

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 16 Issue 2



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.

\$6.00



Birmingham Arts Journal

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FRONT COVER: BLUE SAX – 9" x 12" Acrylic on Canvas *Ahmad Austin* creates music-inspired and heavily textured paintings to the sounds of music. Many of his paintings feature musicians. He also teaches art in Birmingham Area schools.
aaustinart@yahoo.com www.aaustinart.com

BACK COVER: BLOWING BUBBLES IN THE PARK -- 24" x 36"
Acrylic, handmade paper on canvas, *Debbie Hunter Snow* is currently studying at the School of the Chicago Institute of Art. She was an emerging artist at Magic City Art Connection and has participated in numerous workshops in Birmingham, AL, Cambridge, UK and Chicago, IL. She splits her time between The Preserve in Hoover, AL and Chicago, IL.
debbiehuntersnow@gmail.com

THE 4th ANNUAL
ANDREW GLAZE PRIZE FOR POETRY

For poems by Andrew Glaze, visit his website:
andrewglazepoetry.com

Birmingham Arts Journal established the *Andrew Glaze Poetry Prize* in honor of Andrew Glaze (April 21, 1920-February 7, 2016), our friend and author who served as Alabama Poet Laureate 2012-2016. Mr. Glaze was inducted into the inaugural (2015) Alabama Writers' Hall of Fame in 2015. This annual award in the amount of \$200 is presented to the poet whose work is deemed most distinguished of the poems published in the Journal the previous year. Each year BAJ Editors select an out-of-state juror who receives an honorarium in the amount of \$100. Juror and winner are announced on the Journal website in the first issue of the Journal each year.
www.birminghamartsjournal.com

“Dig deep enough into your story that you find everyone’s story.” This quote I’ve heard attributed to William Stafford is manifest in “The Daughter I Will Never Have” by Emma Bolden, a poem that digs deep with seemingly effortless movement and voice. Any poem exploring such a host of intangibles—among them, deep grief, desire, and faith—could easily turn maudlin, but Bolden’s approach keeps sentimentality completely at bay. From the title, a loss is immediately known; as the poet builds on this concept, the resulting character sketch of an independent, often frustrating, ironically imaginary child turns the reader toward a universal story of parenting, then toward the singular human story of disappointment and grief. Through every stanza, expertly shifting phrases of repetition and anaphora create a cascading rhythm that sweeps the reader along. With its mostly even lined tercets more nebulous at the beginning and end, even the poem’s architecture echoes the doubts expressed by both daughter and speaker. “The Daughter I Will Never Have” is a masterful poem that continues to stay with me after numerous readings, and I’m pleased to award it the Andrew Glaze Poetry Prize.

Kory Wells, 2019 juror, is the author of two poetry collections, most recently SUGAR FIX from Terrapin Books. A former software developer, she now nurtures connection and community through her writing, storytelling, and advocacy for the arts, democracy, and other good causes. She is the two-term inaugural Poet Laureate of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where she also founded and manages a monthly reading and spoken word event. Connect with her online at **korywells.com**.

THE DAUGHTER I WILL NEVER HAVE

Emma Bolden – 2019 Andrew Glaze Prize for Poetry

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. www.emmabolden.com, emmaboldenwrites@gmail.com

*"To find that light within---that's the
genius of poetry."*

—Julie Harris

CARRAWAY GHOST

Lori Lasseter Hamilton

In the neutral beige hall,
a clear plastic mask crowns a charcoal sheet
stretched hospital corner taut.
A lone red streak marks the mask
like an exclamation point
or question mark, asking:
is this blood the patient's? the surgeon's?
When the bank chained shut the hospital doors,
did a surgeon shoot himself, fall to the floor?
Do his screams sound down the corridors
like the time I heard a baby's cry
on the 11th floor where beds are stored,
pink sheets swaddling blue mattresses?
In this boys' and girls' hospital,
I once saw a pink sheet rise like a ghost
out of the corner of my eye
but it was just another worker
stuck inside by the avenue's black ice.
Her hands cradled her phone like a newborn
as she rose from pink-sheeted sleep,
a baby's pink cry curdling the silence
in the blue glow of You Tube.

*"Now I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
and if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take."*

I open my eyes when the day breaks
to see the blue star of the south and the east
crash to the ground,
breaking piece by blue piece,
plexiglass slivers stabbing concrete

like a thousand tiny surgical knives
or like one scalpel poking my chest scar
to rip away my heart beating with a memory:
Mom driving me down Carraway Boulevard for braces in the eighties
before General Hospital shone blue as a Bethlehem star in our living room.

.....

Lori Lasseter Hamilton is a member of Sister City Connection, Birmingham's collective of women poets, musicians, spoken word artists, and storytellers. Since 1996, Lori has shared her poems on open mics and at poetry slams throughout Alabama. She is a hospital records clerk and is married to Robert Hamilton.

lasseterla@yahoo.com

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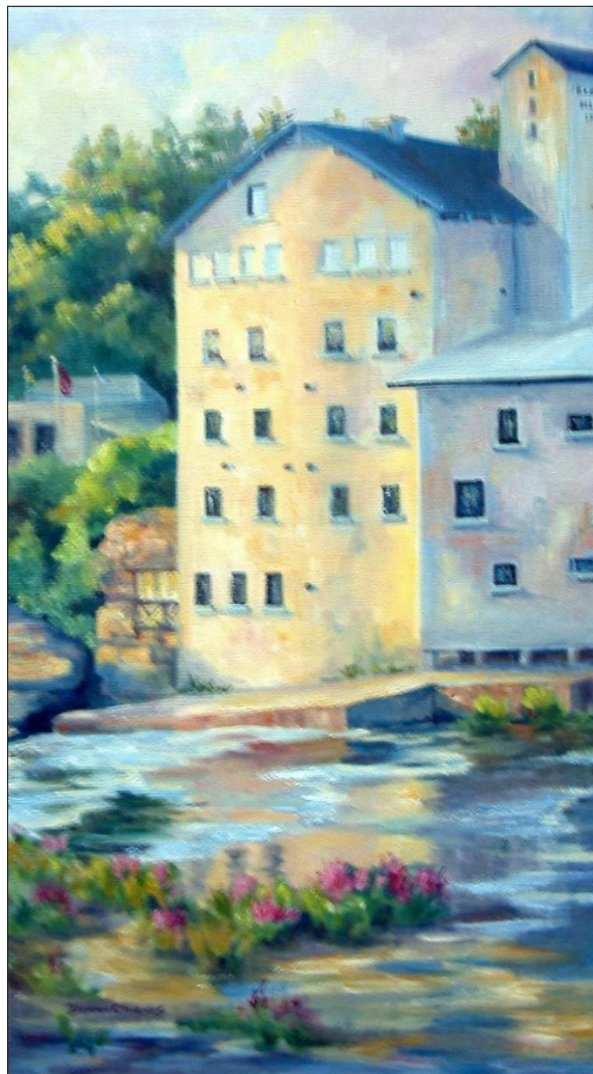
STRONG

Steve Cushman

She said you don't have
to be strong to carry me
across this water. You only
have to extend your arms,
take my hand
hold me tight if I start to fall.

.....

*Steve Cushman has published three novels, a short story collection, and most recently his first full length poetry collection, How Birds Fly. **jsmslb@aol.com***



ELNORA MILL INN

Oil on Canvas

16" x 32"

Donna Chieves

Donna Chieves is a Birmingham artist who paints en plein air. Her work is generally in an impressionist style. She holds degrees from Oglethorpe University in Atlanta as well as University of Montevallo. She lives in Hoover, AL.*

www.facebook.com/donna.chieves

*Catherine Legg, Shelby County Reporter

LOUETTE'S WAKE

Sue Cronkite

—an excerpt from the novel *Louette's Wake*

"Now I'm so happy,
No sorrow in sight..."

Late in the day Lou and Bucky reluctantly headed toward town, up the river road and back over the levee to Geneva. She hummed, "I saw the light," as she guided the car over the winding road. "No more darkness, no more light..." Bucky snuggled against her. A feeling of sheer happiness engulfed her as she drove along with her grandson peacefully napping, his mouth making motorboat sounds. She took the long way around, past Benjamin's place with its carefully clipped hedges in the shape of a long train.

As Louette parked in her side yard, the sun began to slide down its evening chute, dusting the sky gold and mauve. Bucky mumbled.

Louette sat for an instant, admiring the sunset. In the side yard she saw what looked like a reddish-brown cat with a thick tail. A sunbeam flushed the furry animal with a bright glow, turning its coat into a shimmering copper shield.

"Why did you stop, Gramma Lou?" Bucky was suddenly awake. Then he saw the animal. "Ooooh," he said. "What is it?"

"A fox squirrel, I think." A twist of dread formed near her stomach. She realized that when Marj learned about the danger that Bucky had faced at the farm, she would never let him stay alone with her overnight again.

"How can it be a fox and a squirrel at the same time?"

"Lord, Bucky, you can ask the most gosh-awful questions. Let's rest our tongues for a change." They got out of the car. The little boy skipped ahead. He kicked leaves under the rain tree and jumped so hard on the picnic table Louette was afraid it would collapse. *Let it, she thought.* It was a joy to see him bounce around her bedraggled back yard.

She reached her hand into her pocket. *Benjamin's note.* She'd found it early in the morning, before Bucky came. She had walked onto the back steps to see a bouquet of roses with a note tucked in them. *That man could make a fence post bloom if he took a mind to.*

She pulled out the note. It smelled like the roses she had put on the breakfast table. *I wish he wouldn't do this. I already told him I couldn't have feelings for him, not with Joseph gone. Me and Joseph said our vows, for better or for worse.*

The pain of Joseph's leaving mixed with her sentiments toward Benjamin. She wanted to be more than friends, but she had to keep her emotions tamped down until she knew for sure if her husband would ever come back. She held the note to her nose, then read it again.

"Dear Louette, I brought these roses for a reason. We need to talk. I understand you're troubled right now, so soon after your mother's death. But Joseph has been gone more than twenty years. I have to know if there is room for me in your life. My cousin Louis insisted I go hunting with him in Tate's Hell. I'll be back in about a week. When I get back, no excuses. I need to know how you really feel about me, once and for all. Love, Benjamin."

Louette crumpled the paper into a wad, held it to her lips, kissed it then shoved it back into her pocket. *I just can't do it, Benjamin*, ran through her mind, even while a flush spread outward over her, enveloping her with its heat.

"*Duty and honor come before personal considerations.*" She could hear the words as if her mother spoke them aloud.

What about love, Mama? My soul is parched. The heartache is like a cancer, growing in me. What can I do?

She listened to the wind rattle the rain tree's leaves. Close by, Bucky's voice echoed over the back yard. Far off she could hear the whistle of a freight train. Pinecones made popping sounds as they fell on the tin roof of the shed in the back yard. But not a sound from her dead mother. *Not a cotton-picking word*, she thought, *when I need it most*. She couldn't stop the hurts from surfacing, like peeling an onion, with fresh tears for each layer.

Bucky bounced around the yard like a bunny, hopping over the mounds where last year's corn stalks had stood. She looked around. The neighbor's orange and black tabby cat sat on the stoop, staring at her. Waiting.

Bucky came running just as she called out, "Let's feed the kitty." Bucky stomped into the kitchen. She opened a can of cat food and spooned it into a broken saucer. *Shirley must be gone again. Some kind of neighbor that Shirley is. Looks like she'd feed her animal before she runs off somewhere, or at least ask me if I'll feed it, or tell me thank you when I do, for that matter.*

"I'll sit with kitty while she eats," said Bucky from the back steps. He stroked its soft fur as it gobbled the food.

From the door, Louette could hear a dog barking. A rooster picked up the rhythm and the mockingbird who lived in the rain tree added its tunes. "It's not even quiet at dark around here," she told Bucky.

Louette rubbed the spot on her neck where it ached. The screen door squeaked as she held it for Bucky to come inside. The cat ambled off, full and satisfied. *I should put some oil on those noisy door hinges. Or mop the kitchen floor,* she thought. But her hand didn't reach into the pantry for the oil or the mop.

She and Bucky stretched their arms and yawned at the same time, then burst out laughing.

.....

Journalist / author Sue Riddle Cronkite spent many years at the Birmingham News and most recently resides in Geneva, AL & Apalachicola, FL. She has many children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren and continues her writing career unabated. Contact her on Facebook.

*"We should indeed keep calm in
the face of difference and live our
lives in a state of inclusion and
wonder at the diversity of
humanity."*

—George Takei

WHEN YOU BROKEN YOU BUY IT

Brian Watkins

shouts a faded label in
halting English eye-level
amid myriad bottles
of nail polish made to be
self-care badges painted on
manicurists' canvases
in a small-town nail salon

pilgrims seeking lacquered peace
a clinking doorbell heralds
YOU PICK YOU COLOR shouts a
manager Pavlovian
obedience is slowed by
the oddly worded label
will its translation osmose

a tired pediatric nurse
seven on and seven off
moscato in a stainless
goblet chooses sapphire blue

a bride-to-be and her maids
fifty fingers and fifty
toes painted delicate pink
to match a groom's cummerbund

an elderly man and wife
unable to trim their nails
he hesitates to expose
his feet to a strange woman

a reed thin boy with turquoise
hank of blonde hair challenges
binary thought with purple
base under sparkling glitter

convergent sisters reach a
compromise in magenta
a small concession in a
fight over mama's future

an empty-nest husband reads
Welty while his wife's feet soak
content to spend Saturday
anywhere but a ballfield

a mother and daughter seek
amends by candy apple
green and coca cola red
side by side yet miles apart

two longtime high school friends meet
monthly gossip and laughter
one's shade depends on her mood
one always picks rose petal

customers with cares light as
snowflakes dismiss the label
in measure of tolerance
to their native tongue's treatment
some sneering at indentured
staff some amused by label's
ironic broken message

customers with burdens as
searing lightning bolts absorb
the odd translation deeply
triggered subconsciously by
WHEN YOU BROKEN YOU BUY IT
how many ineffably
whisper YES I AM I DO

.....

*Brian Watkins is a husband, father, and software developer who occasionally engages the
Muse at Pleasant Grove, AL. **bgwatkins@gmail.com***

AMANDA AND MICHELLE

Carolyn Ezell

I a-mm hi-ding!” taunted Amanda. “And you ca-an’t find me!”

Rustling behind the couch betrayed her. I imagined her squatting, arms hugged tightly around her knees, eyes shut to prevent being found. The logic of a three-year-old.

Michelle giggled. She scurried into the living room, flip-flops flapping, and giggled again. She was older than Amanda, bigger and stronger. She paused when she saw me. Winked. “I’m going to find A-man-da!” she sang. “But where, oh where can she be-ee?”

Twittering erupted behind the couch and Michelle’s lips jerked upward. She tiptoed across the room, leaned over the white leather, reached an arm downward and tickled. “Boo!”

Amanda squealed, popped like a jack-in-the-box, blonde hair flying up, settling down. “I’ll hide again!” She scampered into the hall. Peeked around the doorframe. Disappeared.

Michelle tiptoed in her direction, pretended to look here, there. “Boo!”

One thing I’ve learned. Three-year-olds have high-pitched squeals. Amanda’s sliced through the house like a razor. She darted back into the living room, arms crossed and hugging her stomach. “You scared me, Michelle! It’s dark in the hall.” But her laughing eyes said it all. She loved being scared.

A lanky arm stretched around her shoulder. “Let’s get some cookies.”

“Two cookies,” said Amanda.

Both of them looked at me. Pleading eyes.

“One each,” I said.

They were gone. Amanda skipping, Michelle trotting awkwardly behind.

“I’ll get them.”

It was Michelle. The lid of the cookie jar clattered onto the counter. I opened my mouth to warn her of breakage but changed my mind. Whispering. Snickering. They were up to something. They almost always are. As odd as it sounds, their shenanigans delight me. They are the best of friends.

Truthfully, I never planned to parent Michelle but somehow four years ago, here she came. I'm pretty sure we didn't like each other. She was stubborn and oppositional, short tempered with a shorter attention span. She called me bossy. It didn't seem I could ever make her happy. And when Amanda came along a year into our tenuous relationship, doors slammed and feet stomped while Michelle pouted, grumped, and yelled.

"It'll probably get better when Amanda's older," the doctor said, and thankfully, she was right.

"We got two," said Amanda, eyes wide, a peanut-butter cookie in each hand.

"I said, 'just one.'"

They looked at each other. Michelle laughed a non-laugh, stared straight in my eyes, stuffed a whole cookie into her mouth and chomped. Amanda's mouth was smaller. Still she tried to do the same. Crumbs fell like confetti onto the carpet. Jax, our yellow Lab, jumped from his bed to help with cleanup. I watched Michelle make short work of her second. The peanut butter smelled good and I toyed with getting one myself. Amanda held her second in an outstretched arm, flat in her palm, smiled at the dog. Jax wagged his tail, turned his head sideways and slid the cookie into his jowls.

The three of us watched the dog chew and clean his lips with his tongue before Michelle reached under the coffee table. She rolled a soccer ball into her hands.

"We'll be out back," authority begging to be challenged in her voice.

The door jerked open and heat rushed in. Amanda and Jax bounded after her. Into a perfect playground. Flat and fenced. I moved to the kitchen window.

It's funny about life. The responsibilities that fall to us. The experiences they bring. Michelle's dementia. Amanda's visits. I'm watching my mother, my granddaughter and Jax play, and for a moment, this unique, endearing moment, the world feels laden with my gratitude, their joy.

.....

Carolyn W. Ezell (Carolyn Breckinridge) is author of kaleidoscope jane and other stories, and mysteries, Tuscaloosa Moon and Tuscaloosa Boneyard. A third mystery, Tuscaloosa Trolley, is in-progress. Her recent children's book, The Messy Room, is published under Carolyn W. Ezell. Carolyn is recipient of the 2017 Druid City Arts Award for Literature. cezell668@aol.com

L'ENVOUTEUSE (THE SORCERESS)

Courtney Hooper

*—based on painting of the same name by Georges Merle
on display at the Birmingham Museum of Art*

Blue silk,
why do your eyes cut through me?
Is the cross around your neck
meant to curse
or to heal me?
Submerged in jewelry,
I have skeletons in my closet
as well.

Your steely gaze tells me
the rhythm your chest beats to now:
a wound transfigured into anger.

I, too, have cast these spells,
never knowing whether to
destroy or resurrect.
There is power in your tired bones—
ancient, moving through veins and marrow,
ageless, at the ends of fingertips.
Ready to be invoked.

I've watched you move
through edges of the room—
igniting candles out of breath,
drawing golden patterns with sore hands,
laying out a tear-stained pillow.
Knowing it was more than he deserved.
I watched you regain control.

You struck the heart of it all.
I wish I could have done the same.

.....

*Courtney Hooper is a graduate student at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, pursuing a master's degree in English. She is an amateur poet and aspiring college professor. **courtneybhooper@gmail.com***

THE MESS

Kim Shackelford

My sisters, brother and I descend on my grandma's home with excitement, energy and expectations. This exuberance only comes one time a year because we only see my grandma and Aunt Lu at Christmas. The rest of the year, Grandma and Aunt Lu live with their dog and bird in a century old, small, quiet, neat and always the same house in Nebraska. We don't live here. We live wherever my dad's job takes us, and it is always many states away from my grandma's house.

My cousins are there, waiting for us, and in the midst of hugs and "Look how big you've grown" the waft of familiar old smells settle me down with the comfort of "nothing has changed." The same tree and ornaments are in the corner by the front window. The bells tinkle when touched. The floor furnace brings warmth from the chill from outside. My grandma's hands are soft, and I hold them even after my hug. The china cups on the shelf still clink when someone walks across the dining room floor. The cuckoo clock reminds us that this time must be made the most of, and my aunt, who smells like Noxema®, asks if she can get some help decorating the dozens of Grandma's sugar cookies piled up on the old wooden table.

There are unfrosted reindeer, bells, Santas, stars, Christmas trees, and snowmen cookies that are about to be covered with our artistic creations. Six children frantically employ many colors of frosting with knives, tubes and colored sugar to make the cookies gleam with colors and Christmas glitter. Amongst the mounds of designs, every family member has a named cookie that is only his or hers to eat. "Don't lick the knife!" or "Are you wiping your hands on your pants?" and "You have frosting in your hair," "Who put the green knife in the red frosting?" and "Oh how pretty!" my aunt exclaims as she stifles her laughter, a sound that is pure, real, and as full of joy as the hearts around the table. She chastises us with mirth, and marvels at every cookie as a work of art.

This glory of our Christmas is in this mess. The colors cover the kitchen, and us, and I am sure the decorating would not make the cover of the Family Circle magazines piled on the chair in my aunt's room. It is good to have a place to be as messy as we are, and still be loved.

Aunt Lu never had children, nor did she ever marry or date. I guess she stored up all her love to be able to give us the glory of Christmas grace

and love. Even though the clean-up must have lasted throughout the next year, we knew we were cherished as the messes we were. Maybe finding a bit of hardened red frosting on the back of a chair brought a Christmas memory to my aunt and grandma when we were miles away. I know frosting Grandma's Christmas cookies gave me more than memories.

We have all tried to replicate Grandma's sugar cookies. No one has succeeded. Perhaps it was not the tangible ingredients that made them perfect.

.....

*Dr. Kimberly K. Shackelford is an Associate Professor of Social Work at Auburn University in Alabama. She lives in Gulf Shores, after retiring from a career in child welfare, and teaching social work at the University of Mississippi. She loves to write but is new to memoir and fiction writing. **kshackel12@gmail.com***



INSIDE THE GARDEN

Zoe Radford

Black Sharpie on White 24# Bright White Paper

*Zoe Radford is a sophomore in college and living in Athens, GA, majoring in graphic design. She has been drawing since birth and believes anyone can be an artist; all that is needed is practicing most days. **radfordzoe6@gmail.com***

MONA L.

Tom Gordon

I realize now, you were always headed someplace else.
I was a way station, a lovelorn lodger in a roadside inn,
and now that I am standing before your portrait,
I see it all more clearly.
Your smile is guarded, grudgingly given,
Your eyes follow suit—detached, a lens of wariness
dimming their shine, inflicting uncertainty on suitors.

I hear the painter is getting kudos for capturing your look,
but I saw it long before he put you before him,
including that summer afternoon
when I talked about our getting married,
and the moments when you slipped naked under the covers,
playfully aware of your body's power over me
yet watchful in a way that told me,
even as I undressed to join you,
that other inns and lodgers awaited your passage.

.....

Tom Gordon is a past contributor to BAJ, a former reporter for The Birmingham News, a former reporter and editor at The Anniston Star. His hobbies include cycling, contra dancing, traveling, French and, in recent years, taking photographs of birds.
tomgordon99@gmail.com

*"Music is a conspiracy to
commit beauty."*

—Jose Abreu

AUNT IDA AND “I’D LOVE TO LAY YOU DOWN”

Scott Richburg

To a Southern boy like me—the South of his childhood now more legend than reality— life will always be a summer night on a front porch brimming with relatives. Gnats and mosquitoes and other buzzing critters, of course. The heat, its own swirling, stinging thing. The dark, a black hole threatening the little moons of our faces.

Homemade ice cream being cranked out of a rattling machine stuck inside a moat of rock salt. Maybe some chilled, smiley-faced watermelon chunks bleeding through old newspapers. The chatter. Of course, the chatter, sweet lulling buzzing of another kind.

And the laughter.

Virtually everyone on the summer-evening porch now humming alive in my memory is dead, except me, of course. The only way they live is through me and any other mind capable of feeling the sun from the quicker side of the grave.

The other day, I was listening to the radio when an old song helped carry this scene and all the precious characters back to me. Or rather, helped dust off the layers of dead brain cells and accumulated experience to unearth what had always been there.

The song brought back to me with lovely cruel clarity my dead great-Aunt Ida, by the time of this memory, reduced to chicken-neck scrawniness. A fish-boned eighty-year-old largely confined to a wheelchair, blue baby-bird veins fluttering at her temples, Aunt Ida had a saucy temper and humor, a still bright-eyed farm-wife wit that sparkled with mischief.

With the dried-up creeks of snuff cankered at the corners of her mouth, she could get a good one off and set the whole porch of future dead folks laughing well into the night.

Like that night in my memory, a pinprick of constellating laughter shooing away the everlasting darkness if only for the moment.

We had homemade peach ice cream on my grandmother’s front porch, in front of us, the rumbling old cotton mill whose heartbeat kept the little town of Opp, Alabama, alive with a trembling expectancy of better times which rarely ever came.

Everyone was feeling especially fine that night, the good mood riding on the hymns of happy voices. The talk turned to music—a country radio station providing the background noise to our evening.

Shrunk old women are easy to lose track of, if one is not careful, and Aunt Ida, slumped in her wheelchair, her tremor of a head, tired from holding itself up, resting in the cup of her palm, was easy at times to overlook.

Then out of the bug-encrusted light shining from the porch's ceiling, she called us all back to the awareness of who she was and what mattered to her. A sly chuckle, fissuring open the dead creek beds of snuff, flashed at us like a firecracker: "I like Conway Twitty when he sings that song, 'Just Love to Lay Ya Down.'"

From the little patch of grass extending from the cracked stone steps to the rusting mailbox at the edge of the empty Saturday night street, the porch threw out a hail of laughs, enough to knock the planets for a loop. The old crone, the very marrow nearly sucked out of her bones, gets a kick out of "I'd Love to Lay You Down"—gets all steamed up over Conway Freaking Twitty—was the thought raging wicked and hilarious through the laughter.

Hearing the song for the first time in years the other day—back in 1980, a typically controversial Conway Twitty lyric, rife with dirty innuendos that could get him banned in small-town landscapes decorated with more steeples than radio towers—resurrected the image of Aunt Ida sitting upright as if an electric current had shot through her knee-highs, a cackling laugh radiating out of her siphoned face, revealing her joy at a country singer's wish to bed his wife into oblivion.

Toward the end of the song, Twitty promises his endearing passion for that wife will never fade, that he'll always have the hots for her:

When a whole lot of Decembers are showin' in your face
Your auburn hair has faded, and silver takes its place
You'll be just as lovely, and I'll still be around
And if I can I know that I'd still "love to lay you down"

As the minutes passed into forgetfulness and the evening became a signpost on the inevitable trajectory of a linear life—all of us headed where life demanded we head—we all laughed with Aunt Ida, at her spirit's steadfast desire in the presence of so much physical incapacity, the dream, more of a dead fire with the kettle of beans growing colder over it than a sweeping fire ready to burn down the town.

In admitting us into this personal preference of hers, however, perhaps Aunt Ida was reminding us that no matter what life had taken away, no matter

the splintering plywood and peeling paint of her once shiny new barn, there was still a ruckus of lively birds knocking the hay down out of the rafters.

After everything, after all, she was still a woman. And in the rose he so lovingly extended, Conway, his big hair and rhinestones as much a part of Southern summer nights as lightning bugs and Dixie cups, knew it.

.....

A lifelong resident of Alabama, Scott Richburg spends his life in the world of words, through teaching, reading, and writing. His latest manuscript yet to be published is The Lyme Life: Essays on a Chronic Nightmare, detailing his wife's struggles with Chronic Lyme Disease. To his great joy and salvation, he shares his life with his wife, their son, and their two dogs. scott_richburg@montgomeryacademy.org

*"Few novels written to a formula
have any life. That is because real
novels are written from the solar
plexus."*

—Doris Lessing

NIGHT SONGS

John Ryland

This is a strange night indeed,
warmer than most, cooler than some.
It is a strange night of need,
darkness is a song whose words won't come.
Dreams of a dreamer
languishing in fear and self-loathing,
hiding in the mind like a fever
coming as a sheep in wolf's clothing.
A specific place in time, awake in the dark
music is the silence inside my mind.
There is a song hidden with my heart
with words and music of another time.
Sweat-soaked hopes swim forward
trying to wash themselves clean
seeking a home to run toward
or to find purchase in a dream.
.....

*John Ryland is a lifetime Alabama resident living in Northport where he has written and published poetry since 1997. His most recent work appeared in The Scarlet Leaf Review and The Potato Soup Journal in October 2019. He also maintains a poetry website on Facebook. **rylandlink@yahoo.com***

JUNE 25, 2008

Hanna Kraker

I remember my grandma's sixtieth birthday in a blur of sunshine, food, people, and music.

It was a perfect day of Ohio summer: no rain and not too hot, which was a detail that I didn't appreciate as a kid. Adults were the ones who planned the parties and worried about being prepared for all circumstances; the kids just had to help unload the car. I spent most of this party soaking in the sun on the playground nestled in the very back corner of Uncle Joe and Aunt Natalie's backyard, horrified as my cousin, Spencer, always fearless, walked across the wooden beam that the swings hung from.

The theme of the party was a Hawaiian Luau and in keeping with that theme, we roasted a pig. Already a very picky eater at that age, I was grossed out after seeing the pig hanging over the fire, and I didn't eat any. I remember a second or third cousin of mine calling dibs on the ears, because apparently, they're the best part.

There were so many guests. Of course, the aunts, uncles, and cousins that I saw all the time were there, but also the more distant relatives whose names I had a hard time remembering were at the party. Beyond family, it seemed like our entire church was there. The kids played by the playground or the trampoline, the adults hung out around the pig or on the deck by the house, where Grandma, the reason for all this celebration, was sitting in her rollator, her walking aid that looked like a cross between a wheelchair and walker. Most of the guests wore Hawaiian attire, whether it was simply a lei, or they went all out with a Hula skirt or flower-print shirt. Grandma wore a typical Hawaiian flowered shirt and an orange lei, a constant smile on her face.

One side of the deck was set up as a stage, with speakers and music equipment. My dad, Uncle Bill, Uncle Joe, and other musicians from church played music. Grandma was sitting in the front row, listening and talking with guests. Behind her, I remember Aunt Kelly sitting on Uncle Chris's lap, Grandma's third-born son.

With the weather, all the people and food, the band playing, leis around everyone's neck, it seemed like the party was complete. But it wasn't; my aunts had planned a surprise.

Elvis entered the building.

At least, a local Elvis impersonator came around the side of the house and walked onto the deck.

I wish I could have seen Grandma's initial reaction when he came out, but I was among the crowd who heard that Elvis was there and ran across the yard to watch. Everyone watched, but Elvis was there for Grandma. He played his classic tunes, he serenaded her, and even did one of his signature moves as he took off his white scarf and put it around her neck.

In the picture I found on Aunt Natalie's old MySpace® account, Elvis sings and plays his guitar right in front of Grandma, her hand covering her mouth as she laughs, her family and friends surrounding her, laughing and smiling along with her, taking pictures, all of this to celebrate her. At one point, Grandma wasn't content to stay sitting on her rollator the whole time; she got up and danced. She sang along, she hugged Elvis. And she clapped and cheered when after putting on quite a show, Elvis left the building.

This is joy: something so everlasting and embedded so deep within you that even when you're suffering, you find a way to stand up and dance. It is so strong and durable that it does not weaken in the face of mounting struggles; in fact, it demonstrates its resilience in those moments, rising above and outshining the pain. It is so sure of itself that it does not care what others think, removing all doubt of its existence as you sing along to the music with abandon. Joy is able to say amidst life's hardships, *you are alive, and you are loved, so celebrate.*

I wonder if she had a feeling this would be her last birthday, her last celebration, until the victorious celebration of her life and ministry on August 27, 2008, a week after she died. Still, she stood up from that rollator and she danced. Because of how much she loved the music, because of all those people gathered on that summer day to celebrate her, because of joy.

.....

*Hanna Kraker is an emerging, unpublished author who just recently graduated from Cleveland State University with a BA in creative writing and French. She now lives in Birmingham, AL. **krakerdilerock@icloud.com***



MONET'S WATER LILY GARDEN

30" x 40"

Watercolor & Encaustic

Tom Dameron

Tom Dameron is a true Renaissance Man: retired pharmacist, sousaphone player with The Legendary Pineapple Skinners and The Old-Fashioned Rhythm Method, and fine art painter when he can find time. tom@tomdameron.com

PULLEY BONE WISHES, DRUMSTICK COMPETITIONS

Jim Reed

Oh boy, I hope I hope I hope I get to get the only thing worth getting today.

I'm sitting here at the tiny dining table in the tiny dining room adjacent via swinging door to the tiny kitchen at my childhood home on Eastwood Avenue at the fulcrum of the tiny town of 1940's Tuscaloosa.

My younger brother Ronny and older sister Barbara and handsome father Tommy and beautiful mother Frances are about to dine together this Sunday-after-church afternoon.

The fragrance of fresh-fried crunchy-breaded chicken blends with all the other fragrances of the hour. Steaming mashed potatoes. Hot corn bread. Carrot sticks. Gravy. Catsup for newly shelled black-eyed peas. Salt and pepper for boosted flavor. Hot pepper for Dad. And maybe, just maybe, sweeter-than-sweet lemon meringue pie made from scratch.

This magical and flavorful event pales in comparison to my lust for one big drumstick. Just one.

It's more than desire. More than mouth-watering anticipation. More than hunger. We are always well-fed, no matter how scant the income, no matter how high the food prices. My parents find a way to shield us kids from the realities of scraping by. The drumstick will make everything feel right, feel secure.

Mother is always the last to sit down, for she is captain of the ship. She backs into the dining room from the kitchen, pushing the door behind her just enough to slip through, carrying a steaming platter of chicken.

I'm at the ready, hoping to get first dibs on a drumstick.

Everything is negotiable. Should Sister Barbara decide she wants first choice, she will get first choice. The privilege of being eldest child. Should my father be of a mind to have a drumstick, so it shall be. Should Mother want a drumstick—wait, Mother never gets the drumstick because she waits till everyone has chosen, then meekly selects from what's left. Being youngest voter, Ronny takes whatever he's served, at least till he becomes older and more assertive.

Today, Dad serves himself a thigh. Barbara grabs a drumstick. And, miracle of miracles, I get one, too! Life is good. Life would be even better if chickens came with five legs.

The feast is talkative and noisy and filled with laughter and signifying. But one more ritual must be observed. One more punctuation mark must be applied to this happy mythology.

Who gets the pulley bone?

Lunch-before-dessert will not be complete until two of us get to make wishes, then tug apart the pulley bone. Today, it's Barbara and yours truly.

She holds one half of the slippery arch; I hold the other. We close our eyes and make our silent wishes. We pull hard. The pulley bone cracks.

One of us has a wish fulfilled

.....

*Jim Reed's Red Clay Diary podcasts and stories can be found at **www.redclaydiary.com**. He writes and edits and makes wishes in Birmingham, AL.*

*"This is true of all old men,
that the recent past is misted,
while distant scenes of memory
are clear and brightly
coloured."*

—Mary Stewart

THE LAST TIME I SAW GERTA K.

Craig Kurtz

The last time I saw Gerta K.,
it was like any other day;
a day from the last century
when clocks ran more reservedly;
an unclear wind had settled in —
far off, the strains of Beethoven;
and all the clouds that formed above
looked archetypical, sort of.

The last time I saw Gerta K.,
there was so much I didn't say;
neglecting thoughts to deflect us,
the menu's what she would discuss;
she had her coffee right away,
anterior to the entrée;
it's possible we reminisced
about a topic since dismissed.

The last time I saw Gerta K.,
most details I failed to convey;
she checked the time, it seemed, a lot
although there's so much I forgot;
the music heard was retrograde,
the melodies however fade;
we spoke of matters commonplace —
the clouds above us took up space.

The last time Gerta K. saw me,
another place I sought to be;
the future's passages were all
I thought of then, I now recall;
herself, she didn't seem quite 'there'
but so much of life is elsewhere;
if one could stop and hit rewind,
we'd see how little was designed.

.....

*Craig Kurtz is the author of Wortley Clutterbuck's Practical Guide to
Deplorable Personages, illustrated by Anni Wilson. Recent work featured in
Rabbit (Australia), Rattle (US), and Orbis (UK). More content at
<https://kurtzandwilson.blogspot.com>.
vanhalenkurtz@gmail.com*

*"A bad book is as much of a
labor to write as a good one; it
comes as sincerely from the
author's soul."*

—Aldous Huxley

GARDENER

John Grey

Knees in shadow,
your face is cradled in sunlight
and the purple affection of hydrangeas.

In the garden
as in the bedroom,
the loving touch is reciprocal.

Why else would rosebuds
lean in your direction,
or I watch from the window?

Your fingers work among
the living skins, the giving soil,
drawing out the life, the color.

If it lives,
it's attended to.
First, the peonies.
Then the azaleas.

I am waiting in line.

.....

*John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in That, Dunes Review, Poetry East and North Dakota Quarterly with work upcoming in Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal, Thin Air, Dalhousie Review and failbetter. **jgrey5790@gmail.com***

MUSCLE MEMORY

Mark Burke

The body absorbs history,
it forms adhesions, strictures in the flesh,
records what's been taken, lost.
Like an Inca tally-string tied inside,
it forms a harness of memories.

The instructor said to let our arms go,
press into the wall, loosen the knots.
Eyes closed, I push my shoulders
back against the wall and begin to drift
down a river over brown-pepper,
grey and bone-white rocks.
A huge boulder tears the rush,
lifts a glistening arc of water
up over itself where the flow
falls back down into its swirling eddy,
traps all that come close.

Caught there in a five-second dream,
I'm driving the truck home from the cemetery,
his smell oozing from the upholstery,
graveled vowels staining the air
with his lectures
on the means to an end.

He taught me to talk to the mirror,
look in my eyes when I was afraid.
His "a little rain must fall" floods,
the touch of his eyes, his grin.

A strand comes undone
from the years caught in my shoulders
as if I'd heard his voice
calling me home at dusk.

I swirl up to the surface
sucking at the air in the room,
turn to the wall, press my face
against the plaster, its cold flat comfort.

.....

*Mark Burke's work has appeared or is forthcoming in the North American Review, Beloit Poetry Journal, Sugar House Review, Nimrod International Journal and others. His work has recently been nominated for a Pushcart prize. **markanthonyburkesongsandpoems.com**
markburke113@msn.com*

*"We should indeed keep calm
in the face of difference and
live our lives in a state of
inclusion and wonder at the
diversity of humanity."*

—George Takei

ADVERTISEMENT

There is to be roupd and sold upon Thursday the 13th current, in the General's Entry, end of Bristo Street,

Several Sorts of HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE, viz. mounted beds, feather beds, blankets, bed and table linen, carpets, mahogany tables, desks, drawers, chairs, mirrors, iconce and dressing glasses, table and tea china, an eight day clock, kitchen furniture, with a jack, and lead cistern.

The furniture warranted free of vermin, and the roup to begin at ten o'clock forenoon, and to continue till all is sold off.

—from The Caledonian Mercury tabloid newspaper,
Edinburgh, Scotland.
Monday, April 10, 1769.

NOTE:

“roupd” means “auction” in Scottish – “iconce” may mean “sconce”

"You've got to dig it to dig
it, you dig?"

—Thelonious Monk

FALSE SPRING

Barry Marks

at night you think you see them
as appearing from a dream
at the side of the road
they watch bewildered
your headlights sweep over
the impossibly graceful necks
the soft faces delicate legs

what if one bolts into your path
what if you are not quick enough
what if your daughter is in the backseat
what is it daddy what happened
will it be all right

legs scissoring across the asphalt
ragged night breathing
the naked eye staring into you
wanting to believe that you
are not wolf
that day will follow night
that the world is good
that your hand
will not slip

.....

*Barry Marks is a Birmingham attorney. His most recent book, Dividing By Zero, combines poetry, narrative and fiction to tell the story of the damage caused by a writer's self-possession. Possible Crocodiles, his first book, was named 2010 Book of the Year by the Alabama State Poetry Society. His most recent project is a poetry/music collaboration with Alan Goldspiel, Chairman of the Music Department of the University of Montevallo, called Sometimes Y, which has been performed at music conferences and universities around the country. Barry was Alabama's Poet of the Year for 1999. **Barry@LeaseLawyer.com***

THE CHILD MARRIAGE

Amirah Al Wassif

Nana used to roll the wet body of her baby in a shabby towel. If you asked her, "Why?" she will answer you automatically like a robot, "God made me a mother!" and if you ask her "Who is a god?!" she will answer you, "My husband."

A year ago Nana was playing happily in the clay. She was stealing some clay and throw her friends with it and they return her favor back without hesitation as a daily habit of childhood age. [TR: shaping clay with friends]

She was still a child until Ismael came, at that damn moment when he looked at her as if he would eat her innocent face with his red eyes. Nana shuddered, uncomfortable feeling knocked her heart's door and unfortunately, her poor heart opened.

His father stopped close to her and whispered in Nana's ears "Show some respect to your husband." Nana smiled, she is a child and doesn't know what is the exact meaning of "Your husband." All she did was smile because she used to smile to everyone, to every stranger.

Ismael took the child and ran away. Nana's parents waved with indifference. Nana tried her best as a child to leave Ismael's hand, but how she would flee away from her man/from her destiny...

She asked in a crying tone "Where we are going?" He didn't answer her question. He never ever did.

At every tragic story, she screamed until her voice escaped away. Nothing prevents Ismael from his plan or (the plan of God). The only answer that he told Nana in the creepy tone of a man "You are mine, and I am your God."

.....

Amirah is a freelance writer, poet, and novelist who lives in Egypt. Amira writes in English and Kurdish, with works also appearing in Spanish, Arabic and Hindi.

[Note: some minor changes have been made to facilitate reading in English]

amera_love2053@yahoo.com



LEONARDO

Jeff Faulk
12" x 9"
Oil on Canvas

Jeff Faulk lives and paints in Birmingham. jeffart61@aol.com

MISCHIEF

John C. Bush

It was Easter Sunday, and the large church we attended was packed to the gills. Our family arrived too late for the five of us to sit together in our regular pew, so Sis and I ended up sitting together down near the front. When the sermon started, I put my head down on her lap and settled in for my usual Sunday morning nap. Every time I almost got to sleep the preacher raised his voice and woke me up. Finally, I had enough. I stood up on the pew and, in a voice adequate to meet his challenge, announced, “Sister, that man talks too loud.”

Nearly a dozen years later, on a Sunday night, we were at that same church. We were celebrating the Lord’s Supper that day. Daddy was one of the Deacons, and he was sitting down on the front row so he could serve the bread and Welch’s Grape Juice when the time came. When I say “down” on the front row I mean down because the floor had a steep slant from back to front. I figure they built it that way for two reasons. One was so people in back could see over the heads of the people in front of them. The other was to keep you awake, because if you went to sleep you were liable to lose your balance, tumble forward and bump your head on the pew in front of you. I know that from experience.

I asked Mother, who was sitting with Sis on the other side of the church, if I could sit at the back with my friends. She said, “All right, but you boys behave now, you hear!” How do mothers always know when you are about to get into trouble?

It wasn’t that we planned it that way. The three of us were sitting near the back of the room where the pitch of the floor was steepest. Before the service started, we were talking to Larry about how he broke his leg earlier that week while playing sandlot football. It was his right leg, and he wanted to sit nearest the center aisle so he could stretch his leg out when it got cramped. Joe was sitting beside him, with Larry’s crutch resting on the pew between them, and I sat beside Joe.

Time came for the Lord’s Supper. The Deacons began serving from the back of the church forward, alternating rows. The bread was passed to the old man sitting directly behind us at the same time we were being served from the other direction. Just as Joe took the little piece of dried up flour dough that we used for communion bread and put it on his tongue, the stomach of the man behind us let out a most impressive growl.

The three of us found that coincidence uncontrollably funny. We tried to muffle our laughter while everyone within ten pews turned to stare, but our guffaws would not be contained.

Thinking that my best move was to leave before things got any worse, I got up and started toward the aisle, which is when things got worse. Remember, Larry's crutch was resting on the pew between me and my destination. I tried to step over it, but my toe caught it and sent it clattering to the polished wood floor. It began to slide down that slope and it didn't stop until it got all the way to the front row where the Deacons were sitting.

It was a long time before the three of us were allowed to sit together in church again.

.....

John C. Bush was born in the panhandle of Florida and grew up in Montgomery, AL. A retired Presbyterian minister, he holds degrees from Samford University. A prolific writer in the field of religion, he has turned in retirement to historical fiction. Patriots and Rebels is his first novel dealing with the actual experiences of people from north Alabama who fought on the Union side in America's bloodiest conflict. He and his wife live in Decatur, AL **jbush3838@att.net**
jbush3838@charter.net

*“Everything’s irrelevant
Except the ears of elephants
They’re ear elephant.”*

—Joey McClure

ESTHER'S STORY

T.J. Hunter

“Ever tell ya’ what happened to daddy?” she says.

And you think, *Oh God, another thing I have to listen to*, but you say you never heard. When did you become so polite? You rinse a floral plate then place it in the dishwasher.

“He died when I was a girl.”

“I remember,” you say. You remember hearing Aunt Carol’s giant mouth, probably at one Christmas, that Esther’s father died young.

“Was shot by the grocer.”

Your face is surprised, and you don’t try to hide it. You’re genuinely surprised. “What happened?”

“You remember the Depression?”

You tilt your head to the side and shrug.

She pauses, sips a mug of room temperature decaf. She doesn’t like things too hot or too cold.

“Daddy was a coal miner... This was between what’s Jasper and Carbon Hill today. Used to be all coal mines.” Her speech is slow but purposeful.

You step to the kitchen table and sit across from her.

“You see, Daddy had lent the grocer money. And a’course, during the Depression everyone was laid off. That’s why Daddy wanted the money that that man owed him.” She pauses to sip. “That man that killed my daddy... Daddy approached him about the debt. That man was mad, got a gun, then shot and killed my daddy. Right in the store...”

You’re floored.

“Didn’t sit well with Curt.” Her brother. “Curt was there when it happened. Must’ve been thirteen years old. That was 1938... I was eleven. You see, years later Curt went off to the service. Then he came back, got married, and he and his brother-in-law were out huntin’ our land. Curt shot his brother-in-law. It was an accident.”

You’re impatient at her slow speech, and it shows on your face.

“But Curt felt that if the sheriff didn’t believe it was an accident, he’d go to prison. And he felt that if he had to go to prison, he wanted to go kill

that man that killed my daddy. So he did right away. Shot him clean through with his huntin' rifle."

"What happened to Curt?" You're hooked.

"Well that's what he was really charged with – shootin' the grocer. They gave him a life sentence, then it came on down and he finally got out."

You have no words. Just a blank expression. Then you cringe because this is family. And you wonder whether you're capable of killing. It's in your DNA, you think. But you don't want to kill. You twirl your hair and fake-smile but want to leave. Maybe you shouldn't have engaged her. But she needs this. She needs to tell someone. She needs to tell you. She trails off. Talks of teaching neighborhood kids, and how you should be a better mother but you aren't listening. This until you make your excuses and hug her goodbye. You crouch in your car and cuss your height. You were always taller than boys in school. Remember Tommy Boyd could barely reach your shoulders at homecoming, but you kissed him anyway. Bending over like a freak. Your parents are short. Where did this height come from? You pick out the grocery list from your purse and sigh. There's enough in checking to cover most of it, you think. You'll use your AMEX instead. Then you imagine what a shooting at Piggly Wiggly would look like. The camera phones, the terror, the screams coming from Produce. You shift into Reverse.

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T.J. Hunter lives in Birmingham, AL and studied at the University of Montevallo. He has written for Time Inc. Studios and others.

TimJHunter@msn.com

*"I've found that raising my voice
is the next best thing to being
right."*

Argus Hamilton—



US 80 BRIDGE

Digital Photograph

Glenn Wills

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

WHERE I AM

Joey McClure

It was a beautiful early spring morning as I helped my mother get into my old Buick and buckled her in. Our journey this day would take us from Mom's house in Sylacauga to Munford, Alabama, about 45 miles away. It

was my childhood best friend, Jimmy Culver's, birthday and his wife had invited my mother and me to a surprise celebration late that afternoon.

Mom and I had decided to make the most of the nicest spring day since the end of a cold hard winter and rather than taking the forty-five-minute drive up highway 21, we chose to meander through the countryside along back roads and pig trails.

After a nice lunch, a couple hours of beautiful scenery and pleasant conversation, I realized I wasn't quite sure of our location. Many of the old roads we had been on I remembered from my high school explorations, but we were past Talladega and in unknown territory, though my instincts told me that we were heading in the right direction. Then after a long curve we came upon a single lane trestle bridge spanning maybe thirty yards across a scenic falling-rapids creek. Since we had not seen another car for at least thirty minutes, I stopped the old Riviera right in the middle of the bridge, opened my door, stepped from the car and made the short walk over to the bridge's edge.

The setting was breathtaking. To our right was a dam tall enough that we couldn't see the lake behind it, but a wide flow of water spilled over its face for about twenty-five feet or so splashing onto great stone boulders. It then continued its descent crashing into more and more rock outcroppings as it ran under the bridge down a small valley to our left until it became a wide flowing creek for a short distance where it fed into a glass-smooth reflective, serene pond. Mother opened her door, fought with the seat belt until it finally fell away, she pulled herself out and stood there leaning on the car as she took a deep breath and slowly scanned the loveliness of the spring day and her surroundings.

I looked down at the point where the creek met the pond and there on the bank under a blooming willow tree sat a barefoot, shirtless fellow wearing faded blue jeans rolled up to his knees with a ragged straw cowboy hat cocked his head. A red bandana hung out of his back pocket and a tobacco pipe hung from his mouth. Even from the bridge I could see clouds of smoke engulf his head each time he puffed on his pipe. Four cane fishing poles stuck out from the bank over the pond and four cork bobbers floated lazily on top of the water awaiting the big fish to swim by.

Now more than before, I wondered exactly where we were because an amazing place such as this must have a name, and it should be a glorious name. I decided to take the opportunity to find out. I took a drink from my water bottle, took a deep breath and bellowed over the melody of the falling water toward the relaxing fisherman below.

“HAAAY, WHERE AM I?”

The fisherman looked across to the other side of the creek. Then he turned, squinted and gazed around the pond. He next twisted around to look behind him.

I hollered again, “HAAAAAY, WHERE AM I?” I took another big swig from my water bottle.

This time he stood up and as he looked around for the source of the strange voice he slowly turned around in a complete circle. Eventually, his gaze found me standing there looking down on the puzzled fellow. He smiled really big, took off this hat with one hand and removed the pipe from his mouth with his other, pointed the stem of the pipe right at me and yelled.

“I KNOW WHAR YOU IS! YOUS UP THAR ON THAT BREEGE!”

I choked and spat water everywhere gagging for breath as I started to guffaw. Water was still coming out my nose and tears streamed down my face as Mother asked, “What’d he say?”

I looked to see that the fisherman had sat back down next to his poles with a satisfied-with-himself look on his face. I finally caught my breath enough to wheeze out, “He said we’re up there on that bridge,” mocking the southern drawl of the fisherman’s. Mother began to howl, and tears rolled down her cheeks. We got back in the car which was void of conversation the rest of our trip because it was filled with roaring laughter all the way to Munford.

.....

Joey McClure lives and works as a storyteller/writer/real estate agent in downtown Birmingham, AL joey@jmcre.net

*"I'm not a complete idiot.
Some parts are missing."*

—Argus Hamilton

THE COCKTAIL SQUIRREL

Richard Modlin

In the balsam and spruce forests of Down East Maine one can hear an almost contralto-level trill wafting between the trees. Sometimes this tune lasts about a minute or more. This high-pitched warble is the call of a little roan-colored creature, a smidgen larger than a chipmunk, with a black stripe stretching along each edge of its underbelly between the front and back legs. A thin bristly tail, curling over this melodious animal's back, quickly characterizes it as a red squirrel.

Unlike our common "squirrely" gray squirrel, red squirrels are curious, cautious and confident. Also differing from gray squirrels, red squirrels establish territories, especially if the resources in an area abound. So, when Marian and I rented Sea Spray Cottage in Roque Bluffs, Maine, we found that a red squirrel residing in the surrounding fir trees had the deck incorporated into its territory. The squirrel's appropriation did not come as a surprise. This enterprising critter had learned that, when humans utilize the deck, they bring peanuts, potato chips, bread, crackers, and a variety of other goodies. So, we became the red squirrel's chattel.

Whenever we went onto the deck, within moments the red squirrel made its presence known by running along the rail and jumping on the pedestal at the stairway to the beach. There he stood upright, projected his mouth forward and shaped it into an "O" and released his bird-like warble. Sometimes he ran across the deck or the rail, stopped in front of us and stared. Then he ran off and chased chipmunks and other red squirrels away.

Marian and I were definitely guilty of enticement, because we knowingly threw crumbs and peanuts on the deck to attract birds and forest creatures. And they came: chipmunks, red squirrels, raccoons, and others. We didn't know we were interfering with the dominant red squirrel's domain. We learned that there were many in the forest, but only one owned our deck. The others were interlopers. In the late afternoon the difference became apparent.

As soon as Marian and I emerged from the cottage, became comfortable in the deck chairs, placed our cocktails on the side tables and opened the can of peanuts, the little critter came zipping up the stairway from the trees near the beach. He'd run along the rail, assume the upright pose, and sing his ditty. He then scampered back to where we sat, jumped onto the first knee available and sat upright. If this knee happened to belong to me, and I ignored his presence, I'd feel his cool nose and whiskers vibrating against my

fingers, while he energetically inspected them. Finding nothing, his little face would appear over the book's spine and I'd see a pair of black shining eyes focused on mine. In my mind's ear, I heard a telepathic statement. It said, "*The charge for using my deck is peanuts!*"

A gentle request. I immediately reached into the can of peanuts and offered one. The red squirrel took the nut with his paws, rotated it about, jumped back to the rail, ate the nut, and then returned.

After several reappearances, the squirrel would streak off to the pedestal, jump on it, sit upright, fold his front legs against his chest, and curl his tail. Then he sang, inspected his territory. If all was well, he scampered back to my knee.

As long as we provided the red squirrel with unsalted peanuts, he'd take them. However, after reaching his fill, he would place a single uneaten peanut in his mouth and dash away down the hillside. We assumed he concealed these in his lair, until I followed the little critter one day and found this was not so. The hillside had many burrows and my friend wasn't selective. The other holes could have been dug by other squirrels or even chipmunks. I did see chipmunks enter a burrow shortly after the squirrel left. So, the concealment of his nuts wasn't so secretive. Everyone knew where he hid his stash.

This red squirrel became known as the cocktail squirrel because he appeared when we came on deck to enjoy a cocktail. No matter rain, fog or shine, I could set my watch with the cocktail squirrel's arrival. If we weren't on deck, he'd scurry about, stop and peer through the window of the sliding door. This behavior continued until one of us came out.

Eventually we were accepted, and the cocktail squirrel came to sit on our shoulders. If he wasn't given a peanut, he'd examine our hands and check out our shirt pockets. Several times, he crawled headfirst into my pocket, then flip around. It's a silly sight to see a nervous little head sticking out of your pocket. If his quest was unsuccessful, he'd return to the shoulder and stare. Then he'd jump onto the deck. I could hear his feet patter rapidly across the deck as he scampered away.

During times when the cocktail squirrel was absent, chipmunks and the neighboring red squirrels came to the deck and, of course, we fed them too. We knew that after a period of sulking the cocktail squirrel would return and chase the interlopers away. Then he would stand on the rail or a chair and scold us, birds and other interlopers for the next five minutes.

The cocktail squirrel became so important around Sea Spray Cottage that, on our grocery list, a jar of unsalted peanuts turned into a staple. We enjoyed being accepted by this gentle, charismatic little creature during the two summers that we visited Roque Bluffs.

I believe the cocktail squirrel has a lasting memory, because when we returned the second year, his behavior had not changed. It was as if we had never left. Perhaps he will still rule the deck at Sea Spray Cottage in Maine when we return next year.

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*"A bad book is as much of a
labor to write as a good one;
it comes as sincerely from the
author's soul."*

—Aldous Huxley

SELF PORTRAIT WITH LAKE

Irene Latham

I am morning
slicing a kayak

I am the blue
cuddling clouds

waves
painting the sun

twigs gathering
geese

logs
gnawing beavers

I am the heat
that holds
boulders

shore that kisses
the current ripple

that skims
dragonflies

I am a lullaby
singing
the pines
to sleep.

.....

*Irene Latham lives with her husband on a lake in rural Alabama where she writes books and poems for children of all ages. **irenelatham.com***



EARLY MORNING IN FOG

Digital Photograph

The late Dr. Dail Mullins taught science in the University Honors Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.



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