenda Burton works in a 9 x10 room analyzing data for an insurance company and writing fiction. She doesn't get out much. On the rare occasion when she does, she spends her time discussing Angry Birds and Spiderman with her grandsons. **moosie40@yahoo.com**



MOJAVE DESERT

David M. Jones

36" x 24"

Soft Pastel on Ampersand Pastelboard

David Jones studied art at Auburn University where he concentrated in illustration and painting. He holds a Bachelor of Visual Arts degree from Auburn University Montgomery. He has studied with many premier landscape artists in the United States. He lives and paints in Monroeville, AL. **davidmjones@frontier.com**

SELF LOVE

Eric Latham

i feel it

accepting who i am
respecting who i am
honoring who i am

it just took understanding
who i am

been chasing tails all these years
always trying to be someone else
no wonder i've had such trouble

i'm a triangle who tried fitting like a square
always felt that i was missing a side
i just couldn't bring myself to admit it

failing over and over to let my obsessions fill the empty spaces
all they did was widen the gap
cut away at my edges

but now i lay my story to rest
in your hands
where i was given a beginning
where all struggles may be given an end

thank you for my life
and for teaching me
the truth

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Eric Latham is a student at Oak Mountain High School who loves writing self-reflecting poetry. He is also a musician and recording artist and seeks to share all his art with the world. **ericoliverlatham@gmail.com**

20 QUESTIONS

Rachel Belth

"You'll have to guess who we saw at Kohl's."

This is how Mom greets Dad today when he comes home from work. She leaves it at that for now–she's still browning the meat for the chili.

"Okay!" he says, pecking her on the lips. He sets his lunchbox on the counter and goes into the study, where Rebecca and Caleb are studying. He watches over their shoulders momentarily and sorts the papers on his desk until dinner.

Mom flips the piece of frozen ground chuck. The raw meat sizzles as she scrapes off the top layer of browned meat with a spoon, a rhythmic clack against the bottom of the skillet. It's my job to make the cornbread. If I start the moment we finish unloading the groceries from the car onto the kitchen laminate, it will be finished just in time to eat. I work two ingredients at a time: briskly to the pantry for flour, sugar. Take them back and grab baking powder, salt. Again, for cornmeal, vegetable oil. To the fridge for eggs, milk. Whip with a wooden spoon, pour into the glass baking dish, scoot Mom aside to slide it into the still pre-heating oven.

At dinner, everyone's quiet, the clink of silverware the only sound. Mom leans forward on her hands to shift pressure to a new part of her lower back; Dad leans back in his chair. Rebecca sits on both knees so she has farther to slouch, resting her head in her hand. She watches indifferently the curl of steam rising from her bowl.

Caleb is wearing a bright green Bobby Labonte t-shirt. He habitually keeps a stash of NASCAR magazines and used Kleenex next to his spot at the table. He eats almost reclining, his entire right bicep parallel to his plate, fist to temple. His placemat is strewn with cornbread crumbs and drops of chili. He has opened one of the magazines next to him, occasionally turning a page with his greasy thumb.

Dad tries to break the silence. He looks at Mom across the table and says cheerfully, "Bill Deitsch gave me some more work today."

I never understand why he thinks we're interested about his time at work. I have never met any of his coworkers; I have only their names to imagine what they look like. I imagine Bill Deitsch to be a cheerful, gray-haired fellow. Maybe because "Deitsch" rhymes with "peach."

"Good," says Mom. She also does not know how to respond when Dad talks about work. She stares expressionless at a knot on the oak table.

Rebecca looks at me over her glasses. I roll my eyes in reply. Dad is staring at his bowl, so he doesn't notice we're making fun of him.

He tries again. "I'll be testing a new radio. Greg Cantrell might be helping me." I imagine Greg Cantrell to be intense, a man who lives on the balls of his feet.

Mom takes a bite of chili, concentrating on the knot. And another bite. "Will that be a problem," she says finally, the words so hard to come by that they don't have the energy to form an actual question.

Rebecca coughs, a single faint thing, just a reminder of her presence. Caleb flips a magazine page.

Dad thinks and says, "Testing the radio or working with Greg Cantrell?"

Mom pauses, spoon midair, as if she had asked the question out of obligation to make conversation, as if she had asked it without knowing what she was asking or caring about the answer. "Working with Greg Cantrell."

I sigh and lean back in my chair.

Dad takes a couple bites, thinking. "I think it will be all right. He's getting a little better…at working with people."

Caleb reaches for seconds, spoons the chili with his elbow still on the table, dribbling sauce on the hot pad beneath the skillet. He drags the bowl back to his place.

"Is there math today?" says Dad, looking at Mom. He holds the raisin container to his chest, one hand inside, massaging the raisins apart and dumping them on his salad. He turns to Rebecca, "What kind of dressing are we having?"

"Ranch." She stabs a piece of romaine with her fork. It's a tradition of theirs to have the same salad dressing, a tradition so old no one even tries to remember how it started.

"Rebecca and Caleb have math. It's on your desk," says Mom.

"Can I open the Doritos?" says Caleb.

Mom nods. "Okay."

Caleb goes to the pantry. I neatly cut another piece of cornbread, press it against the roof of my mouth with my tongue, savoring the grainy sweetness. Finally, Mom looks at Dad and says offhandedly, "Oh, you still need to guess who we saw."

"Right." Dad's face brightens, though he doesn't actually smile. He sets down his fork. "Where did you say you saw them?"

"Kohl's," says Rebecca, sitting a little straighter. "We saw two people."

"Let's see…someone from Westridge?"

"No."

"Someone from North Park?"

"Yes."

"Someone from our Sunday school?"

"Yes," says Rebecca.

"Well…," I say.

"One of them is from our Sunday school?"

"Yes!"

"Is this person a male?"

"Female?"

"Is she married?"

"Does she have kids?"

"How many kids does she have?"

"Dad. It has to be a yes-or-no question."

"Oh, right."

Mom chortles softly.

"So, does she have more than three kids?"

"More than four?"

"So, four kids?"

"Four kids…in our Sunday school…are the kids in the youth group?"

"Are some of the kids in the youth group?"

"Some of the kids in the youth group…four kids…in our Sunday school…the Kraffts?"

"Which ones?"

"Mrs. Krafft."

"And Anna?"

"Amanda?"

"Mrs. Krafft and Amanda!" he says, smiling as if this is a delightful surprise and leaning back in his chair. "Very good…how are they doing?"

And before long, we fall back into the relative silence of spoons against bowls.

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Rachel Belth is a creative nonfiction writer and poet in Columbus, OH. She works as an instructional designer for a variety of companies. Her work has appeared in Prick of the Spindle, *82 Review*, *and* Embodied Effigies. **rmbelth@gmail.com**

KNOWN BY SALT

Tina Mozelle Braziel–*2016 Hackney Literary Awards–State Poetry, 1st Prize*

Instead of sugar, salt spangles my grapefruit halves,
cream of wheat, grits. Always salt on watermelon.

I get looks, questions for salting before tasting.
A habit of my father, his father and brothers.

Ironworkers, their jobs demanded salt,
offered it in capsules that they never took.

The day I was born my father cut
from the carton the Morton salt girl

for me, his first-born, a girl,
whose salt pours under umbrellas.

I've never welded, never raised a bridge,
but I'm one of them in the taste we share

for what we get and need to take.

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Tina Mozelle Braziel's chapbook, Rooted by Thirst*, was published by Porkbelly Press in 2016. Her poetry has appeared in* The Cincinnati Review, Southern Humanities Review, Tampa Review*, and other journals. She directs the Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She and her husband, novelist James Braziel, live and write in a glass cabin they are building on Hydrangea Ridge, near Remlap, AL.* **tinamozelle@gmail.com**

THE COMOVING DISTANCE OF THE PEACH IN COSMOLOGICAL EQUATIONS

Matthew Layne–*2016 Hackney Literary Awards–State Poetry, 2nd Prize*

Circling down in a tightening gyre
the crow charts its course to the silver orchard,
pencil trees in perfect parallels
until the horizon, where, anarchy!
Lines meet, centers fold, Euclid rolls gravely,
and chaos wads his glooming arithmetic
into a confused ball. Look to the farmer,
her twilight fingers plot a new geometry
as they trace across the paper bark.
Here, soil is *x* and fruit is *y*, and we solve
for no endpoint but infinity.
Beneath each callus lies the spiral
formula of creation. Beneath
the bark, *spiritus mundi* pumps sap
heavenward to where peach blossoms unfurl
luscious truths, and there, my firm friend,
past the pluck, the fuzz, flesh, nectar, and pleasure,
turning and turning, beyond the world's
widening eye, is the grooved pit of it all,
intricate as your brilliant brain.
The stony core of its center holds
the key, press it to your ear and hear
it lover-whisper, be sweet. Be sweet.

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Matt Layne is a Birmingham poet, librarian, and advocate for positive change through arts and literature. He helps facilitate Birmingham's annual Day of the Dead celebration and is currently serving on the American Library Association committee, Best Fiction for Young Adults. **mr.mattlayne@gmail.com**

LOCH NESS

Alexandra Upton–*2016 Hackney Literary Award Winner–National Story, 2nd Prize*

Alasdair MacDougall stared glumly into the amber liquid in front of him, absentmindedly drumming his fingers on the ancient bar top. The bartender let him bide in his corner uninterrupted. It was not uncommon for the stony Scot to spend his evenings here in the pub, nursing a drink in isolation. The men had long since ceased to invite him to join them in cards. The few women edged around him as though afraid he would eat them up as soon as look at them. He had a reputation in Whitefield as a sullen old bastard, resigned to his solitude and the inevitability of death. It was a formidable reputation. He lived alone in an enormous mansion overlooking Loch Ness. The house was maintained, for lack of a better word, by Mrs. Keith, a kind, albeit resigned, lady.

Hardened by years of drudgery and sustained, she claimed, by the healthy lake breezes (but more likely by the healthy store of cooking sherry in the pantry), she was a woman of scrupulous morals, strong superstitions, and unyielding prejudices. No other creature could have forborne such a life of isolation and monotony. The women of the town, when flocked together on doorsteps as is traditional for women in small towns everywhere, gossiping and gabbing and glowering ferociously at any men who happened to be passing, would often breathe a sigh of pity for "poor Mrs. Keith. What a love to work up there alone in that drafty auld house with that clarty bastart."

This evening, that same clarty bastard, having finished his drink, slammed the required four pence on the bar top, heaved on his oilskin coat, and slouched from the pub. The atmosphere of the establishment lightened perceptibly following the departure of the old man. The weather was tempestuous. Alasdair staggered up the sodden road through the driving rain, his empty sleeve flapping violently in the wind. Rain sloshed over the tops of his boots as he stumbled in and out of potholes, agitatedly wiping water from his eyes with his hand. Thunder rumbled like the wrath of an avenging god and lightning split the sky, illuminating for a second Mrs. Keith's riotous garden, her foxgloves and columbines thrashing about in some wild satanic dance, the daisies prostrating themselves before the towering hollyhocks which writhed as though in the fiery tortures of hell itself. Stumbling again, Alasdair flailed desperately with his arm to catch himself, seizing upon a providential fencepost just in time. He kicked an offensively cheery garden gnome out of his way and gained the backdoor cursing, soaked to the skin and quite out of breath.

The long hall inside was dark and drafty, the only faint glimmer being Mrs. Keith's kitchen at its end. Slamming the door behind him, he unceremoniously flung his coat and hat on a hall chair and slouched off towards the stairs. Halfway up and he was assailed by a reproachful voice from below.

"Weel, there y'are, ye bloody bampot. An' here's me worryin' ye'd be out all night I' right blootert doon't yon pub an' a'd half to come 'n' git ye 'n this storm 'n' bring y'up here right pished 'n' all! Blazes, ye had me right feart ya'd gone an' got yersel' blown into th' loch! Whit're ye up to, ye huddy?!"

Alasdair muttered some incomprehensible but likely obscene response and continued up the stairs. Mrs. Keith recognized a losing battle when she saw one, and years of attending to Mr. MacDougall had taught her when to take the high road.

"Weel, seein' as ah didnae ken when ye'er comin' back, ah kept yer supper on th' hub for ye 'n' 'tis nice warm if'n ye be wanting it."

Alasdair ignored this, and Mrs. Keith, shaking her head, bustled off back to her kitchen, agitation personified.

Most of the upstairs rooms of the house were shuttered, the ghostly forms of the sheet-draped furniture wallowing in decades of dust and sun-starved solitude. As a rule, Alasdair prowled between his bedroom upstairs and his study downstairs with only occasional treks into the kitchen when he required something of Mrs. Keith too complicated to be bellowed through the halls. The bedroom was an austere apartment–only the vital necessities of bed, washstand, and a dresser and in one corner shrouded with a heavy quilt and covered in dust, a shadowy, indistinct shape. Before the window was a stiff-backed chair in which Alasdair liked to sit of an evening, smoking his pipe in taciturn tranquility. The room had no mirror, nor did the rest of the house. Complain as Mrs. Keith might about the dangers of his slitting his throat as he shaved left-handed each morning, Alasdair refused to have one in the house.

He undressed quickly and got into bed. The rain hammered down on the roof and beat against the windows. The old house trembled as rolls of thunder shook the moor. Trees twisted and writhed grotesquely in the wind, and the waters of Loch Ness slowly rose, drowning the heather in its inky depths.

The life of Alasdair MacDougall had not always been such a bleak abyss. His parents discovered that Alasdair possessed a unique talent for writing at a tender age. By the age of ten, his first had been story published in a local paper, and at sixteen he enrolled at the university in Edinburgh. Upon his return, he moved to a small cottage in Balchraggen where he scribbled furiously. There he had finished a short novel which was published within the year. By the age of thirty, Alasdair was a celebrated author, a revered professor at the university, and the toast of

Edinburgh. However, the onset of the war in 1914, awakened a hitherto unknown sense of patriotism in the heart of the loyal Scot.

Despite his forty-two years, he enlisted along with the rest of his countrymen and promptly was assigned to Company C of the Black Watch. Three months later, Captain MacDougall and his company of blindly excited, fiercely patriotic, petrified young men shipped out to France. Two weeks later, the entire company of 200 Scotsmen, all under the age of twenty-five, were slaughtered in a poorly planned advance on the German base in Le Havre. Captain MacDougall awoke in a military hospital with a minor head injury, some bruised ribs, and no right arm. He was honorably discharged and sent home to Whitefield. He was given a hero's welcome, to his utter horror. He declined all social engagements and eager entreaties to resume his teaching post at Edinburgh, sold his flat, and retired to the family estate on the loch, vacant since his father's passing. That had been twenty years ago, and he had not socialized, taught, or touched a pen in that time. Writing had been his life and now that that career as he saw it was finished, he felt that his life, too, was over.

Gunshots shattered the still morning air. The sky, which should have been clear blue, was heavy with smoke and unseasonable fog. The screams of the fallen mixed with the roar of the sea into one cacophonous symphony of horror. He was running, running as he had never run before. Dirt and blood splattered his clothing and splashed into his boots as he pelted on, charging blindly towards safety or death, there was no way of knowing which. The company had scattered, forgetting all their training in their panic. They were only boys–children! He stumbled over something and looked down as he caught himself. A young man, no more than seventeen, the Black Watch insignia half torn from his coat, lay sprawled in the road, his life's blood pooling around his body. For the life of him, he couldn't remember the boy's name, the boy whose eyes were already half clouded with that horrible sleep. Nevertheless, he knelt, ducking as shots sounded close by. Hoisting the boy onto his shoulders, he struggled to his feet and started to run, staggering under the added weight. He heard a shout from behind him and then a shot, an explosion; he spun around, the blood pounding in his ears. An enormous crack of thunder and….

Alasdair sat up in bed, shaking as cold sweat trickled down his neck. He clambered out of bed and strode to the window. Fumbling with the latch and flinging open the casement, he stuck his head into the driving rain. The cool night air swept over his face, bringing with it enough rain to drench him instantly. He blinked the water from his eyes and stared down at the roiling black surface of Loch Ness, trying to clear his head. The frothing water seemed almost alive. The following morning dawned clear and bright.

Mrs. Keith greeted him as he rounded the banister. “Twas a mingin’ big brawl we had last night then. Yon kitty was in a right fleg. An’ for why didnae y’eat yer supper last night, ya feel numpty? Ach, weel, dinnae fash yersel’. Yer breakfast’s on th’ table if’n ye fancy a bit o’ scran. Ah’m off to shnecky if’n ye be wanting ye mouthing’.”

He ignored her, as was his custom, and walked past her out into the garden. The only indications of the previous night’s squall were several fallen tree branches in Mrs. Keith’s garden, which had resulted in several more gnome casualties. Alasdair smiled grimly to himself. Cheeky bastards deserved it. He strode past the barn down to the bank of the loch. The usually glassy surface was now a mess of dead leaves, twigs, and small branches dislodged in last night’s storm. He strode around the perimeter of the loch, staring dully at the debris. Not far from the house, he encountered two boys at the water’s edge, staring intently at its surface, unaware of Alasdair’s presence.

“Do ye think it’s th’ monster?” asked the taller of the two.

His companion leaned out over the bank and squinted hard. “Dunno,” he replied. “Looks like.”

“Me mam says it often comes out after storms ‘n’ th’ like,” continued the taller boy.

“Ach weel,” retorted his friend, “me da says it’s all tush anyway, and that that bit in th’ paper was naught but some pished dobber’s idea of a laugh.”

“Yer da’s a pished dobber; mine says so! An’ yon beasty is as real as you’n me! … C’mon! Let’s go an’ git some scran to t’row into th’ water ‘n’ see if he comes up for it!”

With that, both boys scrambled up the bank and out of sight. Once he was sure they were gone, Alasdair moved to the part of the bank where the boys had been standing with the intent of seeing the subject of their dispute. About a hundred yards out in the loch, a dark shape was just visible below the surface. The murky water and the undulating waves gave the shape the appearance of motion, as though some large aquatic creature were lying there in wait. A sudden slew of memories flashed through Alasdair’s mind. A picture on the front page of the paper of a great hulking beast supposedly discovered in the loch. Stories told in dramatic voices around the fire to frighten children, or hushed voices over a pint in the pub to startle tourists. Decades of folklore trickling back to the first memory of a tale his father had told him when he was a very small boy, of the Loch Ness Monster, a prehistoric beast that still haunted their very loch, only allowing itself to be seen once every seven years when it grew hungry and emerged from its watery abode to swallow unsuspecting fisherman whole.

The monster had been a popular local legend for all of recent memory, and lately had risen to global attention with the photograph of the supposed beast that had been published in a local paper, and soon papers around the world. Alasdair, like the boy's father, and many of Whitefield's more senior inhabitants, thought the photo to be no more than an elaborate hoax meant to stir up trouble. Nevertheless, his writer's curiosity, though dulled from years of dormancy, was aroused by the boys' conjectures and he propelled his grudging feet back up the bank and into the decrepit old boathouse under the trees.

The building had not been opened in years. Alasdair coughed as the dust, dislodged when he opened the door, settled around him. The interior was as dank and musty as a crypt, the windows greened over with leaves and vines, and the old rowboat covered with what must have been the legacy of generations of spiders. He brushed the webs aside and hauled the boat out into the daylight. Rowing with only one arm was incredibly difficult, but with a great deal of splashing and cursing he eventually paddled his way out to the dark spot the boys had been eyeing. He found it to be nothing but a large branch, likely dislodged in last night's storm, floating just below the surface. It did look like some vast aquatic beast lying in wait. He gave an involuntary shudder. The icy, stagnant water, devoid of all signs of life, reminded him too powerfully of the field before battle, the air thick with tension.

What a gruesome ordeal. What a pointless, stupid, filthy bloodbath. Why, he wondered, why could people gabble all day about a monster that

(continued on page 38)

INNOCENSE
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.
www.jaymebarrnobles.com

no one believed in when a real monster was staring them straight in the face? Why could no one see it?

When he had returned home from battle he had been surrounded by kindness, compassion, empathy–all meaningless. Simply empty words and sentiments. They were just overjoyed to see their uncles, fathers, cousins, brothers, sons, returned safely home. Not a one of them knew what it was like out there, and not a one of them wanted to. Not a one of them dared to contemplate the horrors of it, the lasting horrors that made their boys wake screaming in the night, jumping at their own shadows. That was the monster that haunted Loch Ness. That was the beast that ruined lives, destroyed families, decimated homes. That was–a story.

A tiny part of his brain that had been asleep for more than twenty years stirred. Alasdair stared down at his drink in agitation. For days, he had been trying to suppress the tingling. He knew what it was. He'd always had that sensation when the urge to write had taken him. But he had not felt that urge in over twenty years, and besides, it was impossible now. Impossible. He could never write with his left hand. And even if he could, he had no reason to think he could write anything worth reading. No doubt whatever creative genius he had once possessed had dried up years ago.

But he could not deny it. The urge was there. For three days, the gears had been turning, creating characters, relationships, plot lines, and story arcs. For three days, he had been struggling to piece together the mythologies of his childhood with the more modern lore, focusing all his energies into marrying the two. And for three nights he had slept without waking in terror. Perhaps it was not impossible. "Kin ah git ye omethin', Mr. MacDougall?"

The cheery barman was leaning over the counter, his round, red face holding the pleasant expression of good-natured attentiveness seen on barmen everywhere. Alasdair slumped further over his drink as though protecting it.

"No," he said gruffly. Then as an afterthought, because the man was still there, "Thank you."

"What is it that's omething' yer then sir, if ya dinnae mind me askin'. Yer looks like ye've got a right bee in yer bonnet aboot omething'.

Alasdair glowered up at the man. He was about to tell him to bugger off when suddenly, like so many of his fellow men before him, he felt inclined to confide in his amiable inquisitor.

"There's…." He stopped and licked his dry lips. "There's something I want to do. Something I haven't done in a long while. Something that's, that's very important to me. But I don't think I can do it anymore." He fell into the local tongue. "I expect I'll make a right pooched fack of it."

The barman stroked his sandpaper chin in silence for a moment, ignoring the roars for "Anither round, me fannybawz!" and "Fillerup there, chump!" that assailed him from all sides. Then he leaned in with his forearms resting on the bar top and his face level with Alasdair's. His eyes twinkled with unexpected intelligence.

"'Oort business in this world is nae tae succeed, but tae continue tae fail in guid spirits.'" And with that, he was gone to refill pints down the other end of the bar.

Alasdair sat on the edge of his bed, fully clothed, staring at the shrouded shape in the corner of his room. Excitement such as he had never known, tinged with terror, was coursing through him. He strode across the floor and tore the quilt off the shape. His writing desk. Exactly as it had been twenty years ago when he had covered it, never expecting to use it again. He sat, sliding the inkwell to the left side of the desk. He pulled a sheaf of fresh paper towards him and with trembling fingers, reached for his pen. He dropped it almost instantly, his left fingers clumsy and unaccustomed to its shape. He cursed at the ink-splattered page and tried again. This time he held it. He touched the nib to the paper and slowly, slowly dragged it the length of his name. It was sloppy, splattered, barely legible, but it was there. He tried again. The process was painful, excruciating. Once he had started, the thoughts flowed thick and fast and his maladroit hand could write at only a fraction of that speed. But he bore with it, all night long, stopping only when the lamp wick burned out.

The next day he began again. It was emancipating. He related the tales of his childhood mingled with the legends of old, detailing the fearsome water beast that plagued Scotland. But that was not the extent of the story. Into his text he wove the tragedies and the triumphs of battle, the comradery, the terror, the sorrow, the regret–stories he had never told a soul. It was a tribute, an apology, a plea for forgiveness, a reconciliation. It was a story like none he'd ever written. And with every agonizing sentence he felt a weight slowly lifting from his shoulders as courage and confidence filled his heart.

Mrs. Keith did not know what to make of her employer's obsession. "Surely he must be touched in the heid!" she lamented to a neighboring cook. "Up all day

'n' all night scribbling awa'. Doesn't eat hardly a t'ing. Tis no way for a gid jimmy to behave. Tis a mercy his arm doesn't fall clean off!"

At the end of a twelvemonth, it was finished. His blotched, besmeared manuscript. He called his old publisher, who was delighted to hear from Alasdair and, yes, he was more than willing to come out of retirement for a new MacDougall manuscript. One year later, Alasdair strode out of his gate and down the lane, a wrapped parcel under his arm. He smiled and tipped his hat cordially to the two young women he passed who, instead of shrinking and scurrying past, returned the smile, and giggled together as they passed on. He strolled into town, past the bookseller, whose windows were full of The Monster Within by Alasdair MacDougall, a reasonably well received and quite popular novel.

His steps led him through the town center, out toward the small, whitewashed church and its rambling, mossy cemetery. A year ago, entering this place would have been unthinkable. But the story needed an ending. He walked reverentially past the lichen-encrusted stones commemorating lives long ago forgotten. At the center of the cemetery stood a tall, ivory monument rising high above all the nearby graves. It was distinguished from its surroundings by its great height and snowy color, but more significantly by the withered garden of bouquets and wreaths heaped at its base. Etched into the front of the monument was the inscription: "He is not dead, this friend–not dead, But in the path we mortals tread Got some few trifling steps ahead And nearer to the end; So that you too, once past the bend, Shall meet again, as face to face, this friend You fancy dead." – Robert Louis Stevenson For our beloved boys. We shall never forget 1914-1918. Alasdair stood for a moment staring up at the inscription, letting the tears trickle silently down his cheeks. He carefully unwrapped the parcel containing a copy of The Monster Within and laid it gently at the foot of the monument. Then he turned and walked away.

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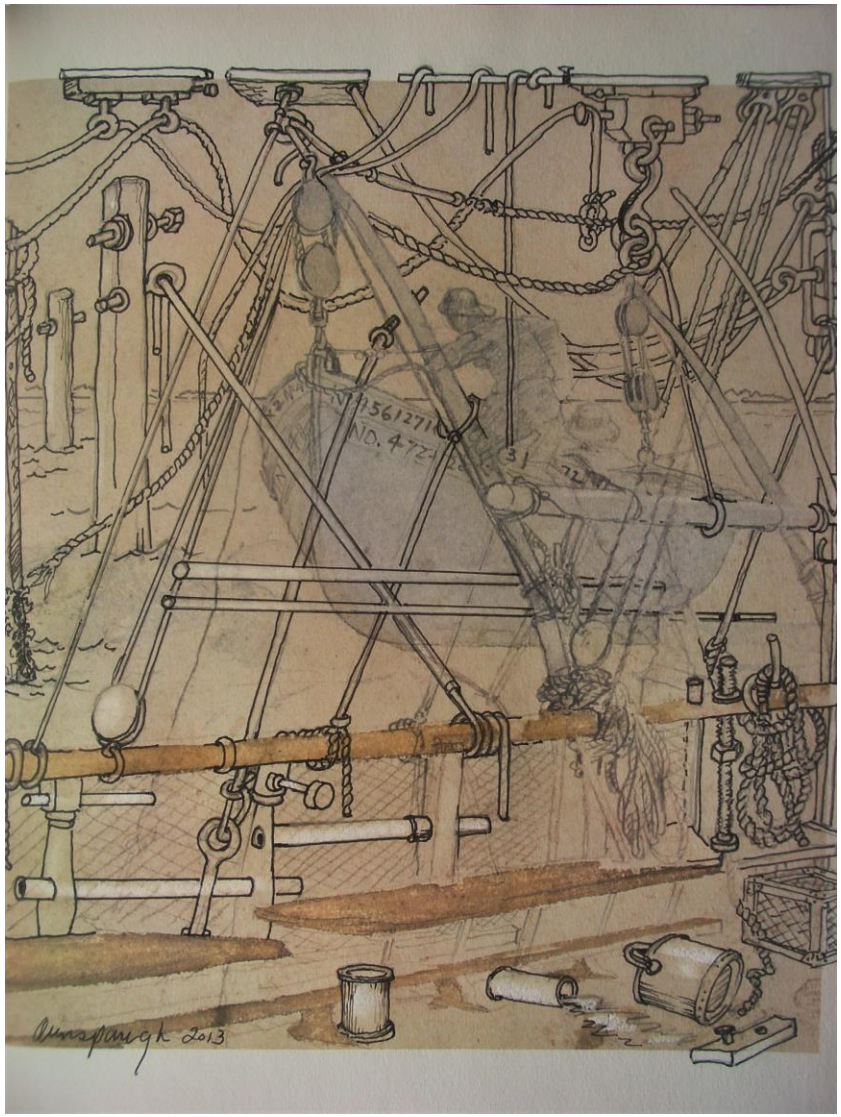
Alexandra Upton, an award-winning author and poet, lives in Milton, MA. When not writing, Alexandra performs in theatrical and dance productions in and around Boston and Cambridge, MA. Storytelling, in its many forms, is her passion. **jupton@comcast.net**



HOMER & ME

Dick Uncaught

8.5" x 10"

Ink on Print

Dick onslaught, a native of Dunedin, FL, retired from teaching art at Young Harris College in Young Harris, GA. When not making art, his other passion is kayaking.

Aunspaugh1196@windstream.net

TENDER

Bracha K. Sharp-*2016 Hackney Literary Awards-National Poetry, 1st Prize*

This morning, I look out of my kitchen window
And eat a strawberry
And watch the rain glide down the neighbor's
Red deck chairs.

I listen to the voice of the rain
As I eat the strawberry,
Accepting its sweetness
As the chairs
Sit silent,
Catching the rain,
Receiving.

This afternoon, sun spills
Into the kitchen in patterns on
The green tiles. I look out of the kitchen window
And watch the droplets of bygone rain
Rest there—transitory—
On the neighbor's decking.

I lean against the cool counter eating a smaller one,
Coming upon the droplet-like appearance—approaching—
As if for the first time.

Now, this evening, I have had enough of strawberries
And cool countertops and spying on the neighbor's porch.
But there is something, like a wave, that always draws me back.

(It is not the spying, for I do not look
Merely to spy;
It is the chairs, now empty,
Now silhouetted

Against the fast approaching evening
That draws me in.)

No one sits on them all day,
Nor the day before.

And I think how even objects have a
Sensibility about them, if they are only
Left open to the whitewash of rain,
If they are treasured because they are:

It grows—this connection.

.....

Bracha K. Sharp's education in English literature and psychology informs her writing in poetry as well as in a series of children's books on which she is currently working. As her writing notebooks seem to end up finding their way into different rooms all over the house, she is always finding both old pieces to revisit and new inspirations to work with.
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"The problem with putting two and two together is that sometimes you get four, and sometimes you get twenty-two."

—Dashiell Hammett

EATING WORDS

Laine Cunningham - *2016 Hackney Literary Award Winner - National Story, 1st Prize*

The man walked toward the tavern near the edge of town with all the conviction he could muster. Immediately, every eye was upon him. Had he come fresh from a plantation, they wondered, or had he escaped earlier and spent weeks or months running from hounds, flinching at every rustle in the swamps and deep woods that had hidden him during his long journey north?

His clothes offered no indication. They could have become so ragged during whatever labor his owner had forced upon him, especially if his master had been the type who whipped slaves as fiercely as a malnourished horse might be whipped to death in its traces. His shoes were no better than those of any field hand, only now they were caked with dust from the road rather than the ashy dust of cotton fields. His hair had been shorn but not recently. The depth of his color might have been burnished by long days of toil in the sun or it might have blessed him at birth.

Either way, the people of this town, every one of them white even though more than a few were dark enough to be his brother, could not read–either with quick sidelong glances or lingering stares that could have been pitying as easily as hostile–the circumstances behind his appearance in their town.

He had not yet reached the line that separated free states from those that enslaved their fellow men but that wasn't supposed to matter anymore. The government had finally abolished slavery although a piece of paper could never guarantee anyone's liberty. A different piece of paper had allowed slavery–except the words from that sheet had been scribed on the iron used to manacle women's necks and cut by whips into men's backs. In areas where the Union Army had not yet reached, the new paper was ash. The old words continued to be writ upon flesh that bled as red as any.

The tavern's mistress wordlessly waved him to the steps on the side porch where he could be served. Equally as silent, he nodded and pointed his dusty shoes in that direction. She did not own him, that mistress, just as she owned none of the other dark faces he had seen while traipsing along the road.

Not many like him remained in any of the towns where he had paused, and the ones who did were careful to offer him only sidelong looks, glances that asked if he needed help with a raising of the brow or a particular tilt of the head. To congregate in any numbers would be to invite the wrath of citizens too old or young or disabled to have joined the war but who weren't too old or young or disabled to raise a stick or a gun against a group of freemen.

He neither needed nor wanted assistance. Receiving help would have required that he share his story, it would have called for him to knit himself, if only temporarily, into the group or community offering succor. For that, he was not yet prepared. For that, he did not know if he would ever be prepared.

He settled on the steps to await his meal. He did not wait long; the mistresses and masters of these taverns were not keen to have freemen linger. Even the ones who refused payment or mumbled to him of Quaker homes where he could shelter or houses that had been part of the Underground Railroad or the free villages even now being hacked from the forests and swamps could not afford trouble. And trouble would inevitably appear clothed in the law or in the guise of concerned citizens who would hurry a stranger–a black stranger–along with kicks and cudgels.

The food was basic but hearty. The war had decimated so much of what was necessary to basic living that everyone, including the former masters, ate pretty much the same thing. The soup had been made thick with gelatin boiled from trotters. Slivers of pork from the shins and neck caught in his teeth, and the peanuts in the stew were as soft as beans. Rice made watery by the broth lined his tongue like soft pellets of cotton.

He savored every nuance of the meat by remembering the words: *hog. Slop. Snout. Lard.* And the difficult one, the word with so many extra letters added in, as if those extra sounds were needed in order to bear the weight of its meaning: *slaughter.*

Another spoonful generated another flood: *groundnut. Plow. Crop.* And then *harvest,* with one of the letters that was only rarely used. *Husk. Mill. Measure,* and the sweetness of *sugar* and *milk* for rice pudding.

These words he knew by sight. He could read some, write a bit less, but he could form all the letters in the alphabet. Some better than others, and a few only after remembering the tricks she had taught him: *Z* is a backward *S*. *Q* is an *O* with

a tail, perched like an owl on the page. *V*, she always said with a laugh, was a *U* that was as shy as a maiden.

At times, mostly at night when the darkness gave him nothing from the world to replace the landscape of memories in his mind, the letters were a torment. *M* and *X* jumbled together like the jagged wounds cut on her back. *R* paraded the abundant bosom of the plantation mistress who had noticed her husband's eye falling on certain of the female slaves. *Y* was the gaping hollow his belly had become just days before freedom had arrived.

But in this moment, there was light. And in this moment, there was food made of much the same items she had used to teach him to read. In the cornbread, he felt the gritty resistance of the coarsely ground kernels so like her knuckles swollen from years of kneading and stirring in the rising steam of cookpots. He tasted the dust he had swallowed on long days relieved finally by the whistle of the overseer and the sight of her emerging from the shadows of the summer kitchen.

The butter melted into the bread coated his tongue like the milky tang of her nipple sharp in his mouth. He knew the words for all these things, all brightened by the bolt of his surprise when he had discovered that two words he already knew–*corn* and *bread*–could nestle together to form another word that held the essence of both, like lovers who joined together to create a child who would be neither one nor the other but an amalgam of two.

She would teach him no more words. She had been taken from him by a crime that hadn't been her own, a crime that all slave women and girls and even a few men and boys feared might fall on them and, at some plantations, always did. She had caught the eye of the master, and after he began to lay with her, the mistress–that dominating capital *R*–had punished her for the slightest of sins. The final sin the mistress had conjured–word he could speak but hoped never to have to spell–had carried a punishment so severe that she had not survived the brutal result.

He no longer had her, then. He had his freedom and the money they had both tucked away, he had the strength and a good enough pair of shoes to continue walking until the seasons cooled and the abolitionists made a place for him in their states. But he no longer had her.

Gone were her feet splayed wide by days spent standing and walking. Gone were the fox-fair red highlights that painted her face every dawn. Gone were the fingers so nimble with the herbs and as nimble with his sex. Her bones and her flesh he had buried himself, tucking up her long hair into a kerchief before he wrapped her body in a rough woolen shroud.

He had lain one hand across her face to soothe the rasp of the cloth against her cheeks and eyelids and brow before swaddling her gently into the grave.

With every shovelful of earth, he had erased the worst of her life. One shovelful soaked up the sweat of her endless toil and left her covered in cool shade. Another pulled away the burns and the bites and the cuts obtained in the kitchen. An entire mound was needed to cleanse the pain of the stillborn baby, an infant who might have been his or might have been the master's, for their love had been no bulwark against his rutting lust and the child's skin had been light.

As the earth had closed in above her, he had shoveled faster, sopping up blood and tears, throwing off stench and sorrow, pressing her body down and down and down again until finally she was hidden from master and mistress and the weight of the earth was his own hovering above her during their lovemaking and the tomb had become a tender, eternal hug.

He had not lingered over her grave. There had been very little time and not a drop of pity in the day, and her body had lain too long already in his bed before the burial. He could not ask her to tarry longer for his weeping. She too had places to be, ones much better than those of this world, and he had already said farewell. He had given her body a shelter where the scowl of the mistress would never fall, a fortress that the leer of the master could never breach. It was the best he could do for her after all she had done for him.

Only a few days later, days that had passed in a haze of grief, days overfilled with work and nights overly empty in his bed, freedom had washed clean the land. He had wept then, not for the death that had finally saved her from torturous punishments or for his own newly born life, but for the freedom she had lost. She had gone from her mother's womb to the womb of the earth as a slave, and not one step of her life had ever been taken with a free breath. Glory had washed over all but her.

He had grieved on her behalf. And when the grieving was done, he had set out for the place that had always been free. He carried little, only the clothes he wore and the memories of the way things had been, which was heavy enough. Of her, he carried only her words.

Words she had given him in the long evenings while he courted, words she had fed him letter by letter, over and over until he could read them and finally write them himself. He had *water* with its letters so like the stones and sticks over which a creek ran. He owned *pine* with a sound as upright as the tree. He held *baby* in his hands, the syllables a mirror of an infant's babble. He fit the rounded swell of *God* into the soft chambers of his heart, he felt the letters of *strength* running deep through the channels in his hollow bones.

And her name. She had taught him his own name first but hers had been the one that mattered: Amira, the name given to her by her mother, the name whispered into the gentle curls of her ear the moment she had been born. A name that sang of her ancestors, a name that would carry her into her future.

The letters of her name had been sturdy, sunk into the foundations of centuries. The peak of the first *A* was uplifting, just as her voice had been during Sunday meetings. The vowels were as rounded as her breasts, as soft as her belly. These letters he pressed to him. These he would carry north into freedom.

And with them would come the spill of all the other letters, the ones that made up the words *ink* and *blotter, foot* and *shoe.* He would have *hound* and *bitch, chicken* and *love*. Every wisp of steam would give him *fog* and *cloud,* every whiff of grass would supply *wood* and *leaf.* The ground would offer *brown* and *powder* and *plant,* corn would offer *hoe* and *harvest* and *pone.* Every meal would offer the scents and flavors and textures of an entire book full of words.

Raising the spoon to his lips, he ate of her words. And they were good.

.....

Laine Cunningham's novels and stories interweave social, cultural, historical, and political events. A resident of Hillsborough, NC, her novels include The Family Made of Dust, Beloved, *and* Reparation. **tlcnine@gmail.com**

"Try to be useful to somebody and try to be kind."

—Barack Obama

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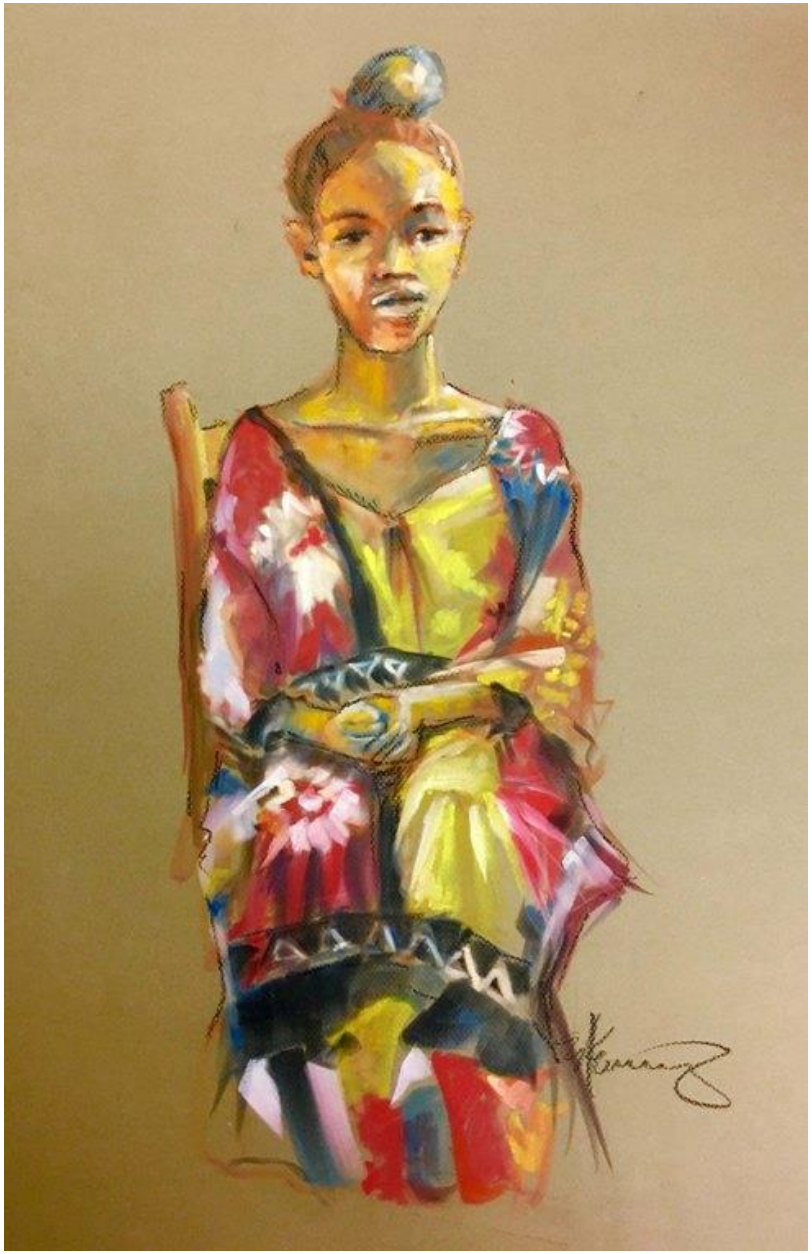

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