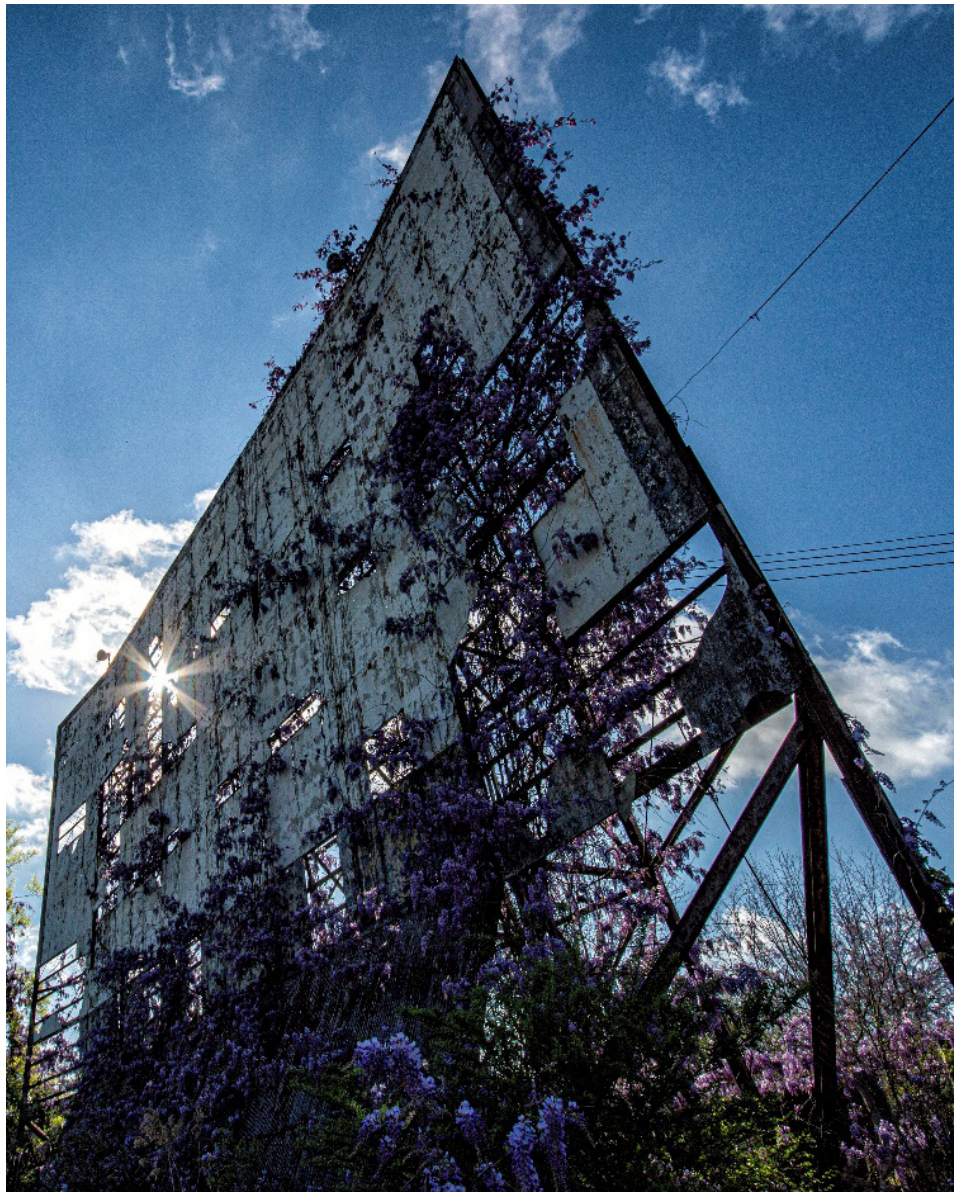


Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 15 Issue 4



Produced without profit by dedicated volunteers who believe that exceptional works by the famous, not-yet-famous, and never-to-be famous deserve to be published side by side in a beautiful and creative setting.

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Birmingham Arts Journal

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FRONT COVER: CLANTON DRIVE IN, Glenn Wills - *Digital Photo*

Glenn Wills is part historian, part artist, part photographer, part writer, and full-time appreciator of all things Alabama. He is the author of three books about Alabama history, architecture and lifestyles.

www.forgottenalabama.com

BACK COVER: EVE, *Artist:* Timothy Poe, *Photographer:* Mike McKenzie

Eve is part of the Carolyn & Rusty Goldsmith collection in Birmingham, AL. Tim Poe has been featured in Birmingham Arts Journal before. The photo of Eve was taken by Mike McKenzie, his first foray into BAJ pages. Mike is Director of Creative Services, Summit Media Corp of Birmingham. He is also a voice over artist for radio, TV, film, and talking books. mikemckenzieradio@gmail.com

Timothy Poe is a Birmingham artist. From self-taught decorative painting skills to glass work to multi-media in two and three dimensions, Tim is the developer of "Antique Mirror Patina Solution" a unique process for creating special effects using new mirror glass, he produces decorative and fine art. He is a graduate of UAB.



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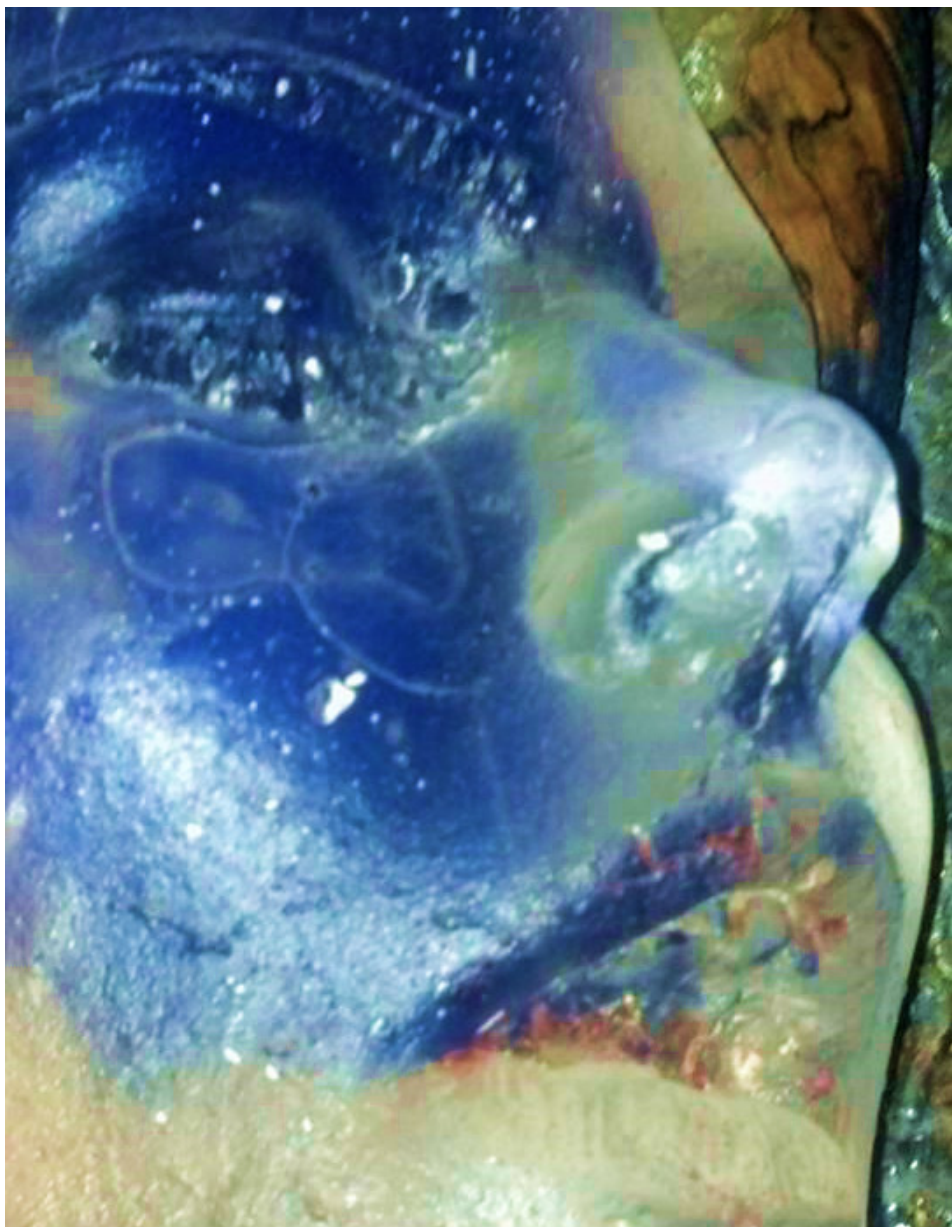
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I TELL MY SON

Pamela Manasco

I tell my son the stars are there when you
can't see them, a map waiting to be filled.
It's not something we should worry about.

My strawberries never bloomed this season,
not one yellow flower budding to fruit.
I tell my son the scars appear when you

have weather this hot, and rain is a myth.
I tell him it's okay to get things wrong.
It's not something we should worry about.

The cakes that won't rise. The small voice singing
honey and jumping from bridges to sleep.
I tell my son the scars were there when you

were born. I catch him peeling strips from his
thumbnail, smoothing jagged edges bloody.
It's not something we can blur and rub out.

I gave this to him. One night he will rise
as do I, looking up, and find nothing.
I tell my son the stars are scarce but true.
It's not something to hurry about.

.....

Pamela Manasco earned an MFA in poetry from the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Her poetry has been published in Strange Horizons and 2RiverView, among others. She is an English instructor at Alabama A&M University in Huntsville, AL.

A TALE OF TWO BIRDS

Max Johansson

There was a tulip tree, older than anyone's eyes could remember, that stole the valley. The old tulip tree stood next to a river, whose fervour had somewhat diminished in the current, torrid, summer months. Sounds of water lazily treading over the stones and the pebbles of the riverbed filled the air, only being cut by the irregular squawks and squeals of various animals.

Occupying the sprawling, uppermost, branches of the old tulip tree were perched two birds. Though sharing a similar exterior, the birds' sizes seemed to directly correspond with their hubris; the larger of which having no regard for the tranquil sounds that filled the bucolic valley; the smaller enjoying the simple gifts the day provided. At its furthest point from the birds in its daily journey, the sun hung at the top of the sky, lavishing every alcove with unbridled sunshine and an amiable warmth.

Heated words were being shared between the tree's two inhabitants. The smaller bird, suddenly dropping from a branch of the Tulip tree, flew towards another limb. Clearly bothered by this change of affairs, the proud bird's tumult only increased, as it fell into pursuit of its smaller counterpart. This dance was shared for a while.

A sojourn to one of the tulip tree's many branches saw the smaller bird's interests occupied by a bright, extravagant group of flowers. Crimson in colour, this flora (and anything for that matter) stole attention away from its incessant pursuer. Curiosity got the best of the small bird however, as an inquisitive prod too many crippled the flower; the flower now permanently ostracised from the surrounding crimson community. But no matter, the bird's attention quickly fixated on another quirk of the old tulip tree, and it took flight. Much the same as ripples follow ripples down the river, the larger bird surely did follow.

The light dimmed and took on a golden hew as mid-day turned to afternoon. Leaves fell from the old tulip tree like a seasonal change into autumn, as the two birds tussled amongst the tree's foliage. The larger bird clawed and pecked at the smaller; though it is uncertain if this was evinced by unrequited passions or, simply, anger. Terrifying squawks left both birds and filled the ostensibly peaceful landscape. Cunning moves from the smaller bird proved effective in saving itself

from the onslaught, though not unscathed. A successful slash from the larger bird saw blood drip from underneath the victim's left wing, colouring the surrounding branches, looking like some sadistically abstract artwork; granted, an installation no curate would find interest in. As if just realising the vileness of its actions, the larger bird abruptly took flight without looking back, leaving the valley and all its spoils. A restful silence fell over the valley; the rambling river no longer interrupted.

Now alone, the small solitary bird found itself jumping from branch to branch with no obvious objective, though clearly with less finesse as the wound hindered its movement. As the sun continued to drop, lightly colouring the sky red, the old tulip tree cast a shadow over the river. Red flowers and green leaves spotted the water's surface as they slowly travelled downstream.

For a moment, the bird stopped. Close by, a blood-stained branch acted as a reminder of the day's trials, and as a distraction from the scene's beauty. This did not seem to weigh on the bird's mind. The bird resumed hopping from branch to branch as afternoon slowly turned to night.

.....

Max was born in London and moved to New Zealand when he was four. Raised in Auckland, he feels a great sense of place in Aotearoa (the Maori name for New Zealand). He gained an English scholarship out of high school and has since worked many contrasting jobs, from construction, to bar tending and coaching tennis but, having fallen out of love with following a roster, now runs a small gardening business. maxjohanssonz@gmail.com



GERANIUM

Cynthia Cox

TREKKERS

Charles Kinnaird

While Captain Kirk
Explored the far reaches of space,
Promoting the best of secular humanism
Or rescuing extraterrestrial civilizations
Or saving life on earth
Or flirting with every shapely humanoid,
His wife, Penelope, waited at home
Weaving the shroud by day
Only to unravel it each night,
Waiting in sorrowful hope.
Or was that someone else's wife?
No, she was also Captain Kirk's wife.
And she belongs to you and me
Just as much as to Odysseus.
The Enterprise traverses
A velvet black cosmos
That reflects our own wine dark sea within.
It is there that we encounter
One-eyed ogres
And reptilian warriors.
We learn that the eye is not always trustworthy,
And we see how human wit
Can unravel any Empire's fearful grip.
It is there that we find the earthly beauty
Of a high school sweetheart,
And can see the bleached bones
Of those who follow
The tantalizing songs
Of another realm.
Look as far back into myth as you can,
Gaze as far ahead in imagination as you dare.
There is a corresponding depth within.
Every day
Is a day spent
Somewhere between sailing the oceans of mythical grandeur
And weaving our mortal garment at home.

.....

Charles Kinnaird is an English major who makes a living as a registered nurse in Birmingham, AL, where he resides with his wife and daughter. He shares some of his poetry and essays on his blog and meets when he can with a small band of fellow writers. clkinnai@samford.edu

COMING BACK THE OLD WAY

Jim Reed

From the earliest times of remembrance, when I was a tad hanging on to every word uttered by family and kin and villagers, I was awed by the things I knew I would never experience firsthand.

I remain awed at the lives I will never lead, at the lives I can only imagine in passing.

Coming back the old way from Tuscaloosa to Birmingham I imagine more than I actually see. I skip the all-too-efficient and soulless interstate highway, veer off to cruise the two-lane blacktops, the blue roads that used to crisscross old folding gas station maps.

I toss aside the idea of GPS and dive into the antiquated concept of driving around till something out of the ordinary presents itself.

Oh, the things I see.

Leaning barns, truncated railroad tracks, bullet hole-enhanced STOP signs, ragged children playing ragtag games in merrily cluttered front yards, leftover Christmas decorations dangling from rusted mail boxes, pickup trucks with FOR SELL signs, loose gravel driveways, shiny and tarnished tin roofs, a three-legged dog romping along, buggy bugs splattering against my windshield.

There's more.

Single-lane red mud roads disappear into camouflage woods, abandoned tractor tires make great playmates, rope swings dangle from trees, elderly women wave from front porches, kudzu continues its plan to conquer the world, aluminum siding braces for the next tornado, sunburned orange-suited prisoners pick up trash, an abandoned meat-and-three diner gives up and ages rapidly, impatient truckers whiz past, a lone and scraggly horse stares into space, an armadillo narrowly escapes being squashed, one pedestrian plods along toward the next convenience store.

All these signs of life are mysterious and enthralling, all these signs of life are stories unfolding.

There is always more...

Grazing cattle await their fate, potholes plot against alignment, a straw-hatted fisherman meditates next to a muddy stream, billboards tout local political dreams of power, an already grizzled teenager grabs a smoke, yard sales offer old baby clothes and plastic pedal cars, boarded-up cinder block buildings hide their contents, pine trees proliferate or tumble, a biker bar forbids further examination, remains of villages nurture their ghosts, KEEP OUT signs obscure silent sadnesses, microwave towers mock the past, friendly servers offer menus and sweet tea relief.

Coming back the old way reminds me that this is my land, the land I come from. It also reminds me that I am no longer a resident, that I am a now stranger in my own land.

The blue roads re-animate wonderful memories. They exist to excite my past and force me to re-examine both past and present.

The blue roads caution me not to snub all the secret stories waiting to be told, but they also tell me to record what I see so that future travelers down the old way will take a second look, a fresh appreciation...a deep respect for all villages and villagers past and present and future, in a land as varied as varied can possibly be

.....

Jim Reed writes and ruminates in Birmingham, AL. jim@jimreedbooks.com

GRACE NOTES

Richard Luftig

how the sun plays
legato in late afternoon.
How it resists a coda
but instead requests

a hold, de capo,
repeat to its beginning
of the day. She imagines

the way that stars,
if they could, would
allegro the tempo
then allegro again,

impatient as they are
to have their measure
of the night. She wishes
she could take wing

and join the blackbirds
outside her window
that perch scattered
like treble-clef quarter notes

on the wires strung
between telephone
poles, and listens to how
the rain on the roof,

are staccatos, heartbeats,
how the rests she has
learned to detest,
accentuate her opus

into minor keys,
stresses all the wrong

harmonies into chords
that never resolve.

And how time, hated time,
signatures her descent
to piano, a duet reduced
for solo now that he is gone.

.....

Richard Luftig is a former professor of educational psychology and special education at Miami University in Ohio now residing in California, a recipient of the Cincinnati Post-Corbett Foundation Award for Literature, and a semi-finalist for the Emily Dickinson Society Award. His work has appeared in the United States, Japan, Canada, Australia, Europe, Thailand, Hong Kong and India.

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THE KINGS OF GOWANUS

Rae Meadows – 2018 HACKNEY LITERARY AWARD – 2nd Place
National Story

Big Jim Sullivan was born in America, in Darby's Patch, a squatter's camp of dirt-floored, single-room shanties along the canal where hogs roamed the serpentine alleyways. When it rained, the canal flooded the slum.

"Stood on chairs," he'd told his son Jimmy, "until the floor dried out."

His parents had come from Derrymore in County Kerry, a village tucked between the green velvet Slieve Mish Mountains and the ocean. His father had been a fisherman. But in America, he peddled "fresh country milk" to the genteel in Brooklyn Heights from his sickly cow that ate from slop heaps and drank swill from a nearby distillery.

"When the city came, my mum stood in the doorway with an axe," Big Jim had laughed. "They burned the house down around her."

Jimmy took a shallow breath through his mouth as he stepped from the sagging cottage, the door clacking against its broken frame behind him. If the city wanted to burn down their house, he might go ahead and let them do it.

Outside the air was already hot and rank, thick with summer stink. He spent his days, like most boys in the neighborhood, walking around, looking to get something for nothing. But today was fight day. He and Nell had work to do.

At the canal, Jimmy saw that the ballooned carcass of a dog had moved only a few yards since yesterday. Now it floated below the bridge in stagnant water mucked with oily brown and yellow ooze, riddled with tin cans, melon rinds, toilet paper. Sewage poured in from mains along the canal. When it rained, the putrid overflow rimmed the streets and emptied into basements. You were born into the smell, his father had told him, carried it on you even when you no longer noticed it. Slaughterhouse blood and coal tar and formaldehyde and fertilizer and dead animals and hydrochloric acid and lead—sludge ten feet deep beneath a river of shit.

Jimmy watched the dog, legs stiff, belly distended, mouth agape, almost smiling, its long gray tongue thick and lolling to the side. He didn't recognize it—strays were everywhere—but he was sorry anyway. Probably jumped in after a gull or a stick thrown too far. Or maybe someone tossed the mutt in for fun. See how long it could swim before it gave out.

"You go in, you ain't coming out," Dundee said from the tower. Dundee was keeper of bridge, retracting it twice a day for boats. He sat up there on his perch all day, the top of his head red and crisp from the sun.

"I dare you," Jimmy called up.

Dundee laughed slowly, his eyes loose in their sockets. He was drunk. Barge captains bribed him with liquor to let them through during off-hours. He scratched the greasy hair that remained around his ears and settled his shoulder blades on the back of his seat. "Devil's in there," he said.

Jimmy waved him off. He pitched a piece of brick at the dead dog, sending it bobbing and spinning into the milky scum along the bank.

Nell was late. Jimmy bounced in his shoes, his feet slick through holey socks.

His sister was thirteen and flat as a slab, hair cut high and jagged on her neck. She had no interest in being a girl, wore short pants and a work shirt, and kids let it go because her eyes glittered a cold pale green and she kept a razor blade in her newsboy cap. When John Mc-Tiernan tried to get his hand down her pants he ended up with a slash from eye to mouth.

Jimmy spotted her walking past the coal yard, her arms more muscled than his own in a shirt with the sleeves cut off.

"Where've you been?" Jimmy punched her hard in the arm.

Nell raised her fist quick to his face but let it drop. "Cafferty," she said.

All the kids had to run from that old pervert at one time or another. "You?" he asked.

“No, the Flannery boy. Had him in the shed.” Nell fingered the brim of her cap, as was habit, to make sure the blade was still there.

“You smell worse than the canal,” he said.

“Keeps the eejits away.”

He nodded toward the paper bag in her hand. “You got it?” he asked.

Nell squinted into the sun reflecting off the water but didn’t answer. Jimmy never asked how she procured liquor. He knew it required something horrid of her.

It had always been Jimmy and Nell, just a year apart. They had two little brothers and a baby sister, pink and snively, all farmed out to fat Mrs. Jamison who kept a zoo of them behind dirty lace curtains. Their mother was brittle, her fingers gnarled from threading bobbins at the mill. Their father was a drunk who sporadically lurched home to eat something and then screw his wife. But Jimmy and Nell knew something else about him. Big Jim Sullivan had the fists of a giant and, when he was sober, he could take anyone. The whiskey was a bribe they would offer for after, make him walk around, sober up, follow it like a carrot on a stick.

The men couldn’t fight the bosses or the government or the cops, so they fought each other, knuckle to bone. The reason was almost always minor—an insult, a few cents short, eyes at another’s wife—or made up altogether. Today was a grudge match, Big Jim and Sal Pesce, because one was Irish and one was Italian, reason enough.

“I get ten if he wins,” Nell said.

“If he loses?”

She shrugged.

They told each other it was for the money, pretended anyway, but Jimmy willed his father to win for memories that glowed like a hearth within him. He kept them tucked away even from Nell. Like when he was six and hot with fever and his father carried him like a baby in his arms, Jimmy’s face next to that big chest. Safe, safe. Or when he found his father sitting on the front stoop in the winter dark, and he told Jimmy that the halo around the moon meant it would snow. The next day, as the snow came down, Jimmy felt like his father had trusted him with the universe.

The thrown chairs, their mother’s black eyes, the puke and piss, his red bloated face that no longer had any handsome in it—“Stop looking at me,” he would spit, his whiskey-tinged sweat dampening a face that careened between contempt and shame—Jimmy could tell himself that this was not the real Jim Sullivan. “He’s an asshole, Jimmy,” Nell would say. “Don’t be a goop.”

Nell crossed the bridge and flipped the finger at Dundee, who smiled and closed his eyes toward the sun. “I’ll be watching from here,” he said.

Jimmy wiped the sweat from his lip with the heel of his palm and followed his sister. They walked by the weedy lot crusted with coal dust along the left bank of the canal where the fight would take place. A boy held up a rat by its tail and swung it toward his friend who tried to bat it with a broom handle. The Trolley Dodgers played in Washington Park, but no one had the twenty-five cents for bleacher seats. Sometimes kids would line up along the wall outside just to hear the sound of a bat hitting a ball.

“If he wins, maybe we could go to a game,” Jimmy said. The thought so delighted him, he knew his voice had given away his hopefulness, his foolishness. Nell looked back at him and shook her head, her eyes rolled up. She kept walking, holding up the paper sack as a reminder.

Jimmy wondered if Nell had any memories, good ones she held close. But he also knew how much cruddier it was for her, how their mother scorned her for who she was, even managed to blame her for Big Jim’s tirades. Nell had been born pretty—the one good thing for a girl—but she had done all she could to be somebody else. Her cleverness, her toughness, made it worse. “He can’t stand to look at you,” her mother would say. Nell sometimes did not come home at night.

It was not yet noon, but the day’s heat had baked the road dry. Manure dust rose as they walked. Jimmy breathed through his mouth.

“You hear about Julia Foy?” Nell asked.

Jimmy would sometimes imagine putting his hands up the front of Julia Foy’s dress. She liked to tease him, call him Little Jimmy, even though she was only fifteen. Her eyes, though. A blue so fragile they

were almost gray. That black braid she tossed around like a whip. He'd watch her walk past the window, coming home from the mill with a little skip, like she was on her way to a dance. "What about her?" he asked.

"Got her hand caught. Three fingers ripped clear off."

No, no, he thought. Smooth pink nubs where her slim fingers used to be. Could he even hold her hand now? A feeling of tenderness for her settled on him like dew. Yes, he could. He did not cry, and for that he was thankful. "Right or left?"

"Right, probably. Threading."

He tried to picture if Julia could still be pretty with her fingerless hand.

The stench lifted some as they moved away from the canal, up out of the big ditch of the neighborhood, and caught a breeze sweeping across from the Slope. Hoyt Street was quieter, though the houses still meager and ill kept. It was early enough that the gangs of boys had not yet gathered in the shadows. A mongrel without a tail crouched and whined as they passed. Nell pulled out a hunk of sausage wrapped in newspaper from her pocket. She took a bite and handed it to Jimmy who ate the rest. They came to a small collection of brick row houses on an unpaved block tucked behind the concrete company. Billy's was run out of one of the basements, more flophouse than bar, purveyor of cheap moonshine that smelled like turpentine.

Jimmy and Nell had been here before, sent by their mother to collect Big Jim in the days when she still bothered to know where he was. A palpable earthen cool rose up as they descended the steps into the darkness. It took a moment for Jimmy's eyes to adjust. Lumps became men slumped against the wall.

Behind the bar Billy wiped out a glass with a dirty rag. He was a small man but his teeth were big and white and they seemed to glow in the dingy light. He flicked his eyes to Jimmy and Nell.

"There a fight on?" he asked, his voice unhurried, slinking like a cat. Billy was wily, but Nell was a hustler too. "Want to put something on it?" she asked. Billy smiled with half his mouth. "Whyn't we work it out in the other room?"

There was this turn so often now with Nell, when something regular would become something dirty, some proposition Jimmy didn't fully understand. They lived in two different worlds, hers full of trapdoors and doublespeak. He felt the prickle of sweat under his arms. Nell took off her cap and twirled it on her finger. If she was scared, she was good at hiding it. She'd learned long ago that fear was the worst kind of weakness—she would show nothing.

"He here?" Jimmy asked. He tried to sound gruff, but he had to clear his throat.

Billy bit his bottom lip with those teeth and chuckled. "Out back."

The yard was hot and dusty. Rusty springs and crumpled newspapers and moldering bricks lay in a heap against the wooden fence. Laundry like flags crisscrossed above them. They didn't see him at first, and then Nell spotted his boots. He was wedged behind the garbage, drinking spirits from a tomato can, his black hair in a lank swoop across his forehead, his middle a large mound.

Jimmy stood where he was, unable to move toward the wasted man who could barely hold his head up. Nell walked over and squatted beside him.

"Daddy?" Her voice was so small and feathery, so unlike her usual voice, Jimmy was startled. It was eerie, like she had summoned her long-ago self. Nell was like a hoar-frosted window, glittery, beautiful even, but impossible to see into.

Big Jim tried to lift his eyelids higher. "It's my Nellie girl," he said, hefting his back upright against the fence. He cuffed her cheek too hard with his paw of a hand and knocked her sideways into the rubble. She glanced at the blood on her scraped palms with the slightest of smiles but didn't bother wiping it off.

Jimmy scowled and stepped forward. He stood in front of his father, his jaw set. "You're fighting," he said.

Big Jim groaned and keeled to the side, his hand over his face. His knuckles were scarred purple, the skin cracked. He rose to his elbow and tossed the now-empty can onto the garbage heap. "Adieu the Hills of Kerry I ne'er will see no more," he sang. "Oh why did I leave my home, oh why did I cross the sea?"

“You ain’t never even been there,” Nell said.

Her father looked at her, tried to steady his gaze. “What you got in the bag there, Nellie?” he asked.

“If you win,” she said. She wagged the bottle in her fist above him then snatched it back.

Jimmy bit his cheek until his teeth cut through. His sister’s nerve astounded him sometimes.

“Bitch,” her father said. But he was so drunk it had little bite. Big Jim fell twice before they could yank him to his feet.

Block by block they walked the neighborhood, resting in patches of shade, dunking Big Jim’s head in the trough behind the grocery, walking again. Mrs. Mahoney knew about the fight and gave in to Jimmy and Nell’s pleas to feed him. They sat on stacked lettuce crates as their father filled his cavernous mouth with liver and onions. Jimmy watched his father turning back into himself. His cheeks pink, the red clearing from his eyes. Thick fingers loosening, shiny with grease.

“Pesce’s not so much,” Big Jim said.

“He took out Arthur Murphy not four weeks ago,” Jimmy said.

Nell stabbed an elbow in his side. “You’ll take him,” she said to her father. “He’s weak in the brain.”

“Your mother coming?”

“Working,” Jimmy said. His father nodded, then rubbed his forehead, disappointed.

“The Foy girl got her hand chopped off,” Nell said.

“Just a couple fingers. You said it was just fingers,” Jimmy pleaded. Not the whole hand, he thought, please.

“Don’t matter what it is. Ruins her,” their father said.

Jimmy pretended to mess with his shoelace to hide his face. Big Jim sucked down a glass of beer. They allowed him that. He flexed his meaty fingers then pulled them into fists. He yawned like a bear out of hibernation, eyes closed, mouth wide and contorted before he snapped it shut.

“Falks paying?” he asked.

Wendell Falks owned Carroll Gas. To keep the unions out, he doled out gifts to the Irish. A ham here, a woodstove there. A hundred

dollars when the Kellys lost a baby to typhus. Fifty when Connolly took out the Italian padrone who he caught with his wife.

“They say,” Nell said.

“We’ll celebrate,” Big Jim said. “A new dress for your mother.”

Jimmy nodded, knowing, like the baseball game, that it would never happen, but not letting himself fully know it.

“Can’t wear anything nice to the mill,” Nell said.

Big Jim’s jaw worked and clenched. He could have slapped Nell to the ground, but he let her barb pass. Jimmy would never have risked their father’s anger, but Nell had a sense of things that he didn’t.

“How do you feel?” Jimmy asked.

Big Jim heaved air into his massive lungs. “Don’t matter,” he said.

Nell hid the bottle behind a loose brick.

When they arrived at the fight, men were milling about already, a ring of them around the lot at the edge of the frothing canal. Women were there too, weary brows, hard eyes, children ducking in and out of their dirty skirts. The crew from Butchtown, swarthy Italian asphalt layers, had walked here under the afternoon sun and now dumped buckets of water over their heads. It took Jimmy a moment to see Pesce, who squatted against the canal pilings. He looked like the others, but when he stood, Jimmy grabbed Nell’s arm. The man was an oil tank.

She swatted his hand away. “It’s here that matters,” Nell said, jabbing her temple.

This fight, like all of them, would be a cross between an Irish Stand Down and a street fight. Knockout or death. Rules were few and flimsy—you couldn’t choke or kick but you could fishhook a mouth or dig an eye. Big Jim took off his shirt. A roll of white belly flesh hung over his pants. Pesce was barrel-chested, and his immense arms hung low.

They were nudged toward each other without ceremony. Big Jim caught Pesce’s opening blow and beat it away with his wrist. Pesce parried Big Jim’s next strike.

“Elbows in!” yelled Nell.

Big Jim scraped the edge of his boot quick and hard against Pesce's shin and stomped his instep. Pesce cried out and spun away, hopping some on his good foot.

The fuse had been lit. The crowd crackled, drawing in closer.

On the other side of the fight Jimmy caught sight of Julia Foy, her black braid snaked over her shoulder, and she smiled at him, that dimpled, teasing smile that hooked him in the gut. He looked down and saw her hand like a club, ending in a gauze-mummied stump. His mouth dropped open and he looked up at her again and she saw that he had seen, and he didn't know if he was going to cry or be sick. He felt his throat burn, bile inching up. She held her mangled hand up, as if to wave.

Jimmy jerked his eyes back to the fight just as Pesce rushed forward to attack, but Big Jim sprang quickly to his right foot and bent down, tripping Pesce with his left. The humiliation gave wings to the Italian who kipped to his feet and popped Big Jim's nose, blood spattering the onlookers, a red constellation on Jimmy's sleeve.

Jimmy could see his father's eyes aswirl in rage, his nose now flattened and crooked, blood running down his chin. Something had busted open in Jimmy, too. He saw it everywhere now, the rage beating in the faces of those around him. And he was part of it too, His heart pummeled his ribs with the same rage that ran through them all like a river.

The fighters traded body blows, Pesce landing his fist in big Jim's ribs, Big Jim punching Pesce square in the heart. Grunts and groans and the slapping, sticky sound of skin against skin. His father stumbled, fatigue weighing his arms.

"Kill him!" Nell yelled.

Jimmy breathed hard, filled with the madness of it, the rusty tang of blood, the roar in his ears. He glanced back across at Julia Foy and felt only pity, a new sense of power in his heart.

"The clinch," Nell said.

And then Jimmy saw it too, the Italian moving in close. The men were lumbering beasts, hanging on each other, almost hugging. Jimmy saw Pesce's hand slightly open, his thumb out. He had not imagined

his father could lose. But now he saw a bottomless black hole in place of his father's eye, his body felled, a cold leaden weight. He thought of Samson, eyes gouged out and shackled by the Philistines.

"Eyes!" Jimmy yelled.

But his father somehow had gotten his left hand on the back of Pesce's head, and he pulled it down with a jerk and uppercut him with his right. It was a sledgehammer to the face, the crack of bone like a snapped board. Pesce reeled. Nell jumped up and down, the cords in her neck pulled tight, her eyes like suns.

Everything around Jimmy went white and quiet and he saw what winning could mean—his father, the victor, returned. His mother's hands soft, her eyes merry. All of them together again around the rickety wooden table, a heaping bowl of lamb stew. Laughing. The way it never had been. And the crowd screamed back in, the fight still going, his father's face like bits of clay pushed together.

Pesce dug for whatever was left in him and went for a head butt, a bull ram to the chest, almost knocking Big Jim into the canal. But after, Pesce could barely stand, staggering backward, his eyes swollen shut. Big Jim launched a sickening straight right to the chin that sent the Italian crumpled to the ground, two bloody teeth a foot away in the dirt.

Big Jim Sullivan had won. For all of them. Jimmy felt sparks shoot through his body, pride he didn't know possible. Life can change, he wanted to shout to his sister.

But she was gone, off to collect her money.

Paddy Kerrigan lifted Jimmy onto his shoulders, and he was Big Jim's son above the frenzied crowd, hot and bright and soaring. He closed his eyes and imagined running along the edge of the canal all the way to the bay where the air was fresh and salty, and then diving in, being pulled by something swift and mighty, and the deafening rush of water rinsing him clean as he streaked out beyond Red Hook, all the way into the cold blue sea.

When he opened his eyes, the Italians were gone, and Jimmy didn't know if Pesce was alive or dead. His father was in a bloody heap, someone pouring beer down his gullet. The men around him were

already shaping their stories, eyes shining, the myth growing even before the blood was dry. I was there! His fists were the size of boulders! Jimmy felt the moment passing even as he tried to slow it down. Paddy Kerrigan set Jimmy back down in the dirt and he was just a boy again. The barges lined up at the bridge, orange in the late-day sun. Dundee sat in his tower, waiting for the mill bell, which would signal 4:30, and he would let them through.

Jimmy knew he would never feel this way, this good, again. For a moment he imagined the worst—Nell working the corners, his drunk father falling into the canal, his mother coughing up blood from cotton-clogged lungs, her fingers curled into claws that could no longer hold a cup of tea—but then he looked straight at the sun and tried not to feel anything at all.

Jimmy and Nell sat in the dark on the edge of the bridge, their feet dangling over water they could not see, and passed the whiskey bottle between them. The moon looked like it had been cut from wax paper, big and lopsided. Dundee had gone home.

“It’s just one finger,” Nell said. “She’ll heal up good enough.”

He imagined Julia Foy in the starlight, her braid roped in his hand. She wouldn’t call him Little Jimmy anymore. She would be grateful.

He looked down into the blackness, a lapping sound as the languid water hit the posts of the bridge. He felt the muscles in his hands contract, the bones unbroken. He knew there would come a day when he would fight. He held his breath and tried to fool himself into believing the water below him was cool and clear, but he couldn’t. He wondered if the dog was still down there.

Maybe, mercifully, it had been dragged out to sea.

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Rae Meadow is an award-winning author of four novels. She writes in Brooklyn, NY. The Kings of Gowanus originally appeared in Bellevue Literary Review.

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SCREENSHOT

Amber Owne

THE MOON FACE GIRL

Margaret Buckhanon

Sharon Barry did not feel pretty despite watching countless beauty videos on YouTube. She had a nose that caused her grief, eyes that did sparkle nor illuminate her face but identical of a vermin in the dark.

A rabid follower of Instagram makeup stars, she was anxious to absorb tutorials how to contour, conceal, minimize flaws, and maximize assets, it did not work; she had no assets, and the flaws countless. Liars, she thought, scammers to desperate girls like her who simply wanted to be pretty to someone, anyone.

Mother repeatedly chastised her for wasting money on expensive face paint. “Those people were no different from the infomercials you brought weight loss products from. You did not lose weight. When will you stop?” she asked for the millionth time. “You will still be the same, no matter how much you cover. You cannot hide from yourself.”

Mother failed to notice the two pounds Sharon lost from the agave diet pills she purchased late one night from an infomercial. It was mother’s fault. As far as the weight gain, that was mother’s fault too with her antics that forced Sharon to purchase them in the first place. If Mother was not playing dizzy, summoning Sharon home frequently from work, she would have not seen the diet pills to purchase in the first place. Mother did not see that; she did not see Sharon.

She told mother she was not hiding, just to simply brighten up herself the way a diamond occasionally needs cleaning to enhance its clarity. Mother said nothing more, she did not say you’re beautiful the way you are. “You’re too vain” she said after a long pause.

There was no need to argue only to be stressed out before work. Her boss, unbeknownst to her mother, gave her a verbal for her punctuality problem. Sharon did not need to give mother any more ammunition--her arsenal was full beyond capacity

“You’re going to be late.”

“When Jeopardy comes on at eight o’clock, don’t forget to take your medication,” Sharon handed mother a blanket, crossword puzzle and reading classes. The portable potty close by, prepared meals and drink within reach, she had all she needed until Sharon returned from work. “Please be nice to the nurse when she comes; make sure she checks your blood pressure again.”

“I’m always nice.”

Her boss glanced at her then his watch as she returned with a second cup of tea psyching up for a long evening. Her shift started with the usual customer complaints of late delays, back orders and damaged goods.

As her shift was near its end, she cringed; cursing the last call of the night hit her Que. Sharon recognized a regular who apologized profusely aware of the time of closing. She detected more than a customer service inquiry. There was loneliness in his tone and as she retrieved his order she matched the voice with the account--Ted. Her coworkers called him Tedious Ted. Sharon calmed him down as he continually rambled on about the error in his order but more so for bothering her. “

“You’re so nice” Ted said, “I never hear an irritation like the other reps when I call.

“No problem Mr. Wallace,”

”You’re such a beautiful person.”

Ted kept her on the call long after her shifted ended, and with no more words to keep her on the phone, he expressed gratitude, wondering if Sharon heard him moments earlier. “I know you’re as beautiful as your heart.”

She finally heard him.

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Margaret Buckhanon’s fiction and non-fiction work has appeared in many venues through the years. She lives in Valley Cottage, NY. mbuck40@aol.com



AN ARTIST'S WISH

Fabrice Poisson

Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and dozens of other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, *the San Pedro River Review* and more than 250 other publications.
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ITOOK HIS NAME

Tina Braziel

Because I could.
Because he told me to
“pronounce it like the country.”
And I wanted that.

I’m rewriting tradition,
calling myself Conquistador,
venturing from my mother’s house,
to take the place I want.

Yes, there were x’s
as in the spot,
as in lovers, boyfriends,

all those marks made
while my heart was still
becoming literate.

.....

*Tina Mozelle Braziel lives and writes in a glass cabin she and her husband, novelist James Braziel, are building by hand. “I Took His Name” first appeared in her book *Known by Salt* (Anhinga Press), winner of the 2017 Philip Levine Prize for Poetry. She has been awarded an Alabama State Council on the Arts fellowship and an artist residency at Hot Springs National Park.*

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BLOOM

Jennifer Horne

Did the tree ask the sky for permission?
What is your rightful home?
Take a look
at this blossoming plum--
fruit to come later.

Our stories zigzag
like a mountain road.

Or needs
spiral like smoke.
Our earliest memories
of God begin
with a breeze.

So many kinds of fruit to bear,
so sad not to. The question
of my life has always
been balance,
equipoise as personal philosophy.

Dust, dust, and dust again.
A dry spell calls on our deepest roots.
When did you plan
to live? For what
were you born?

.....

*Jennifer Horne is the Poet Laureate of Alabama, 2017-2021. A writer, editor, and teacher who explores Southern identity and experience, especially women’s, through prose, poetry, fiction, and anthologies and in classes and workshops. She is the author of two full-length poetry collections and three chapbooks, a short story collection, and the editor of several volumes of poetry, essays, and stories. Her latest poetry collection is *Borrowed Light*. She is currently completing the first full-length biography of Sara Mayfield. Her web page and blog, *A Map of the World*, are at: <http://jennifer-horne.blogspot.com>*

WHAT IS LOVE?

Elise Alisande

Love has always been a concept that both intrigued and puzzled me. I never quite knew what love was supposed to be, what I even wanted it to be.

When I was in middle school it was debates and music choices, carpeted floors, creaky doors, and broken bookshelves. It was theatre programs and hesitance and it was books and books and more books. I couldn't seem to consume enough words, maybe it helped me cope with the fact I had to swallow my own on a daily basis. It was conference rooms and fountains and stories that weren't mine, but ones I had to tell nonetheless.

Freshman year, love was black coffee and shared blankets and walking around at twilight. It was green and blue eyes and stubbornness. It was coloring books and cold hands and the promise that love was nothing more than a chemical reaction. It was sprawled out on towels and burning hot concrete and the reminder that first loves were dangerous, that they gave you something to want and pulled it away just as fast. Love was replaced with "I appreciate you," instead, and I was okay with that. I could've lived with that love for years and years, let it show me what to expect and need for forever. It was group texts and shared photo albums and booths at restaurants and milkshakes. It was bubbles and green grass and messy curls and pin straight hair. It was laughs that last so long they hurt and make sure you can't catch your breath. Laughs that make you feel like you'll die from lack of air, like catching your breath is an action too far out of your reach, until you do catch your breath, and then you miss that feeling of your lungs burning with the effort it took to suck in air because the amusement seemed so much more important, so much more worth it, than basic oxygen.

Sophomore year, love is a little harder to untangle. It's sudden, takes you by the hand and yanks. It had always been cautious, worked

around, planned, slow. Love was summer days and itchy carpets and now it was different. Love is auditorium seats and clasped hands and groups of friends. It's hesitant but fast, entirely contradictory. It's car seats and music blaring through speakers and looks that really only the other understands. It's memories that never stick around long enough and promises that people always end up breaking because we're young and not sure what promise even means. It's sweaters and hot tea and coffee and red lipstick and those blue eyes that are icy. It's letters and bleeding pen ink and wax stamps. It's ice cream dripping and the sound of coins hitting the floor. And it's still "I appreciate you" but "we're the same!" joins it too. It's phone calls that last hours ("I miss your voice." "I have so much to tell you."). It's paint and cinnamon rolls and pillows and rooftops. And it's stars, constellations, and the idea that everything leads back to someone, that you can't really get rid of something or anyone without injuring yourself, not beyond repair but enough that it hurts, in the process. It's traveling and big eyes and even bigger plans. It's long, long roads and late, late nights ("I'll stay up with you.") and the want for skyscrapers. It's people who are so much bigger and brighter than the places they've been stuck. It's denim jackets and black jeans and beat up converse and its teenage love, the kind that never lasts but feels way too important, nonetheless. And it's a bit of stage lights and still a bit of black coffee and green eyes and bus seats. And it's affection but not the kind that holds you there, it's the kind that is comforting. And love is cold just as much as it's warm because it's November days and December nights and it's cramped backseats and music from my favorite band. It's Polaroid photos and sparklers and too many things to even note. It's materialistic, objects, but it's people too. It's feelings and moments.

And maybe I don't really know what love is. Maybe it depends too much on things and people and maybe when they have to go, I won't love them anymore, but for now, love is simple things like eye color and hair texture and the way someone hugs. It's high fives over bus seats and black coffee and car seats and theatres and it's still curls

and pin straight hair but it's waves and denim jackets and hoodies and movie marathons. It's dreams, ones that are bigger than all of us combined, and it's words that don't always flow off the tongue, and it's tight hugs, and loose ones too, and smiles at the ceiling and it's stars and stars and stars, and books, and more books. Love is so much more weight than four letters, it's too big for its label, thrown around too much. But it's also simplistic because it's also small things, such as liking the same music, buying someone ice cream, a "take a break from that", "I miss you", "You're capable of so much," birthday cards, the bump of a shoulder, "how are you today?", the way my mom never stops working, "we'll figure it out. make ends meet any old way."

Sometimes I don't always know what love is because it's a lot and my definition of it isn't universal. To other people love is the person who calms them down, to others it's white picket fences, others it's a chemical reaction, and others love everyone they have one decent conversation with. I don't know what love is, I can't define it. That's why this is so long because there's not a way to say what love is. It changes, because if it doesn't, you're stuck, and everyone needs change.

Love is, I guess, humanity. It's curious and cruel and kind. It depends on moments and it's easily influenced, and it's battered and beautiful, and a whole lot of adjectives that won't get my point across any better.

Love is a lot of things but most of all love is purely yours.

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Teenager Elise Alisande attends Jefferson County International Baccalaureate school, Birmingham, AL, and desires to be a journalist. She has spent most of her life writing and has been published in her school magazine.

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THE MAPLE TREE

Allen Johnson

The maple tree rises behind the wall
A thundercloud of green,
Mysterious in its shadowed inner depths,
Marrying the earth and sky.

.....

Allen Johnson Jr. was born and raised in Mountain Brook, AL. He now lives on Mercer Island, WA, with his wife Jill, son Ben and two dogs – Piccolo and Chloe. Since 1993, Allen has been writing for children and has published twelve books (four for adults). www.allenjohnsonjr.com



SPLASH

Bonnie McCarty
Pastel on Paper

Bonnie McCarty is an award-winning member of the Alabama Pastel Society.

13 WAYS OF LOOKING AT A NEW PROFESSOR

Terry Barr

I. After an initial interview for a first teaching job at a small liberal arts college in the late 1980's, I wait in my office. The phone rings; it's someone I don't know from the department that interviewed me. "Are you a member of a Christian church?" she asks. "I am a Methodist," I say. I don't say that I quit attending ten years earlier. "That's all we need to know," she says, signing off.

II. Heading into my second, on-campus, interview, I drive onto the main street of the college town, where I see a movie theater sitting in the middle of two blocks of retail businesses. I mention this theater to the Dean of the college. "Oh, they're tearing it down soon," he says. I am dismayed. Then, he says loves Faulkner. I am elated. My job would consist of teaching Cinema Studies and Southern Literature. But as the Dean references *The Sound and the Fury*, he continually calls "Quentin Compson" "Holden Caulfield." This might be a test. I do not correct him.

III. I get the job. A colleague asks me to plan a team-taught media class. I suggest that we study the effects of MTV on youth culture. My colleague asks, "What is MTV?" I ask if he's serious. He is.

IV. My wife refuses to live in this tiny college town. She is Persian. I think she might be paranoid, but she's my wife, so I commute 90 miles each day from the city we agree on, which also has three working movie theaters. My colleagues ask when we'll be moving to town,

and which church we might be joining. For the next seven years, I say, "I'm not sure." Tenure is in doubt.

V. My professorial attire: double-pleated black pants, black high-top Chuck Taylor's, and a zebra-striped Willi-Wear jacket. My hair falls down my back, my beard runs scruffy and red. A student tells me that a professor from another department told her that he "can't believe that this guy is my colleague." He meant me.

VI. I tell my Chair one afternoon during my first few weeks on campus that I ate lunch at a local diner, Roberts Drive-In. "Didn't you know that used to be a Klan hangout," he smiles. Then he walks away. I believe him.

VII. During my first year, two older colleagues, whose offices sit on opposite ends of the hall, enlist me as an ally against each other. One says, "You know he's a chauvinist. He's against the ERA!" The other says, "You know she refuses to teach our basic composition course. She thinks she's too good." I listen and try to care.

VIII. When I ask why the college requires us to be church members, my chauvinist colleague says, "So that we can be assured of the character of the person we're hiring." So I decide to pursue the character in me that's half-Jewish.

IX. Year Two: My Chair informs me that "every tenured member of the department thinks [I am] undermining the composition program." I therefore begin subtracting three points for every comma splice and fused sentence I meet. I don't feel good about myself. Neither do my students. One of these students complains to the Dean. "He said he didn't pay good money to be taught by a Beatnik," my boss says. I feel both complimented and outdated.

X. Also during my second year, a colleague from another department tells me that after my first interview, when asked how it went, my Chair remarked, "Well, he has long hair, but we like him anyway."

I think I'm pleased but am not sure why.

XI. After teaching World Cinema for five years, I propose a new course in Film and American Culture. Most of my department accepts the idea. One senior colleague--again, the chauvinist--opposes it: "We hired you to teach one film course and that's all," he says, adding, "I'm just being honest." I thank him, and the proposal passes anyway.

XII. At a forum to discuss the requirement of being a church member, a colleague says, "We have a right to choose our members; you wouldn't expect Amnesty International to allow a terrorist to become a member, would you?"

I am a member of Amnesty International.

I tell him that this policy is "bigoted."

A member of the Christian Education department retorts, "We are NOT bigoted."

The policy remains intact for twenty more years.

I remain half-Jewish and begin teaching courses in Holocaust Literature and Southern Jewish Literature.

My classes are always full.

XIII. We never move to the college town. We never join a church. I am awarded tenure, receive promotions, and after 25 years, am named Professor of the Year. I still wear Chuck Taylors [dark green low-tops], and have a beard that's gone mainly white. My hair is short, and there's a Prufrockian bald spot in the middle of my head. I do not roll up the cuffs of my Levi's, but I am mainly very happy. Half-Jews, Jews, and all other non-Christian types may teach at the college now.

And none of us wants to undermine anything.

None of us, to my knowledge, has bad character, or is a terrorist, either; however, I still subtract 3 points for comma splices and fused sentences.

Roberts Drive-In is now a tax office.

And we have a lovely new theater on campus where last week we screened *Black Klansman*.

It was very well attended....

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Terry Barr's essays have been published widely. His two essay collections were published by Third Lung Press of Hickory, NC. He lives in Greenville, SC, with his family. gtbarr@presby.edu



CRIMSON LILY

Ty Evans

Ty Evans lives in the Birmingham, Alabama, area and enjoys taking pictures in his spare time. His other interests include collecting antique books, playing the guitar, and traveling. ty.evans66@yahoo.com

THE DAUGHTER I WILL NEVER HAVE

Emma Bolden

has lost all
of her grandmother's diamonds. Has tattooed
onto her left arm the name of the boy

she loved two years before she learned
that to love is to surrender to love but never
to surrender the self. Has learned never to surrender

the self. Has learned to love. Has blonde hair, red
hair, brown hair. Has bleached her eyebrows and then
brown-dyed them back two weeks before her first

college Christmas. Has refused to fly home for her second
college Christmas. Has lost her plane ticket. Has lost
her monthly rent check. Has lost her damn mind. Has broken

my trust before I could earn hers. The daughter I couldn't
have wants a kitten. Wants a pony. Wants a cherry in her drink.
Wants Jeremy to notice her, wants cherry Chapstick,

wants a cherry lollipop, wants to know what Jeremy means
when he says that girls have cherries. Wants me to shut up.
Wants me to sit down, to stand up, wants me to love her,

love her. Wants me to just go away and die. The daughter
I could never have lives in a somewhere far from my everywhere
and inside of my if. And if I imagine her long enough, I can
almost touch the knots that tie themselves into the hair
at the top of her neck. I can almost touch her neck. I can
almost count her ten fingers, her ten toes, I can almost count

up to twenty again and then to her two legs and her two arms,
to the top of her head and the zero that crowns it, the blank
spot I would have cradled and feared before she learned to hold

her head up, before she learned to fear me, to call me mother,

before she even learned to wish or refused to pray. I can almost
touch her shoulder blades and tell her that they are the sharp artifacts

of wings, of a time when we all believed in God as our own
bodies, of a time when we believed that would be enough.

.....

Emma Bolden is the author of House Is An Enigma (Southeast Missouri State University Press), medi(t)ations (Noctuary Press), and Maleficae (GenPop Books). The recipient of an NEA Fellowship, her work has appeared in The Norton Introduction to Literature, The Best American Poetry, and such journals as the Mississippi Review, The Rumpus, StoryQuarterly, Prairie Schooner, New Madrid, TriQuarterly, Shenandoah, and the Greensboro Review. She serves as Associate Editor-in-Chief for Tupelo Quarterly.

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THE DISTRAUGHT MAN

Charles Kinnaird

The kingdom of God is like a man who became distraught when he could not find his USB thumb drive. “Every time I am finished with the thumb drive, I always place it in the left hand corner of the top drawer of the cabinet beside the computer,” the man said, “but now when I need it, it is not to be found!”

The man then searched through the drawer. When he could not find the thumb drive, he emptied the drawer completely. He found many things that were no longer needed, but the thumb drive was not there.

“What am I to do?” the man asked with increasing alarm. For the thumb drive had 8 gigabytes of memory, therefore all manner of important information was contained therein. There were photos of family and many pictures taken in various places. Other files held great numbers of music recordings stored for future listening. There were also files upon files of essays and writings; there were works in progress, and there was important information for projects at work.

The man then began to straighten up everything around the desk, which was not in his nature, in order to see if the thumb drive had been inadvertently set to one side on the computer desk. When that yielded no results (except to provide a very clean orderly desk top, which was not in the man’s nature) the man then pulled out the computer desk and searched on the floor and along the wall behind the desk. Next, he went to the cabinet and searched throughout, to no avail.

“What if the thumb drive inadvertently dropped from its usual place in the top drawer into the waste basket?” The man was somewhat relieved that the garbage truck had not run last Friday because it was Good Friday, so he went out to the garbage pails and sorted through the refuse contained therein, still to no avail.

“Perhaps I was negligent the last time I used the thumb drive – I might have put it in my pocket instead.” Heartened by the possibility,

the man then went through all the pockets of his pants, those in the dirty laundry and also those yet hanging in the closet. Yea he searched even through shirt pockets and jackets that he had not worn in months, but what could he do except search, for so much was contained within that thumb drive.

When his wife came home, he said, “Lo, but I am distraught!” and he recounted his day to her. Every suggestion she had had already been tried by the man. Then she said, “We will ask our daughter when she comes home from school if she has seen it.”

When his daughter arrived, the man asked her if she had seen his thumb drive. “Oh yes,” she said, “I borrowed it to do some work for school. Here it is on the end table.”

Then great was the man’s rejoicing, for so much that he had invested in that USB was now in his hands again! He was exceedingly glad and relieved, and he also had a new appreciation for that lady in the Bible who lost her coin.

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Charles Kinnaird is an English major who makes a living as a registered nurse in Birmingham, Alabama, where he resides with his wife and daughter. He shares some of his poetry and essays on his blog, and meets when he can with a small band of fellow writers.

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THE KITCHEN TABLE

Brenda Michael

My family had a kitchen table. Not a dining room, not a big formal mahogany table, but a table in an alcove off the kitchen. It was 1950's chrome with a yellow top and yellow plastic seats. My family was 5 people: Mother, Daddy and me, plus my PaPa and MaMa Griffith. PaPa and I got up 5:00 a.m., and had sugar toast or corn flakes and coffee at that table every morning of my early childhood. My cup contained about 1/16 teaspoon coffee, at least a full cup of sugar, and cream skimmed off the milk. I don't remember words that might have been said; in my memory there were none. Just me and my PaPa enjoying breakfast together. He was blind and couldn't keep his toast in a level position so sometimes sugar fell on his clothes or the table. I think that bothered everybody else, but not me. He died when I was 7 and I was heartbroken.

Lunch was usually a sandwich at that table, baloney with mayonnaise and potato chips – chips ON the sandwich. I still eat one once in a while. You press on the top slice of bread to squash the chips. I had Coke to drink – the real thing – unless my dad was home, then it was a glass of milk. That remained true until I left home at age 21. At night we all had supper at the table. I don't remember blessing the food except when we had company, and then it was from me, "God is great, God is good..."

I remember that table being used for birthday parties, wrapping presents, decorating boxes for school valentines, coloring and homework. And many evenings it was where laughter from card games filled our house. Unless my uncle Richard was playing...and losing. Then it was yelling and card-throwing time. He wasn't much better at winning, but it's still a fun memory.

My friends and I played monopoly there. Pick-up sticks, Parcheesi, and a horse racing game called Kentucky Derby, with plastic horses we moved according to the number on the dice. Seabiscuit. Citation. Secretariat.

I don't think many families share meals or board games at the kitchen table anymore. Maybe the 'open concept' living/dining rooms will bring some of that time back. But in Gulf Homes, in Chickasaw, AL, in the 1950's, life was centered around a yellow and chrome kitchen table.

...

Brenda Michael is a retired great-grandmother with 40 years in administrative positions in Missouri, Florida, Tennessee, Mississippi and two years in an HCA - managed hospital in Saudi Arabia. She writes in Montecello, MS.

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GARRONE

Tim Suermondt

The river treats me with casualness,
the ducks sure I've brought some bread.
I work on my French by trying to name

the trees, the flowers, the bridge so small

it's romantic in the yellow light of June.
I fail rather miserably and close my notebook,
no need to jot down words that are probably

wrong, my English will have to keep carrying
my days, best to go into town, buy some bread
for those ducks, dip into the common language

that requires no words to seal our friendship.

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Tim Suermondt lives in Cambridge, MA with his wife, PuiYingWong.

THE HAIRCUT

Ann Hite

Rhonda's blond ponytail touched her mid-back and was straight with no tangles. See, tangles were my biggest problem. Really my mother's problem. She kept my hair in a pixie cut. Think Twiggy—the British model from the sixties—or a boy's summer cut. Short. No pretty ribbons. No bright-colored hair clasps. I dreamed about ponytails both day and night.

“Please let me have long hair,” I begged.

“We tried that, Ann. Remember how you hated to wash your hair? Remember how you never wanted to have it brushed?”

So when Rhonda and I played together, I placed a yellow towel on my head so it flowed down my shoulders and held it in place with one of Rhonda's headbands. I learned the art of flipping the towel in just a way to make it look like hair, to me anyway.

Rhonda never had tangles. She was perfect. Her mother talked about her little girl's hair all the time. “Rhonda has never had her hair cut and never will. I bought her the cutest ribbons yesterday.”

One afternoon—I wore my yellow towel hair—Rhonda looked at me as she stood in front of her mother's mirror. “I wish I had hair just like you.”

Me? Queen of no hair? Me?

“Mama won't let me cut it. Look how ugly I am.”

“You're crazy to want to cut your beautiful hair.”

“No I'm not. You're crazy for wearing a towel as hair.”

Yes. Maybe it was a little weird.

Then I had the idea of my life. “Why don't we play beauty shop?” I pointed to the chair in front of a makeup mirror, where Rhonda's mother put on her makeup. She wore lots of makeup. My mother never wore any, not even a little lipstick.

“Yes. I like that.” She clapped her hands. “I'll be first because it's my mom's room.” And the next words are exactly how I remember. “you could cut my hair. Mama has scissors.”

The words gave me only a slight pause, and I shrugged. “Sure.” I pulled the towel off my head while Rhonda found the scissors. When she was seated in front of the mirror, I wrapped the towel around her neck like Mother had me when it was time for a trim. “How do you want me to cut it?”

“Just cut off my ponytail. That should be short like yours.”

Rhonda turned her head back and forth.

“Are you sure?” My stomach twisted.

“Yes, silly.”

“Okay.” I held the large scissors to the ponytail, the beautiful long ponytail, smooth and silky to touch.

“Cut my hair all ready,” Rhonda gave me a frown in the mirror. I began to saw at the base of her ponytail with the scissor blades.

“Hurry before Mama decides to check on us,” she fussed.

“It's hard.”

And the ponytail was in my hand.

Her smile was huge and showed her missing front teeth.

“What do I do with this?” I held up the hair.

“Hide it.” She used a brush to fluff out what hair she had. “Is it short like yours?”

“Shorter.”

“Yay.” She clapped.

I threw the ponytail behind the dresser.

The door knob turned and Rhonda's mother stood looking at us as if we were two normal, innocent six-year-olds, who had played with complete content all afternoon.

She opened her mouth and shut it again.

Mother looked around Rhonda's mama. “What is going on here? Where is Rhonda's hair?” Mother demanded.

I looked at Rhonda, and she looked back at me. We both shrugged at the same time. “I don't know,” I spoke.

“You don't know?” Mother gave me one of her stern looks. The kind that suggested no dessert after dinner or worse.

Rhonda's mother regained her ability to speak. “Rhonda Kay, where is your hair? What have you done with your hair?”

“I wanted short hair like Ann. You wouldn't let me.” Rhonda said, giving the mangled mess a flip with her finger.

“Did you cut her hair, Ann?” Mother's cheeks were light shade of pink.

“She told me to.”

“If Rhonda told you to jump off a bridge, would you?”

I fought the urge to answer this question with a ‘probably’.

“Where is the hair?” Mother demanded.

For a split second I thought maybe Mother could repair the damage I had caused. "Behind the dresser."

Mother pulled the large piece of furniture from the wall, reached behind, and retrieved the ponytail still gathered in the pink rubber band.

Rhonda's mother sobbed.

"Oh Dorothy, hair grows." Mother spoke to her friend.

"It's pretty, Mama. I love my new cut." Rhonda wrapped her arms around her mother's waist. She sobbed louder.

"Let's go, Ann." Mother placed the ponytail on the coffee table as we left the apartment.

We didn't speak a word on our walk home. Neither did we speak of the ponytail at supper. My dessert was vanilla ice cream. I continued to receive haircuts. And by the time Rhonda and her family moved from the air force base where we lived two years later, her hair was longer than before.

Fast forward to adulthood. Mother was sixty-nine and taking dialysis three days a week. I helped her from the car into a wheelchair. She grabbed my wrist.

"You know women your age look much younger with a short haircut."

I eased my wrist free. "I'm only forty-five and I love my hair just the way it is, Mother." I flipped a sliver of hair from my shoulder and pushed her through the doors of the center, where we would sit together for three and a half hours. In which time, she would bring up my hair length three more times.

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Ann Hite is a wife, mom, grandmother, and book junkie. At age 51, published a novelist, Ghost On Black Mountain, won Georgia Author OfTheYear and was a Townsend Prize Finalist. She has since published more novels. Being a city girl most of her life, Ann now writes each day in her home office in Georgia that looks out on a decent clutter of trees. annhiteauthor@gmail.com

MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

Ryder Jack Evers - 2019 Winner Doctor Glenn Feldman Historical Essay Competition.

This journal belongs to:

Miles Johnson

November 30, 1955

My mama gave me this journal to write in. She told me I should write about the things I do every day. Today my brother and I were riding bikes and having fun until some white kids threw rocks at us.

December 1, 1955

Something big happened today. My mom's friend, Mrs. Parks was arrested because she would not give up her seat on the bus for a white man. You know it's crazy how mean white people are to black people. Now people are talking about boycotting the buses. If Ma and Pa don't ride the bus, how will they get to work?

December 5, 1955

Today my brother woke me up before sunrise and told me I had to get up to pack my lunch and get myself ready for school since Ma and Pa walked to work because the bus boycott started today. Some people were lucky enough to have cars or get a ride in a car, but most people had to walk.

December 21, 1955

Today I wrote a letter to Santa Claus. I asked for some drawing paper and crayons.

The boycott is still going on. The city made the taxi companies raise their prices so high, people can't afford to take taxis any more. Some people are starting to put some car pools together to help. The carpools are made up of private cars loaned out to drive people to work and back. Sometimes some nice white folks even volunteer to drive people to work.

January 26, 1956

Our preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr., was arrested for driving in the car pool. He was driving some of Mama's friends to work. He's the person who told us about the boycott in the first place. He said if we all stay off the buses, the rules will have to change. I sure hope he is right. I'm tired of getting up before the sun.

January 30, 1956

Tonight our preacher's house was bombed and I can't believe it! His wife and baby could have been killed! Thank God everyone is ok. I never thought there would be bombings as revenge for folks skipping the bus. Pa says its too late to turn back now though. I think if we turn back now they will hate us even more.

March 1, 1956

I haven't felt like writing in my journal lately. The bus boycott is still going on. Ma and Pa are still walking to work and we are still getting up before sunrise and making our lunches and walking to school.

December 22, 1956

I haven't written in my journal for a long time. I've been pretty busy with school and helping out with the boycott. I even let people borrow my bike! I was going to write another letter to Santa Claus, but I decided not to because I already got the best gift in the world. The bus boycott is over! The buses changed the rules and any people can sit in any seat they want to now.

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Ryder Jack Evers is a 4th grader at Southminster Day School in Vestavia Hills, AL. The Dr. Glenn Feldman Historical Essay Competition is dedicated to the memory of its namesake, a professor of History at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Ryder Jack's older brother, Harper Evers, won the inaugural essay contest in 2016.

THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA IS SILENT

Bonnie Roberts

The day we fell on the railroad track,
Daddy gave us the whipping of our lives.
His fear of losing what he most loved
became the train
that overtook us.

Then there was the time
in his blazing yellow swim trunks,
like the sun itself had fallen into the sea,
he beat and boiled the waves,
his ray arms digging for us,
thinking we were lost forever,

his two sand dollar girls
adrift somewhere on the bottom.

When we touched his back and he turned,
grabbing us with sea monster claws,
stinging and relentless, instead of hands,
at first, there was only creature fury in his eyes,
not joy, and behind it,
suffering,
that branded us forever
with the unbearable weight
of his human heart.

He released us without a word,
only the sign language of the red imprint of his hands,

and the warm sea hissing his love,
in merciful waves.

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Bonnie Roberts is an American/Alabama poet who has been around since 1979 when she wrote her first poem at the age of 30. Bonnie has been fortunate to combine her two loves--teaching and writing. Dusting for Prints is her fourth collection, published by Flownwords Press, Anne Pelleschi publisher, in Swansea, Wales, April 2019. Bonnie's poetry has taken her all over the world through fellowships and scholarships, including a Fellowship in Verse in Dublin, an NEH Scholarship in Paris, and a J. William Fulbright Scholarship in Turkey.

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