Birmingham Arts Journal

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FRONT COVER: BLUE VASE WITH FLOWERS *20" X 24" Acrylic on Canvas - Melanie Morris is an award-winning artist whose work has been shown in galleries and juried shows across the southeast. She applies layers of exquisite color with a palette knife to create her dreamlike paintings. Melanie's colorful landscapes have been said to "evoke a range of emotion from the viewer, from quiet contemplation to bubbling-over joy."* **www.melaniemorrisart.com**

BACK COVER: SPARROWS *City Windows 29" x 41". Timothy Poe Eglomise' with reflective elements. Iron frame. Tim Poe is a multi-media artist living in Birmingham, AL. He is a graduate of UAB and was the first artist to restore & convert one of the historic buildings at Thomas Republic Steel facility into a studio space.* **timothypoe23@gmail.com**

THE CHOICE

Alex Wilkerson

Today I had THE CHOICE
I woke up again,
With the bad thoughts.
The same ones I've been having forever

But I made the choice
My therapist said
"Picture a stop sign."
It works.

STOP

And I made THE CHOICE
The same one you have
The same one we all have
I decided
Today is going to be just fine
I made the choice.

Today I had THE CHOICE
I woke up again,
With the bad thoughts.
The same ones I've been having forever

But I made the choice
My therapist said
"Picture a stop sign."
It works.

STOP

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.....

Alex Wilkerson is a musician and writer based in Birmingham, AL. He is the proud father of a bob-tailed tortoiseshell named Margot.

VARIATIONS ON RAIN

Timothy Dodd

Monsoons are here, Manila; on time, drenching
us, flooding back streets. Other places may wait
for rain, of which there is no harvest without,
but here we wait for it to stop before venturing
out into the alleyways. I was here this time last
year, too, waiting on a mystery of another type,
waiting like a season on one of your daughters
to the south. I waited for her until the windows
fogged, leaving me a bystander. You see I am
well fed, sheltered, healthy, and the thick rains
are swelling our precious rice, yet I don't know
where to harvest now or what she has grown;
I'm the sinewy husk only covering my belief,
left not to peel and protect, but chew on, choke.
.....

Timothy B. Dodd is from Mink Shoals,WV. His poetry has been published in The Roanoke Review, Broad River Review, Ellipsis, The William & Mary Review *and elsewhere. His poem,* "The House on the Hill," *appeared in* Birmingham Arts Journal Volume 8, Issue 3, *his very first published poem. He is currently in the MFA program at the University of Texas El Paso.*
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BERKELEY AND JELA

(excerpt from *NEVER SNICKER AT A SNAKE ON A STICK*)

Thomas N. Dennis

Leaving work a couple of hours early, he drove north for a trip of about two hundred miles, checked into the motel room he had reserved a month before, got ready to attend the yoga workshop--having spent some Internet time searching out addresses, figuring out the best route from motel to workshop--and then, when he arrived Friday night at the studio . . . he was the only person attending. The parking lot was empty. Like a lost pet, he went from one opaque door to the other, peering in at darkened yoga rooms. The flier with the workshop details was pasted to the door. No sign of a cancellation notice. Next scheduled class: 8:30 a.m. tomorrow morning.

Son of a – oh well, perhaps it was just tonight's session that was cancelled – the famous yoga teacher from the West was delayed – and the workshop would begin in the morning. He took a little time returning to his motel room, checking for future reference certain districts near the University. Should he go ahead and meander about downtown, check out the urban sites? Printers Alley? Music Row? No. He felt closer to exhaustion, and he also had a thought about an old friend who might still be in or near this city. It was here she had repaired, 17 years ago, after their one-night fling which was the inebriated culmination of a months-long drinking partnership. The old yogi was quieter now, a bit more subdued: ceasing to drink completely, starting and then cutting out tobacco – and, since the last messages he'd had from Jela had been long phone calls where she discussed her attendance at AA – he felt it might be interesting to tell her his story.

Sure enough, there she was in the local phone directory. "I'm sorry," said the somewhat mechanical operator's voice, "the number you have dialed"—pause— "has been changed. . . ." Inadvertently, he suspended his breath, but then quickly caught himself. "The new number is . . . ." Elated, he called the number and got her voice. Yes – that was her slow drawl, slightly yankeeish in places, deeply southern in others. His first message he left was breathless. He was not good at this sort of thing.

Hi, J., this is your old friend Berkeley from seventeen years ago. Do you remember me? I'm here for a yoga workshop but I'm not sure whether it's been cancelled or not … but uh hey I'd really love to talk

to you …so, um, give me a call if it's convenient . . ." He did remember to give the phone number of the motel and the room number.

He called the number of the yoga studio and received a recording; left a message asking about the workshop. Whereupon it hit him that he had not told her his last name. Calling back, he left his name and apologized for leaving the extra message. Do I sound anxious? he wondered. Eager? What might happen? Was she perhaps off the wagon, would she race drunkenly to his motel for a night of -- ? No. Shut up, monkey mind. He looked out his single window and saw an ivy-covered expanse of backyard, some new wooden stairs. Checked the AC. It was nearly 6 now. Did she get off work at 5?

1983: They met at work. The attraction he felt the first time he saw her was immediate and thorough, the roots of the desire sinking a few probative fingers into the bad meat of his soul.

He was a married person, and made no subterfuges about it. Jela was an intense woman.

If you didn't know her, she might strike you as more cold than calm, not quick to speak but neither was she taciturn. Alcohol had the same effect on her as it has always had on Berkeley, creating daring, outspoken people who became unafraid of any gaze, their own (non-drunk) self-conscious exam or even the awareness of others.

Her small, perfectly-placed, unbent nose reminded Berkeley of an actress whose named he could not bring to mind.

She might in heels hit five feet tall, in her early thirties like him, slim, brown eyes full of laughter and curiosity, and her hair done in close curls. Thin lips. Typically, at work and at home, she wore plaid, light flannel shirts – or white blouses, on special occasions – and in the warm weather those stretchy sleeveless blouses. Always very white sneakers and taut old jeans, nothing new. He thought she was pretty damned hot. Her voice had a slowness to it that reeked sex, though he would have been and still was unable to say why that might be true. It pulled at him.

Jela wore a little makeup. She seemed to be interested in Berkeley, also from almost the first day they met. He was introduced as the person who would teach her the job.

"It's hell here," he warned her. "Welcome to hell."

"I don't mind," she said, narrowing her eyes fetchingly. "I'm used to it. It's all those guys that I'm worried about."

"Let's go take a break," he suggested. "Nothing happening here yet."

"Okay."

They sat on metal chairs in the dirty little break room, smoking. Against the wall there were three large machines full of old sandwiches, candy, and soft drinks. Some of the food had green edges.

"Are you from here?"

"Yes," Jela said. "But," picking a speck of tobacco from her tongue, "I've lived mostly in other places. I'm getting over a really bad divorce, I mean, he's really being a s--- about it." Berkeley listened demurely, knowing that he might be near divorce himself, except his wife was a lapsed Catholic and didn't want to raise their daughter alone. They were not getting along. It was the sort of thing done by other kids' parents, when Berkeley was a kid.

It had only been about 6 or 7 years since the tragedy of Jonestown. Bob Marley was gone three years.

She broke the silence: "I used to work at a company like this in Euellton."

"That's down in Withlacoochee County, isn't it?" Berkeley spied one or two of the dock workers walking slowly, lunchboxes in hand, down the unused dock, heading to work. He guessed the time, almost clock in time, nearly 6 p.m. He put out his cigarette and winced as the smoke lifted up into his eyes.

"It is." A pause. "I'm surprised you know that. My ex-husband – well, we're almost ex – it's just a matter of paperwork now – we lived there for a while in really beautiful old house out in the middle of nowhere. Amazing plumbing in that house."

He almost said, "Remember and tell me later."

There was an unpanicked pause; he could tell she was wondering whether to go into greater detail. She put out her cigarette, mashing it with a dance step.

"He was very abusive and insanely jealous. I'm so glad to get out. But he still wants to get back into my life."

Berkeley is nervous, and the sky is tainted by pollution colors, rust and sulfuric yellow, when they walk outside towards the door of the office.

He says, "I've never been jealous but during about one week in my life. Well, only once. Not since then."

"You're not married?"

"No, I am married. Almost three years. One kid."

"A girl?"

Berkeley nodded his shaggy head, looking down at the oil stained floor.

"I just assumed you had a daughter. Is there some reason you don't wear your ring?"

"I don't have one. I never bought one. If you've ever read about the workers in those gold mines of South Africa –"

"I have." She gave him a very direct look. "You must be a man of principles," she said and then laughed briefly. He felt her looking at his dimples, which arose when he smiled. Berkeley rarely laughed, but he did smile a lot.

"No kids for you?"

"No kids for me. For which I am eternally grateful. I bet you smoke dope," she ventured.

"You-u-u – might be right." Why lie? He got a good feeling from this woman. "Tell me, was it the hair or my beard that gave me away?"

"The red eyes."

"Ah. Well, we'll have to burn one some evening when we get a chance. I have some extremely good sensimilla – takes a bud about the size of a sparrow's testicle."

"I have a one-hitter, we'll do that sometime then."

"Name's Berkeley, by the way. Yours?"

"Jela. I will call you Berkeley, Berkeley."

They went back into the office, to work.

After only a few weeks, he began stopping by her house on the days she wasn't working – if his schedule permitted. They smoked and drank immoderately, making expeditions for half-ounces of pot, even, once, walking the entire ten blocks, more than half-drunk, to the local all-night quick mart for more beer. She told him some very sad stories, some intoxicatingly weird stories and a few relatively bland and unimportant stories about herself. There were a few that went beyond weird but were so awful they had to have been true, despite what Berkeley thought upon hearing them. Soon the phone calls began to come in on the nights he was off work and Jela was working.

Berkeley excused his long talks with her by explaining to his Raiza that Jela had no friends and was going through a terrible divorce from a man who had abused her.

"She needs me; a good platonic friend."

"I need you too," Berkeley's wife Raiza replied, eyes flashing.

"For what?"

"I need you to be a father and a husband. You smoke too much. You drink too much. You sleep too much."

"That's the nature of the job, Raiza! God-damn! You think I like these hours?"

"And that's another thing, the cursing –"

Berkeley sighed, went to the fridge, didn't find a beer. Went outside just to get away from her.

His daughter was quite small at this time. The daily procedure was: come home at 6 a.m., stay up with her for most of the morning, playing and also getting some lunch ready, and to crash around noon when his daughter took her daytime nap. Raiza got home around 2:30 and took over while he slept, if it was a work day. Berkeley rarely got enough sleep. He worked while others slept and slept while others worked, leaving his gentle circadian rhythms continually in a snarl. Life out of balance. He longed, during this time, for the normalcy of an 8-5 job.

There was a Tarot card, the knight of cups, which reminded Berkeley of himself. The bearded figure held an overlarge cup, and it's certain that something is spilling as he tilts unsteadily toward it, out of balance and with a disjointed look to the face.

One day his daughter woke him from his nap by carefully touching his eyelashes. "Hi honey! Daddy's trying to sleep."

"Wake up Daddy. Snake!"

"Wha?" He jumped up and followed her to the back door. "Snake got wheels," she said meaningfully, pointing at the large black curves that were moving toward the back porch from the edge of the yard.

"Gah!" He managed to get the snake to move toward the end of the house, but then it slithered through the open basement door. They never saw it again. Berkeley made some coffee, rolled a joint, and searched for a sliver of a Valium he thought he had from the day before.

Phone. It was Jela. His daughter was now happily arranging Fisher-Price people and buildings.

She wondered if she could come by. This was new. He toked the joint, blew the smoke out the back, eying the grass for a return of the serpent.

"Sure," he said. Raiza wouldn't be home for another couple of hours.

"Do I need directions?"

"I don't think so. Come to the back door, okay?" But he gave

them nonetheless.

"I'll be there in a bit. Do you need any smoke?"

"Nah."

It was a late summer day, very dry, warm, late 1985. Cloudless sulphurs came by as he stared out the glass of the back door. Somewhat on purpose, wanting to show off his musical prowess, Berkeley picked up his twelve-string Alvarez and took it to the back porch where, when Jela came up, he was picking out Jackson Browne tunes as best he could.

"I didn't know you played. You never told me you were a musician, Berkeley."

He made a face. "I'm not really, not much of one."

"You don't give yourself enough credit, did you know that?"

She pulled up a chair, placed herself into it, raked some fingers through her hair, lit a cigarette and placed it in the ashtray he had on the floor.

"I have an idea," she said, "that I want to run past you. Something we can do some night when we both are off. Or maybe when I get off work."

"O-kay . . . "

"I think we ought to drive down to this little bar I used to go to down near Euellton. It's called the Stinky Pink."

Berkeley snorted.

"How did it get that name?"

"Don't ask."

"Sorry I did. But – so – um, you think we'd have time to get down there and get me back home . . . ." What he didn't say, but what she surely understood, was the phrase Before Raiza wakes up for work in the morning. She slept so deeply that Berkeley always just came in, slipped into the bed or (more likely these days) curled up in his clothes, stinking of beer and cigarettes, on the couch.

"I think so. I think it can be done. It would be fun."

"You know me, Jela, I'm game for anything."

She just blew the smoke out of her lungs, lips pursed, cigarette tilted up in her hand in what might seem like an affectation but was not, and gave a little snicker, like a horse. "That's what worries me about you."

"Let me get the tray . . . I'll roll us one. Wanta beer?"

Back in the present moment: "Jela, how are you? This is

Berkeley, do you remember me?" The air around his vision, as he stared out the hotel window at a pool, was speckled with unusual light.

"Of course I remember you, hey, honey, how are ya?"

"I'm up here for a yoga workshop – I do a lot of yoga these days, trying to keep this old body from creakin' – but of course there's more to yoga than just that . . ." Don't bore her, man. Remember to shut up.

"So – do you think the workshop is cancelled?"

"I don't know yet. I'll find out tomorrow I guess. I'm planning on heading over there early in the morning – another class is scheduled then, so . . . But we ought to get together!"

She sighed, or perhaps was blowing out cigarette smoke. "I'm having a, uh, kind of hard time with this guy Buddy who I've been in a relationship with. He still drinks but I don't. I tell ya – why don't you call me tomorrow after you find out if you have that yoga class – and we'll plan from there, okay?"

"Sounds good to me. I'm pretty beat tonight, and I guess you just got off work, huh?"

"Yeah, and I need to get some yard work done too."

"You are still going to AA, I guess?" Why should she be, you idiot, that was 17 years ago was it not? He thought of the cicadae, all of a sudden, whose appearance this summer paralleled his renewed interest in Jela. Without time to answer himself, he wondered why he was so interested.

"No," she answered, making a pish-posh noise. Berkeley could suddenly remember very well what she looked like, but the image was wrong, he knew, because it was an old image. "I just kinda slacked off on that stuff after my last relapse, which was in '97."

"So did that, uh, were you -- "

"No, Berkeley, it didn't last a long time. I'll tell you all about it. There's so much to talk about. I can't believe I was really just thinking about you on the way home this evening."

"I know!" Berkeley was pulling the phone away from the wall so he could lie comfortably on the big motel bed.

"I have to admit, Berkeley, that I often wondered what you were up to down there. Remember the last time I came to visit?"

"Oh yeah," Berkeley saw himself wince in the mirror behind the TV. "I made you go to the bar and you said you wanted to leave. Too much temptation. I really felt bad about that. But you know I've quit

drinking too, Jela, about nine years ago now."

"Really? Why?"

"Basically a DUI that – can you imagine driving for nine months without a license, wondering if, if you know, if someone bumps the car and you have to produce a license and then admit that it's revoked – gah – it was so freakin' nerve-wracking."

"Tell me about it. I got two of them when I first moved back up here."

"Well, hey, let's save some of this for tomorrow. It's more fun to talk in person rather than on the phone, don't you think?"

"O f'real. I need to take a bath and – do some other stuff here – and so, okay, till tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow. Around 8 or 9 a.m." Berkeley paused. "I won't be waking you will I?"

"No no, I get up early on Saturdays. Bahyee!"

"Bye!"

He felt strangely elated and ordered pizza for dinner rather than venture forth into the dining districts of the city. After eight deep hours of sleep, and a morning yoga session at the studio where he found out that the workshop had indeed been cancelled – "Would you like a free class, then?" – he called her and made arrangements to drive out to her home near dusk.

Just after sundown, the sky an unprepossessing mauve sheet across the western horizon, he found himself driving across this southern city so renowned for its music, heading back to see this woman he'd not spoken a word to for the entire life of a cicadae. He rechecked his directions and made certain of her number, listening to Prairie Home Companion as he moved east and then southeast toward Chattanooga. He tried to stop wondering what was going to happen, pledged inwardly to let whatever happened happen. Unusual for his trips, he paid little attention to the traffic, the hills, the interstate landscape – so tangled up in the future was the attention of his mind. Would she have changed much? Of course she still smoked cigarettes, so many ex-drinkers now depended on AA appear to depend overmuch on caffeine and nicotine (in his experience) but that didn't bother him too awfully much.

He zipped past bunches of warehouses…right at the light… another quick light…Cemetery Road…it was almost dark, now, but he didn't have that much trouble finding the right number on the mailbox. Nice brick home, tornado-proof, nice open garage. There she was, wet with sweat and unloosening herself from a weed eater.

"Ber-ke-ley! So good to see you."

……

Thomas N. Dennis is author of several books, including his latest, NEVER SNICKER AT A SNAKE ON A STICK*, from which the above is an excerpt.*
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"Human aggression cannot be explained as either a dark-angelic flaw or a bestial instinct. Nor is it the pathological symptom of upbringing in a cruel environment. Human beings are strongly predisposed to respond with unreasoning hatred to external threats and to escalate their hostility sufficiently to overwhelm the source of the threat by a respectably wide margin of safety."

--Edward O.Wilson

LILIES

9"x 14" Watercolor on paper on wood panel with encaustic overlay

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**

THE SECRET

Dannye Romine Powell-2018 Hackney Literary Awards - 1st Place - National Poetry Award

Light shellacs the near-empty streets
as I drive. Beside me, my grown son asks
if a secret I thought I'd kept buried
is true. A secret
that can still catch fire.
We stop on red. A bird flies
by the windshield. My father's words:
Easier to stand on the ground
and tell the truth than climb a tree
and tell a lie. Now, I think. Tell him.
I stare at his profile,
straight nose, thick lashes.
I remember, at about his age,
how a family secret
fell into my lap, unbidden.
That secret still ransacks a past
I thought I knew, rearranging its bricks,
exposing rot and cracks,
changing the locks on trust.

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Dannye Romine Powell's fourth collection was "Nobody Calls Me Darling Anymore." *Her poems have appeared in a number of journals, including* The Southern Review, The Harvard Review Online, Ploughshares and Poetry, *and they are forthcoming in* The Beloit Poetry Journal and Arts; Letters. *She was the 2011 winner of the Randall Jarrell Poetry Competition.* **dannye700@aol.com**

SENTENCED TO LIFE

Jim Reed

I'm shivering on the twilight streets of the big city, waiting in cool dampness for designated driver to appear.

The semi-darkness alters colors and textures just enough to make me re-examine my after-work surroundings.

To my left is the tall vertically-striped Watts tower glowing and glowering at the unstoppable passage of time.

Straight across the way is the large furniture store with forgotten neon OPEN sign defiantly staring back despite the fact that employees have locked up and headed home.

A large municipal bus pulls up, occluding the OPEN sign, awaiting permission of a traffic light. I gaze into the large windows where passengers move about under the eerie bluish hue of interior lights. It looks as if i'm gazing into an aquarium. The occupants tread air and brace for the journey.

Music of the asphalt accompanies all. Horns make horn sounds, tires screech, parkers try to park parallel in multiple back-and-forth wriggling patterns, cars with right-blinkers ablaze turn left anyhow, courier services idle their vehicles. Other drivers weave around them. Incredibly loud music vibrates the windows of one car, a sirened ambulance forces me to stop ears with fingers, pedestrians poop-pause their yappers, plastic bags at the ready.

Chattering teens stroll by on their way to an Alabama Theatre concert. A crestfallen shopper pulls the overtime shopping penalty ticket off his windshield and mutters sadly. One panhandler puts a hand out, a power-tailored attorney hustles 'round the corner, hugging leather briefcase.

I suddenly realize that I have been sentenced to life.

Life on the streets, life among strangers and friends and passers-by.

A life sentence is what I am privileged to serve, here in the tiny wonderland that is my 'hood, my livelihood, my worldly world of pavement and people and creatures of the twilight

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Jim writes, ponders and offers books to all creatures in Birmingham, AL. Hackney Literary Awards short-story winner, 2018 A.D. **jim@jimreedbooks.com**

PRACTICE MAGIC

Paul Pruitt, Jr.

When I got right with Mr. Bach,
It was a day in March, breezy, anticipatory,
And I was playing, window open on Sixth Street.

By now I knew the little fugue, had learned its notes—
Played, machine-like, at last week's lesson time
To gentle frowns from Mrs. Warren and

Shrugs from her husband, the maestro. Now all at once
It was as though I'd oiled the thing. Now I could see
Mr. Bach, that old boy, striding behind, peeping through

The staff. And as I worked it over and over again,
Sixth Street began to flow downhill, westward, moving in
A tactile dream—toward Monuments of Days.

.....

Paul Pruitt, Jr. has been writing poetry "a long time." He has contributed poetry to student magazines at Jacksonville State and William and Mary, and to a 1980-volume titled 3 O'clock at the Pines, a collection of works by former students of JSU's Dr. William J. Calvert*, as well as other anthologies. Paul is a librarian at the University of Alabama School of Law.*
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"In this day and age, if you talk about anything, you're misinterpreted into something else. So if I was a god, I'd be the god of tolerance. Not a vengeful god."

--Ian McShane

YELLOW TULIP

Marian Lewis

Marian Moore Lewis is a retired NASA research scientist who documents the diversity and beauty of Alabama flora and fauna in Goldsmith-Schiffman Wildlife Sanctuary, a 400-acre preserve in Madison County, Alabama. She divides her time between Maine in summer and Huntsville in winter.

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"I never won an argument with my wife. The one time I thought I did, I found out the argument wasn't over yet."

--Jimmy Carter

STRIA 26

Doug Bolling

I have heard you say
In the beginning there was
STONE
and together we have
touched there
two drifters wanting only
the passage through
keeping warm
learning the intricacies
of love
Then stone and the walls of it
wherein the cry of blood ; brain
how did we come here
naked to so much distance
Do you believe it even so:
the sinews of the poem
sufficient

to crack open the unspeakable
the unspeaking
a poem fragile glasslike
formed of silences and
shadows wrought from
unknown depths
a poem taking up shards of stone
into its mouth
breaking free the light
trapped there.

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Doug Bolling's poetry has appeared in Redactions, Flagler College Review, Poem, Isthmus, Water-Stone Review, The Missing Slate *(with interview)* and Folia *among others. He has received Best of the Net and Pushcart nominations And several awards. A native of Kentucky, he has published short fiction and* Poetry of the Mountains *there. He now lives in Chicago.*

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AWAKE IN HOOVER

Brenda Burton

It's three o'clock in the morning and I'm wide awake. So, what do I do now?

Read the book that's lying splayed open on the nightstand? No, I lost interest in it after twenty or so pages last night. I could get up and rummage around for a less tedious book in the Leaning Tower of Amazon on the coffee table, but my feet are warm, and I don't want to disturb them.

I could count sheep, but I've always found that counter-productive. My perverse mind naturally focuses on individual sheep as they leap over a fence. Are they all perfectly white? Do any of them balk as they face the obstacle? Is it a wooden fence or is it chain link with a barbed wire concertina atop it? Wouldn't want the lambs to snag their wool or cut themselves. Are there any wolves lurking about?

I could count my sins, but as my grandson says when posed with a large number, "That's 'finity." Besides, at some point, I'd want to get up and call someone to confess or apologize. Then I'd have to apologize for waking them.

I could imagine a phoned confession/apology to one of my aggrievees. That might lull me back to sleep.

Ring…ring…ring…ring.

"Hmmm…hello…hmmm."

"Shir' Jean, this is your cousin, Brenda."

"Hmmm…who?"

"Brenda, your cousin. You remember, we lived next door to each other for eighteen years."

"What time is it?"

"It's early. Hey, Shir' Jean, do you remember the time Granny gave you a switching for spitting on the Grady kids?"

"Huh? Grady kids?"

"Yeah, remember they lived down the road from us. There must have been eight or so of them. Can't remember any of their names."

"I remember. The oldest boy was Ralph. He was my first sweetheart. Where ARE you? You been hitting the sauce?"

I imagine Shir' Jean's voice will go soft when she thinks about Ralph and I'll know when I finally confess she will laugh it off as a childish prank.

"No, I just wanted to apologize for not confessing to Granny and letting you take the blame," I'd say, modulating my voice to sound penitent.

"You were the one who spit on the Grady kids?"

Even in my imagination, the conversation could take a turn for the worse. And it'd be just like Shir' Jean to rake up other wrongs.

"No! We weren't spitting! Ronnie and I were playing war with them. We'd fill our mouths with water from the well and try to squirt it on them." I'd say, then add, "They were doing it, too!"

"So, not only were you spreading germs, you were playing in the water. Granny always said not to play in the well water!" This would be so like Shir' Jean!

"I'm really sorry. If Granny were still alive, I'd call her and confess."

"Wait a gol'darned minute…weren't you the one who went outside and got a hickory switch for Granny?"

"Well, technically, it wasn't a hickory switch. I broke it off the hedge," I'd explain.

"But why did Granny think it was me?"

If I'm going to do this, I'll do it right. "When little Billy Grady said he was going to tell on us, I think I told him my name was Shir' Jean. You know he went to prison, don't you?"

"And it's probably all your fault!"

Shir' Jean was not my favorite cousin for a reason.

"Do you remember the time you chased me with a fishing hook, saying you were going to stick it in my eye?" I would fire back.

As this point, she would blow a raspberry like she used to do and hang up. I would consider the score settled. I don't need forgiveness, just closure. What's infinity minus one?

I guess I'll get out of bed and clean the shower.

.....

Brenda Burton lives and works in Hoover, Al. **moosie40@yahoo.com**

"Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight as if for taming accidental thoughts from possible pulses."

--Elizabeth Barrett Browning

FOOT SONG
Doug Bolling

The child's foot is not yet aware it's a foot,
and would like to be a butterfly or an apple.

Neruda, "To The Foot From Its Child"

Little foot yet pristine unbanished unworldly
how do you believe as sunlight
and shadow
play their games about your ceiling, along the silent walls.
The voices come and go,
strange discords that rattle the
soft interiors of you.
Even so you are free as unformed clay idle
on a kiln's silent shelf.
No shoe defines you.
No grammar decides your place in the hierarchy
of the learned.
In your innocence you are immortal and forever
what you imagine.
Why not the butterfly.
Why not an apple juicy and inviting.
Why not postpone that monstrous thing
called future, rough road invented
by dull adults.

GRASS
Jackson Bunch

When I see grass, I run fast
As long as I can last.

.....

Jackson Bunch is a budding nine year old poet who is currently a student at Vestavia Hills Elementary East. He enjoys playing basketball, soccer, and playing with his dogs and bearded dragons. **bbunch@gmail.com**

MARBLE HALL
Paul Pruitt, Jr.

Aggies (not so many as I'd have liked), my one
Tiger-eye, some glowies,
Thousands (so it seems) of cat's eyes and
Two ball-bearings (not really legal).
Finally, my shooters. All Down, All

Down: Drop-Drop-Drop-Drop,
Down this hole long overlooked by Mom and Dad,
Here in this dark corner of the bedroom.

Lie long in darkness, oh you Marbles!
Hold Fast, you Dragon-Hoard—monument
Loosed in the clicking moments, dropped in
Dedication to this place above:
To this life, this small eternity,
To this house we're leaving.

.....

Paul Pruitt, Jr. has been writing poetry "a long time." He has contributed poetry to student magazines at Jacksonville State and William and Mary, and to a 1980-volume titled 3 O'clock at the Pines, a collection of works by former students of JSU's Dr. William J. Calvert, *as well as other anthologies. Paul is a librarian at the University of Alabama School of Law.*
ppruitt@law.ua.edu

"The popularity of a book affords no certain test of its greatness: that, as readers grow in numbers, there will ever be an increasing demand for books that can be enjoyed without effort; that a truly great book is a rare production and always will be; that the excessive literary activity of an age may add to the number of highly cultivated authors, without adding much to the list of those who are destined to live."

--Andrew James Miller

SAPPHO

Ann Pedone

I call to the girls weaving
The remains of
His heart, he said
Is never to be

It is circling always in
Broken voices
Words
That came before the rain

.....

Ann Pedone graduated from Bard College in 1992 with a degree in English Literature.While at Bard she studied poetry with Robert Kelly and John Ashberry. She has a master's degree in Chinese Literature from U.C. Berkeley. Ann's work has recently appeared in Adelaide. *She was also a winner in the 2018 Bay Area Poets Coalition Maggi H. Meyer Memorial Contest. Currently she lives in Burlingame, California with her three children.*

ROMAN ALLEY

16"x 20"

Sonia Summers

Sonia Summers creates fine art and commission art. Her painting **Birmingham in the Snow** *sold at the 16th Annual Energen Art Competition. Currently, her work can be seen at the Blue Phrog Gallery in Montevallo, AL. Sonia resides in Birmingham, AL, with her husband, their daughter and son, and their pets.* **soniajacksonsummers.weebly.com**

CREEPY TREES AT DAWN

Lisa Ostreich

Lisa Oestreich is a retired physician who recently traded her white coat and stethoscope for jeans and a paint brush, trading science for the arts: photography, painting, shoe-making, et cetera. She and her husband live in a loft in Downtown Birmingham, AL, with their dog, Baker. **photolisa.lo@gmail.com**

AN ESSAY ON THE SHAPE OF TENTS

G. David Schwartz

Do you know what a tent looks like? Of course you do. They look something like those things you slept in in the army, or boy or girl scouts.

Normally a tent has four sides, one holds the opening. There are usually ropes holding canvas into the air. If the tent has too many holes it would be very airy. Most are extremely steady, made to be non-collapsible. But this does not mean that it, or they, are not flexible. They are extremely flexible; yet difficult to just fall when a wind blows.

They are collapsible yet movable because a tent is both stayed in the middle and points off in all six directions. You want to know why I think there are six directions? Well I do believe in the north, south, west and east, but I also believe there is an up and a down (just one of each), and I do believe my favorite teacher would say these are directions.

You cannot live in a flat, un-erect tent. You may hide in it. But if you were sincere in your wish to hide there are many places better to hide. A tent, as you may know, is extremely small, and when they are not small, they are called houses. Ideally, there are five people—one for each side and the middle.

The center, which is one, holds up the corners, which are numerous. The center, in fact, is the central point. It cannot be called anything else, unless the word is merely a synonym for center. The corners may have several metaphoric names: Northeast. East South or any combination except north-south and east-west.

A tent cannot be mistaken for anything else, except perhaps a figure on the map, a book of matches, or a sunbonnet in the bright sun of July.

One might think of all the things one might put into a tent: cans upon cans of food for the hungry; boxes upon boxes upon boxes, upon boxes upon boxes, upon boxes upon boxes, upon boxes upon boxes just full of anything.

Perhaps instead of finishing this essay of the shape of tents I could make a book of everything you can put in tents. I know you would suggest that I just copy the dictionary, but what about things that are not mentioned in the dictionary?

These include the names of my family and our animals, as well as, if the work would be complete, the things not yet invented, and things thought up by Salvador Dali.

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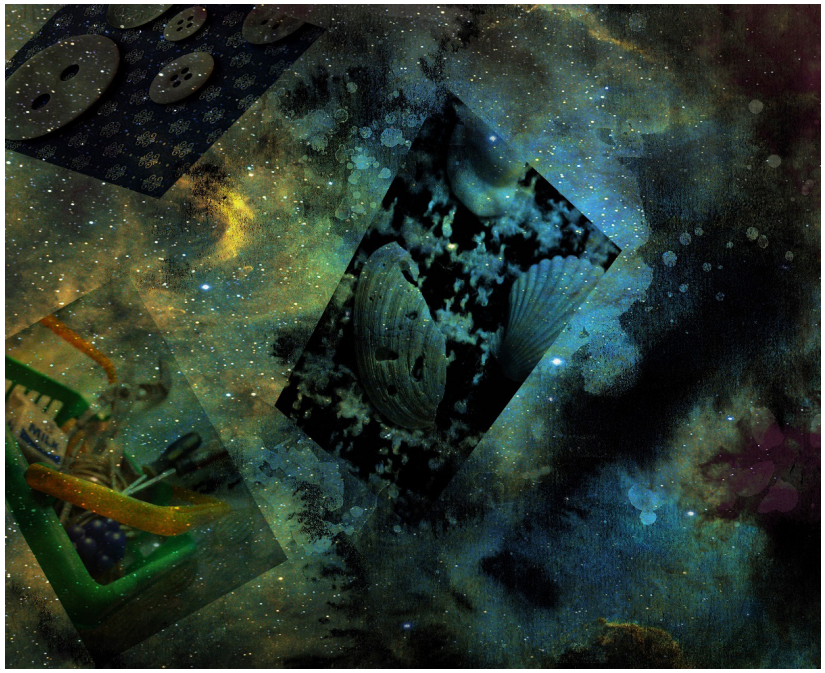
G. David Schwartz is the author of A Jewish Appraisal of Dialogue and Midrash *and* Working Out Of The Book. *His newest book is* Shards And Verse. **DavidSchwartzG@AOL.com**



MIDNIGHT SWING

Melanie Faith

Photo Collage

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Melanie Faith is an online writing instructor and tutor in rural Pennsylvania. Her photography was recently published in The Sandy River Review. *She enjoys spending time with her nieces, still-life and collage photography, and collecting quotations and shoes.* **writer@pa.net**

THE MOUSE KING

Jason Brown-2018 Hackney Literary Awards - 3rd Place - National Story

"'Tis the season," Bridget's grandfather said as he held up his box of individually wrapped honeybell oranges. The family was not allowed to give presents to each other for Christmas, except in secret. Instead, her grandfather gave everyone an orange from a specialty shop in Portland on the opening night of his Nutcracker performance. In recent years of the production he had adapted from the famous ballet, he had played Herr Stahlbaum and tonight was already costumed in his black tails.

As he made his way around the room handing out oranges, he reminded the family that in the absence of any evidence for Christ's birthday, the holiday had started with a papal whim tailored to the nouveau vin and the yearly slaughtering of cattle. Voilà! Christmas. Bridget agreed that Christmas was bull----but what kind of person felt the need to point this out every year on the very night that he bobbed around on stage handing out fake presents to a fake family?

When her grandfather came to Bridget, he tilted the box so she could see: aside from crumpled paper, it was empty. Everyone else was holding an orange, and there was one next to her grandfather's chair. Eight oranges for nine family members gathered in the parlor.

At thirteen Bridget was the youngest of the cousins and used to being last. She didn't want an orange anyway. What she wanted—more, she suspected, than anyone else in the family—was not to sit through another premiere of her grandfather's Nutcracker play. She wanted to be left alone to read the copy of the New York Times she had stolen from the Vaughn Public Library and hidden under her mattress in her bedroom upstairs. Of mild interest: President Jimmy Carter had just signed a bill to finance ways to use woodchips left over from logging to heat people's homes, and Iran had executed a Jewish newspaper editor as a US spy. Of significant interest: David Rockefeller's second cousin won a court battle to move her $18 million trust fund from Chase Manhattan Bank to Chemical Bank. The court cited "irreconcilable differences" between the investment philosophies of Abra Prentice Anderson and her cousin David. Bridget wanted to know more about what was meant by "investment philosophies." Someday, when she lived in New York, she too would have an investment philosophy.

"This is easily solved," her grandfather said. He sat in his soot-stained wing chair and opened the pocketknife he used to clean out his pipes. "We'll split my orange." He ran the blade over the circumference of the rind.

"For God's sake, she can have my orange," Aunt Sandra said but stayed sitting with her orange in her lap. Aunt Sandra was Bridget's Godmother and liked to think of herself as her substitute mother when Bridget's mother was staying with friends in Paris. Not the Paris in France. The Paris in Maine. Her mother was there now, celebrating the winter solstice on a commune.

"God has nothing to do with oranges," her grandfather said as he pulled the rind off and gripped the fruit in his fist so that the juice squeezed between his knuckles and onto the arm of the chair. He proceeded to bisect his offering. When he was finished, he set his half on top of his tobacco pouch and cupped hers in his upturned hand. From the woodpile, to cleaning out the ash from the woodstove, to the kitchen, to the bathroom, her grandfather rarely washed his hands because he was afraid of the well going dry. Water being one of many essentials they could not afford to waste. He crossed the room to where Bridget sat, lowered to one knee, bowed his head, and turned the palm full of dripping pulp upside down. She had no choice but to catch it in two hands to keep it from landing on her dress.

Her grandfather sat in his chair, picked up his half orange, and held it aloft on the ends of his fingers. "Here we have a gift created by man for man—C. maxima crossed with C. recticulata."

He removed a segment, dangled it over his opened mouth, and dropped it in. Everyone else proceeded to peel and eat their oranges as well. Soon they were chewing like cows gnawing on cud, and for a moment Bridget thought she might hurl the dry turkey breast and peas she'd forced down her throat with a cold glass of milk earlier that evening.

When he had finished chewing, her grandfather looked over the family. A bit of orange stuck to his upper lip. "This is my last year as Herr Stahlbaum," he announced.

Grandma stared at him, but Bridget wasn't surprised. He was quitting the Chocolate Church Theater, just as he had quit everything else over the last few years—the volunteer fire department, the vestry of St. Cuthbert. He had continued coaching the baseball team after he stopped teaching, but this year he had quit that, too, because he

claimed the school administration had turned against him. They want me out? Well, I'm out then.

"All because of Peter Reynolds?" Aunt Sandra said. "Because he didn't get the role he wanted?"

With her grandfather's help, Peter Reynolds had recently been granted early admission to Bowdoin College, but the acceptance had done little to blunt the considerable disappointment of his failure to get the role of the Prince, played this year by a boy from Portland named Steve, whose mother was a friend of the director. Throughout the fall and early winter, Bridget listened to her grandfather complain at the supper table about the director ("Ms. Marsden," he called her, though Bridget knew she was married to her gym teacher, Mr. Dawson). The previous director, Harold Chapin, had been forced out by the board despite her grandfather's vociferous objections.

"Petey earned that role," her grandfather said, flicking his hand in the air. "Then this abecedarian Beau Brummell from Portland swoops in with his salmon tights!"

When he used words other people probably didn't know, her grandfather often raised his chin slightly, which he was doing right now. Aunt Sandra had once said that he had the kind of face that gave people the finger.

"Is there something wrong," her grandfather asked her, "with your orange?" The juice had started to slip between her fingers and drip onto her dress, one of only two she was not embarrassed to wear. She raised her cupped hands and sucked the juice and the slices into her mouth in one gulp. Her cheeks, she was sure, puffed out like balloons.

"You shouldn't have promised Petey the role of the Prince," Grandma said.

"I did no such thing," her grandfather said. "As soon as baseball season ended, he began preparing for the Prince all on his own. And when things didn't work out, I told him the truth: the Mouse King is the most important character."

"I've never heard you say that," Grandma said.

"It's true. The Mouse King is the catalyst—the prime mover of the whole drama."

Grandma shrugged. "Well, your Petey is the understudy for the Prince. Maybe something will happen to the Portland Prince and he can have his moment."

"Then who the hell will play the Mouse King?" her grandfather said.

"There is no understudy for anyone else. Only the Prince."

"I'm sure you can play the Mouse King, if it comes to that," Grandma said and looked at her watch. "Everyone up. It's time to go."

"Then who the hell will play Herr Stahlbaum? Who? Oh, for Christ's sake." He threw his napkin on the table.

No one answered him. As the rest of the family busily pulled on coats and hats, Grandma told each person which car they would take. Bridget watched as they slipped quickly out of the room like a class dismissed at the end of the day. Her grandfather didn't seem to notice that the two of them were the only ones left. He continued to gaze out the window. Somewhere out there, in the darkness, the Kennebec River churned with his thoughts. Bridget rose and stood behind him. She wanted him to see the orange stain on her dress. Finally, he picked up his napkin, dabbed at his lips, and rose to his feet.

"It's time," he said to the room as he turned.

She stared at the shiny black lapel of his jacket and felt his eyes resting on her pale forehead.

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On the way to the Chocolate Church Theater in Bath, Bridget sat next to her brother and her cousin Anna. Uncle Alden drove. Next to him Aunt Sandra held an unlit cigarette between her fingers. She wasn't allowed to smoke in the car. With her free hand, she tried to roll the window down. The broken handle clicked in circles, but the window didn't lower. She gave up and turned around in her seat to face Bridget.

"I'm sorry you didn't get a whole orange, dear."

"I don't care," Bridget said.

"I would have given you my orange, but—"

Bridget looked at her cousin and brother who both stared intently out the window as if they were on safari. Someday she would go on safari like one of the characters in a book she had found on her grandfather's shelf. She couldn't remember the name of the character or the title of the story. Only the face of the buffalo charging the hunter right before he was accidentally shot by his wife. That was the only part of the story that mattered.

"Your mother has the flu again this year?" Aunt Sandra said to Bridget, "or is she with her hippie friends? And I was wondering where your father was this Christmas, and then I remembered that he's with his girlfriend."

Aunt Sandra smiled at Uncle Alden, who took his eyes off the road and looked at his wife.

"I believe we discussed this," he said with extraordinary calm. Uncle Alden was a Buddhist, the only sign of which, as far as Bridget could tell, was a collection of flags with Asian writing hanging from the rearview mirror.

"I believe we did," Aunt Sandra said and lit her cigarette, which she pointed at the front windshield, the illuminated double yellow line, and the red taillights of Grandma's Datsun up ahead. "And tonight is the last time I am going to this goddamned performance," she said, though Bridget knew no one in the car believed this statement. Least of all the person who had said it.

Uncle Alden pulled onto the shoulder, turned off the engine, pushed the button for the emergency lights, and stepped out of the car. His boots crunched over the week-old snow. A moment later he appeared standing in the spotlight of the headlamps staring into the woods with his arms crossed over his chest. Aunt Sandra blew smoke against the windshield and sat back in her seat as Uncle Alden stretched one side of his neck, stretched the other, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. The smoke thickened in the car and slowly reduced him to a blurry grey outline.

"That's better," Aunt Sandra said. "Much, much better." The car was a two-door Nova—the back windows didn't roll down. With their wide blinking eyes, her cousin and her brother both looked like mackerel pulled from the deep.

"It's the middle of the play I can't stand," Aunt Sandra said, her voice filling the car as pervasively as the smoke, "I don't mind all the fighting with the mouse soldiers and the Chinaman and the Arabian dance, but I can't stand when they go off to the Land of Sweets surrounded by all those stupid snowflake fairies. The real thing is supposed to be a ballet, but this play is just a bunch of kids running around."

When Aunt Sandra had smoked her Camel down to the end, she stubbed the butt into the ashtray.

"Bridget, dear," Aunt Sandra said, "will you tell the Dalai Lama that we better go now. Herr Stahlbaum awaits."

Uncle Alden must have heard. He opened the driver's side door and stood like a footman as the captured smoke departed into the night air. After an emphatic pause, he sat behind the wheel and started the engine.

"And our journey continues," he said.

They arrived late and parked in the lot for the Chocolate Church, which had been decommissioned as a Presbyterian church and converted to an arts center many years before. Grandma helped to run the art gallery, and Bridget's grandfather had been involved in most of the theatrical productions. For as long as Bridget could remember, the church had been painted a brown more poop than chocolate.

Bridget spotted Grandma and her grandfather by the side entrance with a number of the actors, including the character of Clara, played this year by a senior at Morse High named Cara St. James. Uncle Alden led their group around the side and up the stairs to the landing where Bridget's grandfather leaned over the railing with his chin buried in his chest. When Uncle Alden asked what the matter was, Grandma rolled her eyes.

"It's Peter Reynolds, he's late."

"He's not late," her grandfather corrected. "He's not here." He held his upturned hands in the air. When he was angry, his blue eyes watered slightly.

Grandma shooed them down the stairs. "Go inside and sit down. Petey will be here. He wouldn't do this to your grandfather."

At the front door, they gave their tickets to Mrs. Boynton, who ran the art gallery with Grandma. She told them the show was running late tonight but not to worry. "Just take your seats," she said. The theater was surprisingly full. Even the balcony rows were dotted with groomed heads, large and small. Most of them Bridget recognized as older kids from school and their parents and grandparents. All of them forced to be here, because their family members were sugar plum fairies or soldiers in the mouse army.

As usual, Grandma had found them seats in the middle of the theater six rows back from the stage, close enough to feel the heat from the stage lights. The curtain was open because it was broken, and they could see the set, the same as last year: a fireplace of wood painted to look like bricks, a cardboard grandfather clock, Salvation Army furniture. Two sugar plum fairies poked their heads out stage left and looked at the audience. Grandma and the rest of the family shuffled sideways down the aisle and took their seats around Bridget, blocking her in.

"Petey will be here soon," Grandma said. Petey with his parted bangs and bony knuckles. One leg longer than the other. His slight limp.

When he came to the house to see her grandfather, he always smelled like school lunch.

Bridget's temples were suddenly pounding with one of the headaches she sometimes had to endure on nights when she couldn't sleep. An older boy leaned around the edge of the folded curtain stage left and ran the tip of his tongue over the row of his piano key teeth. Steve, the ringer from Portland—the Prince—probably searching for any sign of Petey. But Petey wasn't going to show his face. Just like that, Petey was finished with all of them. No one here in the theater would believe that. They would keep sitting here until they starved to death.

She said she had to go to the bathroom and edged her way back to the aisle. She didn't actually have to go to the bathroom, but she couldn't sit for another second. Almost to the front door, she spotted the back of Mrs. Boynton's head, so she veered right down the hall to avoid a conversation about Mrs. Boynton's granddaughter, a monstrously large blonde eighth grader who wore knee socks and spent every weekend skating at Happy Wheels in Augusta.

She ducked into the changing room and leaned against one of the clothing racks. It was cooler in here and empty. The actors had left their regular clothes strewn over the tables and chairs. All the costumes were gone. All except one. There, in the middle of the table, lay the crumpled grey suit and upside down whiskered head. The lifeless eyes.

She stepped into the legs and pulled on the arms. Petey was short for his age and she was tall for her age, but the costume was still baggy. Her dress bunched up around her thighs. A tail somehow suspended from the back of the neck area. Though she cinched the belt with its plastic sword and scabbard to the smallest size, it sagged on her hips. The mouse head—with its long snout, tall ears and large eyes—was twice the size of her head, but when she lowered it onto her shoulders and tightened the chin strap, she could see through the slits. She could see out, but no one could see in.

She walked down the hall in the grey stocking feet feeling the muscles in her arms and legs grow firmer with every footfall. When she was younger, she had been one of the fairies, but now she was no dancing sprite. At the door to backstage, she peered around the corner. The army of mice in grey fur costumes sitting in a clump at Clara's feet giggled and poked each other. As Clara pulled at the hem of her dress,

she tried to shush them, but they paid no attention to her. One of the mice, Billy Neale, little brother of one of her friends at school, spotted Bridget. When she removed the plastic sword from the scabbard, the chatter from the rest of the mice switched off like a faucet. Seven pairs of eyes waited for her command.

Boiling in the fur costume, she marched toward the side entrance and was about to step outside to fill her lungs with fresh air when she saw her grandfather on the landing with his back to her. He hadn't moved from this spot since she had first arrived at the theater. His black tails rode too high. The wispy strands of hair circling his crown seemed to have been painted on with a shaky hand.

He turned and she saw the confusion in his face—Petey would have parked on the street or in the front parking lot and come through the side entrance like all the other actors. Looking closely at the eye slits in her mask, he seemed to know something was wrong but didn't seem to understand what it was.

A red fire alarm hung just inside the door. As Bridget reached over and rested her fingers on the white handle, her grandfather followed the length of her arm to the wall. When he turned back to her, his face was red and his eyes looked as if they had been whipped by the wind. He didn't know it yet, but his play was over. In her play, the theater was on fire.

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Hackney Literary Awards short-story winner, 2018 A.D. Jason Brown grew up in Maine and was a Stegner Fellow and Truman Capote. Fellow at Stanford University. He teaches in the MFA program at the University of Oregon. His third book is A Faithful But Melancholy Account of Several Barbarities Lately Committed. **Brownj11@uoregon.edu**

TODAY IS A STRANGE DAY,

Linda-Raven Woods-2018 Hackney Literary Awards - 2nd Place - National Poetry Award

you say, watching clouds
drift by. Outside your window
life is throbbing to a new high
but here inside yours is ebbing
away & you must feel it somehow
though you do not say. I cannot
measure what your life holds even
though you've talked about it non-
stop ever since that first cup of
coffee I poured you at Waffle House
& that seems eons ago. I've conjured
scenes from the elusive Maggie Valley,
the place you always said I needed to see,
have heard crackling rifle fire from the
Wounded Knee siege of '73, ran through
bullet rains in Vietnam…but today you
take a long quiet spell, listening to the
"Wind Riders" CD playing on the boombox.
Indian flutes & percussion strike
the appropriate note. I feel like dancing,
but don't. Maybe I should. Your wife,
Maree, talks about radiation therapy.
You talk about Horsepens 40, a powwow
still two months off. I'm happy I caught you
in a lucid moment, but the "Wind Riders" drums
are carrying you far away. I see your eyes follow
too closely the rolling march of the clouds outside
your window. Outside, the kids are playing ambush
ames, walking their dogs, riding bikes. Maree says
it's spring fever, making you so listless, all you can say
is that for whatever reason

today is a strange day.

……

Linda-Raven Woods is an enrolled member of Alabama's Echota Cherokee tribe. Her poems and poems stories reflect on the unique experiences of being a "modern Indian living in the South." She has an M.A. in English from Mississippi State University and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Georgia College & State University. **lrixwoods@gmail.com**

WHERE DO YOU GO AND WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN LIFE GETS SCARY?

Jeff Sutherland

The beach, again? We just went a few months ago. What do you see in that place? A bunch of white sand and a lot of water. I was teasing my wife. I loved vacationing on the gulf, especially Fort Morgan. Fifteen to twenty miles up Fort Morgan road, things got peaceful. We would walk along the beach as the sun set, almost alone except a few small shore birds and crabs. As a mountain man, or so I thought, I hated to admit this sand, sun and waves were pulling on me like a rip current. No wonder they warn about those so often on local news.

Where do you wanna eat tonight? My wife asked for the fifth time. I don't care, I'm on vacation, you decide. Truth was, my mind and stomach were already in the car heading toward Zeke's for prime rib, the Original Oyster House for shrimp and a great salad bar or our all-time favorite, DeSoto's Seafood Kitchen. It didn't matter. They were all good, nothing like them in Birmingham, our hometown.

Every vacation for the past five or six years had been the same. We stayed at the same place, Gulf Shores Plantation, we did the same things, we ate at the same places and usually ordered the same things. After dinner was the same too. We picked up a real estate book and spent at least one night poring over the homes and the condos. We dreamed of the day we could live in paradise.

Each year we had the same conversation. The prices for condos are higher this year. There are no houses we can afford, unless we look further north. So, sadly we would pack up and go home. Bye, beach, my wife would always say.

Once back on I-65 heading north, my mind would already be on what I needed to do the next week to keep my landscape customers happy. My wife was dreading the cleaning, the clothes washing and the traffic to make it to her accountant job at a fortune 1000 company. By the time we were home, our vacation and our dreams of living at the beach were all but forgotten.

As an accountant, from December through April, I seldom saw my wife. In landscaping she didn't see me from March until October. By mid-October we were both ready for our beach fix which

coincided nicely with anniversary.

The last 20 miles on highway 59, also known as Gulf Shores Parkway, was more like a parking lot than a road. The speed limit signs seemed unnecessary. We are never going to get there. My wife was getting excited. That's good because this year I had a surprise.

Finally, we made it to the condo. We had booked a room beachfront so we could sit on the balcony and ponder our future. That first night after dinner, DeSoto's of course, we picked up a dream crusher (real estate book) but this year would be different. Sitting out on our lanai as the stars came out and lightning flashed far off, I turned to my wife and said, let's do it.

She, of course thought I meant something else. It was our anniversary! When I saw her scowl, I continued, let's find a place and move. Her eyes flashed brighter than the lightning that was getting much closer. I've marked a few houses in the book with prices in our range. What are we waiting for, we aren't getting any younger? I knew of course this had been my wife's dream all her life. She had spent so many years putting up with my business, I wanted to do this for her.

A new job, a newly built home. We were living on Fort Morgan. Dreams do come true. We can live like we are retired, on vacation every day. Someone forgot to tell my new boss of our plans. After 15 years of working for myself, the 60-70-hour weeks didn't bother me near as much as being told what to do, and how to do it. So much for retirement and living on vacation.

Just as I walked into our new home, focused on a hot shower and a quick meal, then bed, my bride yelled, I'm glad you're home. Come see this! A storm was forming off the African coast. My impassioned response, so what? Storms happen all the time. No big deal. They say this one could be a hurricane, it is already a tropical storm, 40 mph sustained winds. They say it could head our way. Tired, hungry and a bit angry by now my response was something like, yeah and it could head toward Norway. So, what is this storms name? Ivan.

Ivan the terrible lived up to his name. We kept an eye on the news. We were only able to catch little clips of what the forecasters were saying. Category Five…biggest storm to ever hit the gulf coast, storm surges of 15 feet or more, landfall expected in Gulf Shores… catastrophic, mandatory evacuation, board up your homes now.

What do we do? How do we prepare? What do we take? Where do we go? What do we do with the dogs? Then the what if questions

hit. What if it hits right at Gulf Shores? What if the storm surge is larger, wouldn't that flood our home?

As we began boarding up windows, one look at my wife revealed, her heart felt as darkened as shuttered up rooms of our new home. What if we lose our brand-new home? She hadn't actually said it. I felt it. My heart ached for her. A huge dream, shattered, or so we thought.

Our truck looked like Jed Clampett's as we crammed everything we could into it, our two dogs in back and my wife looking much like Granny when she had to leave her beloved home in the mountains for Beverly Hills.

We sat in traffic on Gulf Shores Parkway. This time, there was no-one heading south. We listened to the radio. 3000 killed in Haiti as Ivan sweeps through the Caribbean. Gaining strength. Biggest storm to ever hit the Gulf. The last three months sure have been a relaxing, vacation-like, retirement-resembling fun time, I thought as we drove up I-65 with thousands of our new 35 mph driving friends.

Thankful now for not being able to sell our house in Birmingham, we settled into our sleeping bags and watched Jim Cantore on the Weather Channel being blasted by 100 mph winds a mile. He was standing at the T where Gulf Shores Parkway meets His blue LL Bean Storm Chaser jacket took the beating well. What great advertising!

When we saw the actual radar image of Ivan, our jaws dropped in unison. The storm covered from Houston to Tallahassee and the eye was headed directly to Gulf Shores. We didn't sleep much that night. Will we ever see our beautiful new home again? Will the entire town look like the pictures we saw of the tri-state tornado in 1925 that forged a path of destruction for 235 miles, leaving forests, factories, homes, and everything else looking like matchsticks?

Where can you go to escape hell like that? Our pillows the next morning were still wet with our tears. Oh God, what are we going to do? Ivan had hit our sleepy little "retirement" plans with the force in size and (time sustained) hundreds of times larger than an atomic bomb. We envisioned our modest home scattered all over the coast. We might find pictures of our family floating up Gulf Shores Parkway.

Trepidation. Driving back down the parkway a few day later, traffic was light, but our hearts weren't. Fear, worry, anxiety had heightened as the miles went by. Seeing our hurricane decal on the

truck, the National Guard troops allowed us to pass. The National Guard troops!

We slowly passed on to Fort Morgan Road, picking our way around trees that lay like dead soldiers blocking our path. As we turned into our little sub-division, we marveled at how little had changed. Builders had brought in huge dumpsters to clean up debris in anticipation of the storm and except for some missing shingles and a tree down on our new fence in the backyard, nothing we noticed was touched.

We praised God for his protection but the worst of the storm we found hit to the east of us, Orange Beach, Perdido Key, and all the way into Pensacola whole beach front condos were missing. Cases of Jack Daniels floated in the flood waters that covered the beach road near the Flora-Bama.

And then, a miracle happened. Amid destruction worse than anything we had ever seen, people started chipping in to help each other. Sure, there were businesses that took full advantage of people's despair, gouging them when they had lost everything. But more and more, people came from everywhere to clean up homes, to provide shelter, clothes, food and funds to rebuild, restore, in short to get people's lives back in order.

People forgot social status, ignored color, forgave past quarrels. It is a proven fact that churches put aside denominational differences and worked together to help people in all kinds of trouble. In the middle of one of the worst times of hell on our little portion of sand, we glimpsed what Heaven could look like, people focusing not on themselves but on others.

Fort Morgan, Gulf Shores, Orange Beach and Perdido Key combine to make up Paradise Island. It is a wonderful place to run to when you need a vacation, or when your home is buried in 3 feet of snow with -40 wind chills. It's a scary place to run from when officials call for a mandatory evacuation. But this little island really shines when things are at their worst.

Come on down.

.....

Jeff Sutherland lives in Gulf Shores, Alabama with his wife Jan. Together they write articles and books to encourage, challenge and walk alongside those who are hurting, providing resources and counseling. Pet Seminary, A am a Whino *and* A Weed Free Life *are a few of their works.*

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IMPOSSIBLETHINGS

Lana K.W. Austin-2018 Hackney Literary Awards - 3rd Place - National Poetry Award

Don't tell me I can't
believe in impossible things
when all around me there's proof,
like the small miracle, but still
a miracle, that happened when
a few Mennonites re-built
the Hendricks' barn in a single
day. A wooden behemoth,
it stood for over seventy years
in Allensville, Kentucky until
a tornado made kindling of it.
But four men in simple clothes
came without being asked
and quietly brought it back to life
between sunrise and sunset
on a cloudy Tuesday in March,
so you can't convince me
that there aren't strangely
beautiful events taking place
all the time. It makes me want
to go to Norway to witness
the Aurora Borealis, mysterious
hues flowering the expanse
above me, where I've been told
that sometimes the lights pulse
into sound and if you listen
closely enough, you can hear
the night sky's colors
singing your name.

.....

Lana K.W. Austin grew up in rural Kentucky. She studied creative writing at both Hollins University and the University of Mary Washington as an undergraduate and has an MFA from George Mason University (2008). Her full-length poetry collection, Blood Harmony*, is from Iris Press (2018). Austin currently resides in Alabama, where she is an adjunct instructor in the English department at the University of Alabama in Huntsville.* **lanakwaustin@att.net**

SLIP SLIDING AWAY

Thomas Healy

Marathon is a slippery word that has a number of connotations. It is a place and a discipline, a fact and a legend, a distance and a state of mind. Often it is applied indiscriminately, as if it were whatever one wants it to be, but at bottom it suggests some kind of ordeal, something that demands more of people than they are accustomed to giving.

In the beginning, of course, it referred to the site of a battle in 490 B.C., in which the outmanned Athenians defeated the invading Persian troops. But what invested the word with even larger significance was the performance of the courier Phidippides, who allegedly ran some twenty-two miles from the plain of Marathon to Athens to report the remarkable victory. "Rejoice! We conquer!" he announced when he arrived, then keeled over and died from exhaustion. His effort seemed as remarkable as the victory on the battlefield. It was arduous, it was noble, it was magnanimous, and it was demanding enough to cost him his life.

Seldom are any of the numerous events identified as marathons particularly noble endeavors but all are certainly long and grueling. Among such events was a curious dance craze that emerged in the 1920s and reached its peak of popularity during the Great Depression years. The dance marathon was not really a dance at all but rather an excruciating contest of human endurance. It was never the best dancers who won but the ones who remained the longest on the dance floor. Consequently many of the participants approached the marathons as athletic events, aware that little, if any, dancing talent was required, only stamina and grit and determination. A serious couple typically averaged about forty miles a day on the dance floor, and they were often out there for several days. The record of 3,480 hours was set in 1932 in Atlantic City by a young couple that included an aspiring singer, Frank LoVecchio, who later gained prominence as Frankie Laine.

Many of the contestants entered on a bet or a dare, without any intention of staying in for the duration, and generally dropped out after a day or two. Those who were serious about the competition were motivated primarily by the prize money that went to the winning couple. Certainly this was the central motive of the professional marathoners who competed in marathon dances throughout the country. The amateur contestants were also lured by the offer of free food and a place to sleep, and because many of them were aspiring entertainers, they hoped their presence in the marathons might attract the attention of producers and agents and thereby improve their chances of entering show business. Often the promoters encouraged the contestants to perform specialty acts, such as song recitals and tap

dances and comedy sketches and dramatic readings, in order to sustain the interest of the spectators who paid to watch the dancers. If people really liked a performance, they would pitch coins onto the floor for the performer in what was known as "a silver shower." Some dancers, because of their popularity, made a considerable amount of floor money.

The marathons were usually held in huge arenas, the kind of venues where prize fights were staged, with a wooden dance floor installed over the surface. The arena was roped off from the loges and bleachers that surrounded the dance floor. A raised platform was set up at one end of the arena for the band, which, as a rule, only performed at night when the crowds were the largest. During the day, music was provided by local radio broadcasts amplified throughout the arena. Generally the contestants danced for an hour and fifty minutes then, at the clang of a bell, retired to the rest area for ten minutes to sleep on rickety Army cots or shower or tend to their aching muscles and joints.

The first few days the contestants had to dance, and so they slogged through tangos and foxtrots and Charlestons and waltzes, but after that, all they had to do was keep their feet moving and not let their knees touch the ground. Floor judges assiduously surveyed the groggy couples, admonishing them to keep moving, often striking idle dancers across the back of their calves with wooden rulers they carried around like swagger sticks. Sometimes the judges were on roller skates so they could keep as many people as possible under surveillance. And whenever anyone appeared in trouble, they would swoop down on them like vultures, their rulers scraping under the person's knees to see if they were dragging on the floor, and if they were, the person was immediately disqualified.

After several hundred hours on the dance floor, it was difficult for even the strongest couples to stay alert. Their heads lolling across one another's shoulders, their eyes practically shut, they staggered around numbly as if they were knee-deep in a dune of soft sugary sand. Out of necessity dancers caught snatches of sleep while their partners supported them, which was all right with the floor judges as long as they kept moving. Some slept with their heads resting against the chests of their partners, who gripped them tightly around the waist, while others had their wrists fastened together with handkerchiefs then looped over the shoulders of the conscious partner and were lugged across the stinging floor like bags of laundry. What was definitely not permitted were certain desperate tactics resorted to by some to keep themselves and their partners awake. For instance, they would dig their fingernails into their skin and bite down hard on their tongues and deliberately step on one another's toes and would even stick pins in their sides and other sensitive areas. They did practically anything they could get away with in order to remain in the

competition.

The professional marathoners were known as "horses" because of their amazing stamina and perseverance. They were tenacious and willing to stay in for the long haul, as the one-time marathoner June Havoc recalled in her memoir Early Havoc. "They got no place to go," one of the promoters told her. "They got no brains, so they got lots of guts. They can outlast the daintier ones easy." And they were not averse to pulling crude tricks on those amateurs who presented serious challenges to their pursuit of the prize money. Miss Havoc, for example, sought a remedy from one of the professionals for her sore feet, and the woman obliged by taping two half-dollar coins under her metatarsal arches and urged her to dance on the coins, which she did until her legs grew numb and she could barely even walk. Then she discovered she was the victim of a favorite old prank used by professionals to force amateurs out of marathons. Among the other pranks she was subjected to was having a Mickey Finn slipped to her and her tap shoes filled with glue.

*

Speed conceals the strain of physical competition. It is what makes competition elegant and exciting and provides a measure of grace to what otherwise can be rough and brutal. Other aspects of competition like strength and power are also very important but they are crude and obvious while speed is the silver wrapping that blurs away all the toil and sweat. It is what charms the eye and fills it with delight.

Dance marathons primarily were contests of strenuous physical endurance but speed also played an important role in them. In the early stages of the marathon that is the centerpiece of the 1935 novel They Shoot Horses, Don't They?, by Horace McCoy, the master of ceremonies is repeatedly exhorting the contestants to pick up the pace. Frequently, a couple of minutes before the rest break, he shouted, "A little sprint, kids," above the sliding, shuffling sound of their feet, "show the ladies and gentlemen how fresh you are!" The dancers did not actually run when they were urged to sprint rather they moved with a little more animation for the duration of faster tempo songs like "Hold That Tiger" and "Pop Goes the Weasel." The purpose of the sprints was to energize the crowd and force the runners to pretend to be as strong as they were when they started.

Eventually, as the proceedings slowly dragged on, old-fashioned foot speed was introduced into the format of the dance marathon. One reason was to inject some novelty into the event in an effort to attract more spectators. Speed also served as a startlingly effective and dramatic method of elimination. Once the contest was reduced to a field of seasoned professionals and a few determined amateurs, the promoters became concerned that it might drag on for several months before a winner emerged, and by then the large crowds would have

vanished out of utter boredom. So special competitions were devised to accelerate the disqualification of contestants, and racing easily proved to be the most effective and entertaining method employed.

The elimination races staged in the McCoy novel were known as "derbies," as if the participants really were thought of in the same vein as livestock. A thick white oval track was painted in the center of the floor, and inside the track cots were set up for those who had to take a break during the race. The contestants were even issued sneakers and shorts and sweatshirts to wear in the derby races. Along with these uniforms the men were also given thick leather belts, which had straps on the sides for their partners to hold onto when they swerved around the sharp curves. The rules were very rudimentary: every night the contestants thumped around the track for fifteen minutes and the couple that came in last was disqualified from the marathon. The men were restricted to walking at a brisk clip, heel and toe, while the women were permitted to run at full gallop if they wished.

Initially, the derbies were little more than stampedes, with all the couples, at the sound of the gun, pushing and shoving one another out of the way as they rushed to the front. "Hold on to the belt!" the men would pant to the women, struggling to fight through the congestion. This, of course, only increased the likelihood of nasty collisions occurring on the track, which often produced skinned knees and sore ribs and sprained wrists. Whenever contestants got injured and have to receive medical attention in the pit area, their partners were on their own and had to make two laps to count as one complete lap for the team.

After a while, though, only the thoroughbreds charged to the front while the rest of the field struggled to maintain a steady pace. The couples tried to find a comfortable rhythm, one partner not moving so fast that the other had to struggle to keep up. Occasionally, a special prize of, say, ten dollars would be offered to the winning couple but for most of the contestants the objective was not to win the derby but survive it. The turns were the most hazardous places on the track because it was there that couples most often tried to pass one another. They would spurt ahead a few strides on the straightaway then swing sharply over at the turns, fighting to get the advantage on the inside. Couples careening through the turns were forever stumbling and losing their balance, which sometimes resulted in nasty pile-ups. The sweat that sprayed off their bodies made the floor very slippery so that it became even more hazardous. June Havoc was not alone when she admitted she found the slides and near falls at the turns terrifying.

A chronic fear among contestants was that one's partner would collapse out of sheer exhaustion. A couple might be moving at a fairly steady clip then, all of a sudden, one partner would stagger and pull the other one down. Out of such concern nurses and trainers in the

pit area frequently would offer orange slices to contestants and slap damp bath towels around their necks. But soon the squirming couples would get so hot, their eyes threatening to spring out of their sockets, that they would whip off their sweatshirts, and then, because the women had on only brassieres, the men in the crowd would get even warmer and howl in excitement. Still, it was not unusual for partners to drag one another around the track, especially during the frantic last two minutes of a derby, then collapse at the finish.

If skill makes the difficult seem easy, speed makes it noticeable. Certainly the derbies staged during dance marathons seized the attention of people, the crazy pace of the races making it all but impossible not to look at them. But these contests were never enjoyable to watch, nothing about the marathons was, for they were grim competitions that appealed to some of the worst instincts of people. They were, in a sense, like traffic accidents, things that people invariably look at when they pass them but then quickly regret it.

They were popular to be sure, especially during the early 1930s, but the zany, carefree competitions that began in the Roaring Twenties gradually changed and came to reflect the despair of the Great Depression years. The contestants entered the marathons in the desperate hope of improving their lot in life; if not to win the grand prize, at least to gain a free meal and somewhere to rest. And those who came out to watch them did so, perhaps, because to see people worse off than they were helped take their minds off their own troubles. Watching others suffer of course always has been a staple of the entertainment industry, though usually the suffering is not real but illusory. The suffering on display in the marathons, however, was as genuine as the blisters on the contestants' feet and the ache in their hearts. The promoters, keenly aware of the enormous entertainment possibilities of degradation, cleverly and shamelessly exploited the misery of the contestants. The more they humiliated them, the more spectators poured through the turnstiles.

Years later, Miss Havoc acknowledged she felt as sorry for the audience as she did for her fell contestants. "We were all part of the same ugly patchwork quilt," she declared bitterly. The marathons were indeed grisly events for a grisly time. And gradually states began to prohibit them because of their blatant cruelty so that by the late 1940s they had vanished from the wonderful world of entertainment.

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Thomas Healy was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest. His stories and essays have appeared in such journals as the Blue Lake Review, Combat, History and Fiction Review, *and* Welter. **laurel462001@yahoo.com**

EVEN THE NIGHT WAS MADE OF WOOD

Simon Perchik

*

Even the night was made from wood
has sheets, a gown, the kind
brides wear only once

though you pace in front the bed
the way mathematicians mull over chalk
scraping it against something black

that could be pulling the room apart
with the faint sound from dust
coming by for what's left

and the corners –vaguely you can hear
her lips breathing into yours
setting on fire the stars

that would sweeten your mouth
with the never ending hum
emptied from wells and springs

for smoke, no longer knows how to talk
how to glow when side by side
as planks and weeds and this pillow.

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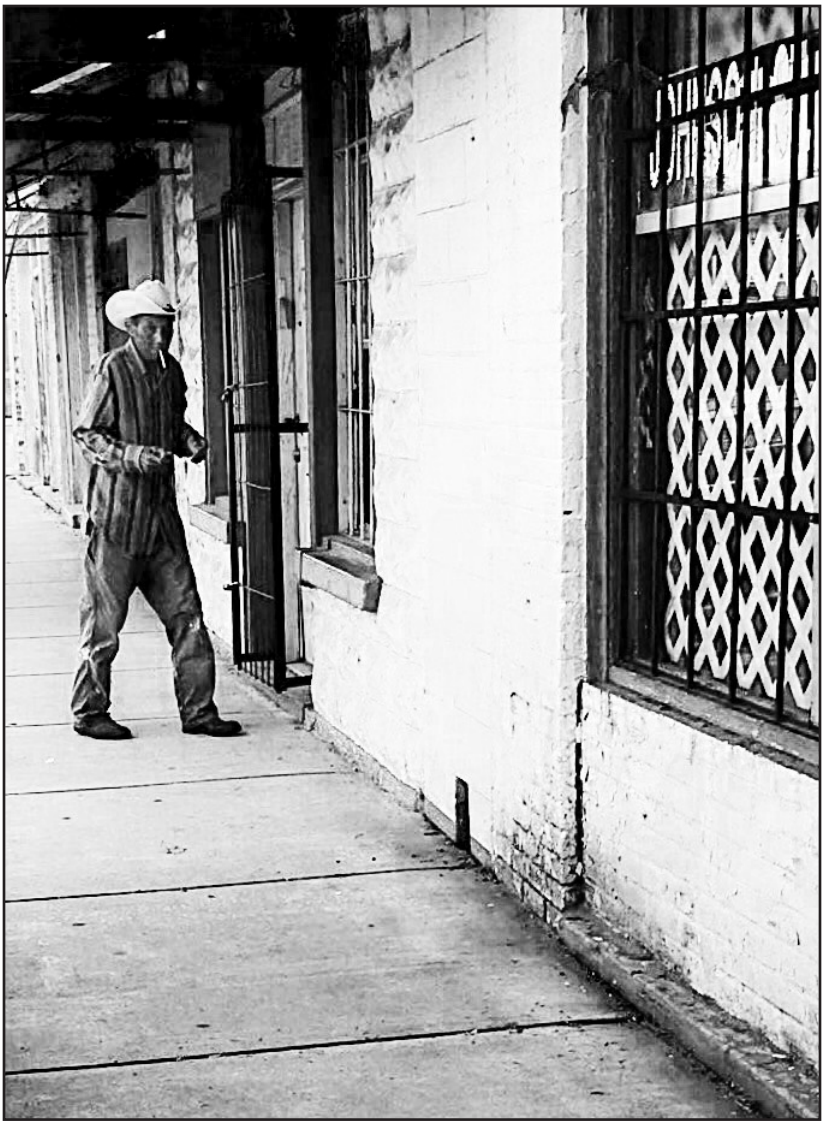

BLUES TOWN 222

Dita Berry

The Edifice of Soul and the Supernatural Delta.

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Dita Berry specializes in film, literature, plays and photography. Her first novel, Sunshine in The Delta *is a Mississippi local best seller and has won the Black Caucus of the American Library Association eBook fiction award. Erica has a bachelor's degree from Mississippi Valley State University and Master of Fine Arts degree from Full Sail University.* **writersnation16@gmail.com**

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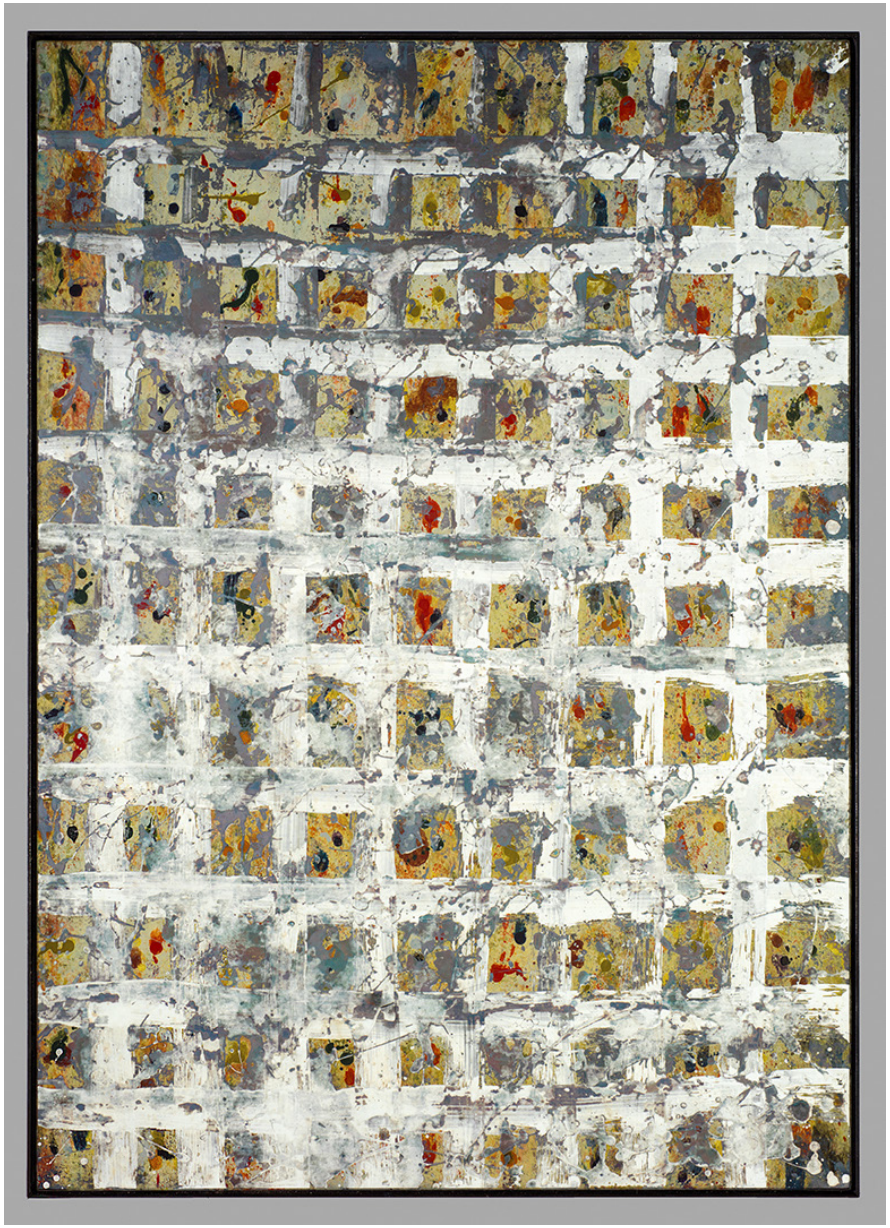

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