

# Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 16 Issue 4



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### FRONT COVER: MARSH IN THE SOUTH – 9” x 12” Oil on Panel

*Jennifer Levins is a self-taught artist originally from Selma, AL. Her work can be seen at the Julianne Hansen Fine Art and Potter in Prattville, the Museum Shop at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Art in Montgomery, and Gallery 905 in Selma.*

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**BACK COVER: AH, SUMMER. *Digital Photograph.*** Andrew Tyson is an award-winning, self-taught photographer and artist in Birmingham, AL, whose degree is in computer imaging and visualization. His medium of choice is graphite, but he has recently begun experimenting with pastels; he also works with stained glass. **[tysona@bellsouth.net](mailto:tysona@bellsouth.net)**

# THE COFFEE CUP

Steve Poer

The little boy watched his momma as she got ready to leave. She was wearing her starched light blue uniform with white piping around the hem, sleeves and collar, a white apron, and white nondescript cloth shoes. The uniform had The Coffee Cup stenciled over the breast pocket in white script. He thought she was pretty as a picture.

He heard her instructions to the large black woman, Matty, whose job it was to watch him and his older sister, 9-year-old Carol, that day. "Now, don't let them wander off. They can play in the yard but don't let them out of the fence. Their lunch is already made, and I should be back late afternoon or early evening."

Matty had replied, "Yes, Ma'am, I'll keep 'em in inside the back fence and won't let 'em out of my sight. Now you go on and we'll see you when you get home from work."

A horn sounded out front and she swished by with a pat on his head and a quick kiss on the cheek and she was gone out the front door. He ran to the window and watched as she got in the front seat of an older big black car of some sort with another lady dressed in the same outfit and they headed off up the hill, past Minor School toward Hollow Park.

He had been to The Coffee Cup a few times when she wasn't working to pick up her paycheck or for some other reason and remembered it as a friendly place where all the workers stopped a minute to dote on him or his sister before they went back about their hustle and bustle of filling the customers' empty cups or bringing orders of eggs and bacon and biscuits. At the ripe old age of 5, he didn't really understand the concept of work and wondered why she was leaving him all day to take food to other people but she had said she had to go so he grudgingly accepted that as an explanation. She'd been gone a while when boredom and the lack of attention from Matty began to be a problem for his short attention span. This was before the colorful description of ADHD had been applied to children but he had it, whatever it was called, and it didn't take him long to decide he wanted to be somewhere else and The Coffee Cup sounded like as good a place as any.

So, while Carol helped Matty with a load of clothes, he slipped out the gate and began a meandering journey up the hill in the general direction of 5 Points West, a shopping district about two miles away, where The Coffee

Cup occupied a strategic location at the intersection of five large roads, the two biggest being Bessemer Super Highway and Ensley Avenue.

His adventure began as a hike up Avenue T or Honeysuckle Hill, as his momma called it, because of the lush honeysuckle that grew on every fence at every house and filled the air with its sweet fragrance. He pulled some of the small flute-like flowers and sucked the sweet juice like his older cousins who lived up the hill had taught him. He stopped at the alley next to the Hesters' near the top of the hill and threw a few rocks at the trash cans because it seemed like a good thing to do but it scared him when he hit one and the big dog behind their fence began to bark so he ran on up the hill. He'd never been this far from home by himself before. It was an adventure and excitement beat in his chest. He knew he'd probably be in trouble but right now he didn't care. He was on a mission.

Up by Hollow Park, he gawked at the big houses surrounding the park that were so much larger than the small house they lived in on the other side of the hill. The park had rows of big stone seats arranged down both sides of a baseball diamond of red dirt with bright green grass in the outfield. It was deserted and he ran around the imaginary bases pretending he was the star, then stopped awhile to look for four-leafed clover that his momma had told him were lucky. He found one and decided it would make a good present for her. He stuffed it in his pocket.

After a while he lost interest in the park, so he continued on his journey toward busy Ensley Avenue, a few blocks away from the quiet secluded park. He heard the cars long before he saw them and was amazed when he got closer and saw how fast they traveled and how many there were. He tried to count them, something he was learning to do, but there were just too many and they flew past in a hurry to get where they were going. He wasn't in a hurry.

He saw a spigot in one of the big front yards and decided he was thirsty, so he detoured across the lawn and twisted the handle. The water came out cold and clear and he knelt down and drank from the spout with the water running down his chin and onto his striped T-shirt. It was good and he took several more, long pulls before he sat satisfied with his belly full. He made a couple of mud pies from the wet dirt around the spigot before that too lost its appeal and it was time to push on, refreshed, rested and well-watered.

He decided against crossing Ensley Avenue because the loud, fast cars scared him, so he stayed on his side of the busy street and meandered on. Sooner or later he would have to cross it but that could wait for now.

As he continued on, the landscape began to change with houses giving way to larger buildings, offices of some sort with parking lots full of cars and people dressed in Sunday clothes going in and out. They looked at this little boy so obviously out of place and a couple of older ladies headed his way, but he scampered off on down the street before they could reach him, and he ran when they called. He hadn't done anything wrong and they didn't pursue him. He escaped.

The buildings got even bigger and taller as he got closer to the congested intersection and it hurt his neck to stare up at the top of them where they met the sky. He wondered what it must look like from way up there. Pretty scary probably. He'd have to go up there another day when he was older, like 6 or 7, and check it out. For the time being, he was on his mission to The Coffee Cup and he needed to push on.

He found an out of place June bug on a bush outside one of the buildings and knew from his vast previous experiences with his older cousins that you could have a lot of fun flying these guys in circles with a long piece of string but he didn't have any string so he put it in his pocket with the clover to save for later. It clawed at his leg through the cloth and made him jump once but then he ignored it. It must not like clover.

He finally came to the large, broad intersection with all of its lights and sounds and he was stumped. How are you supposed to get across with all these cars that never seemed to stop coming? He sat on a wall next to a tall light pole and watched for a while. He noticed that when the lights turned red, the cars stopped for a minute or two and when they went green, everybody moved. Timing his next move carefully, when the light turned red, he took off lickety-split across the five lanes of broad avenue and was out of breath from the excitement when he got to the other side. A couple of horns sounded but he didn't know if they were meant for him and he never looked back once he made it to the other side.

He could see The Coffee Cup now. The flashing neon sign of a large coffee cup hanging from the front of the building was a beacon leading him in the right direction. Wouldn't she be surprised to see him? Wouldn't she be proud of his independence, his determination? He could hardly wait now to get there, to give her his clover and show her the June bug he had captured.

She was surprised and then angry but not for long. Her gasp and stern look when he pushed open the large glass door soon gave way to a big hug and a tight squeeze. The other workers chuckled and patted him on the head and then went back to work slinging hash. The manager let her go early so she could take him home and the adventure was over. He slept hard that night having missed his nap. But the day would stay with him in his mind forever.

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*"A work of art can never be taken  
for granted, and so forgotten;  
neither can it ever be disproved  
and therefore thrown aside.  
Science is soon out of date, art is  
not."*

*—Aldous Huxley*



## THE CHICKADEE

Digital Photograph

Tom Gordon

When my imagination takes wing, I let myself believe that long ago, beyond the great forgotten mist, a Carolina Chickadee belonged to a pantheon of gods. All the gods had their strong suits, and the chickadee's was its ability to burglarize the homes of other gods without being detected. For millennia, the chickadee, in full human form, pursued its trade, always getting away scot-free until one night, it entered the wrong dwelling - that of the powerful nocturnal **deity** whose eyes were like night-vision goggles, whose ears could hear a grasshopper burp, and whose stealth an owl would envy.

Brought before a divine tribunal, the burglar god's sentence was to forever be a small gray and white bird with a black mask covering most of its head and face and a high-pitched plea for a song. Of late, seemingly brought forth by spring, a descendant of this once-mighty masked mischief maker has been breaking into the new bluebird house out back. Listening for a song but hearing something nasal, atonal, barely audible, I watch, I smile, and I think to myself, *Still acting, even now, as if it were a god.*

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*Tom Gordon is 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.*

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# JIMMY

Matthew Tyson

Jimmy finished the race and got up to smoke. He put on his thick denim jacket with the fleece on the inside and pulled the wool cap he'd had since forever over his thin white hair. His hands shook a bit as he put on gloves. It wasn't freezing, but Jimmy was always cold.

The sun had barely set, and it was dark on the creaking, wooden porch except for an old orange light that hung and buzzed at the edge of the awning. The whole thing stretched the length of his double wide and stood about four feet off the ground. He limped slowly to the edge, lit his cigarette and wondered why he hadn't just smoked inside where it was warm. After 30 years of a house full of smoke, Nancy told him he had to go on the porch. But she wasn't there anymore. He thought about going inside, but he couldn't make himself. So he stayed out and just looked out across into the darkness of his three-acre plot of land. Across the yard, he heard the dog whimper.

"Buddy," he said, hanging on the end of his old German Shepard's name. "Quiet."

The dog continued to whine, so Jimmy clenched his cigarette between his teeth and made his way to the giant cage sitting near one of his tool sheds. Buddy started to jump and run the length of the fence. Jimmy picked up the hook at the end of a long line of thick wire coiled up on the ground. At the other end was a heavy cement block. Jimmy opened the gate and grabbed Buddy by the collar, hooked on the wire, and let him go. Buddy started to run around the cage, but the weight of the brick slowed him to a trot.

Jimmy went slowly back to the house and pulled the hose across the yard. He filled up the large tin in the corner of the cage and dumped a cup full of food in the dog's bowl.

"Come on over here," he said. The dog obeyed.

"I'm sorry, Buddy," he said.

Jimmy pitched his butt into the old coffee can on the porch and went back inside. He took off his jacket, hat, and gloves and then filled his own cup full of Milos, which wasn't as good as Nancy's had been, and went back to his chair. There wasn't much else on. He flipped the channels for a bit before giving up. Then he dozed off.

"Dad," a voice said from the kitchen.



Jimmy stirred but didn't open his eyes. Richard walked in and stood over his father.

"Dad," he said again, louder. "Dad, you need to get up. Your dinner is in the microwave."

"What?" Jimmy asked, confused.

"Your food," Richard said. "You need to get up and eat."

"Nah, I haven't eaten," Jimmy said.

"I know, Dad," Richard said, frustrated. "I made you food. Come eat it. You need something on your stomach so you can take your medicine."

"Oh, okay."

Jimmy sat up and pulled himself out of the chair. He shuffled to the dinner table where Richard had laid out a plate of baked chicken, green beans, sliced tomatoes with salt and pepper, and a scoop of macaroni and cheese.

"Did you eat the sandwich I made you for lunch?"

"Yeah, I ate some of it," Jimmy said. "I didn't like it. I don't like spinach."

"Well, you have to eat it."

"No, I don't," Jimmy said.

They sat in silence while Jimmy hunched over his plate.

"Don't forget about your doctor's appointment tomorrow," Richard said after a minute. "I'll be by in the morning to take you. I put a note on the fridge to remind you."

"Ain't you gotta work?"

"I took off work," Richard replied.

"I can drive. You don't have to do all that."

"No, Dad. You can't. You don't have your license anymore."

"Oh, okay."

Jimmy finished up and Richard took his plate and cleaned it in the sink. Then he portioned out a handful of pills and vitamins and brought them to his father. Jimmy took them, one by one, while Richard finished cleaning up. He exhaled a heavy breath as he put up the last of the dishes and closed the cabinet door.

His eye caught a picture of his mother hanging crooked on the door of the refrigerator. Richard straightened it up and took a minute to peruse the other photos on the door. There were multiple Polaroids of his children from when they were babies, many of them faded and yellowing.

There were birthday and Christmas cards his mother had saved. There were appointment reminders, and sticky notes, and a few smaller cards with Bible verses written on them.

“Okay, Dad,” Richard said turning back to his father. “I have to get home. Do you need anything else?”

“Nah, I don’t need anything.” He paused. “When did you say that appointment was?”

“Tomorrow, Dad.”

“Oh, that’s right. I can drive myself.”

“No you can’t.”

As Richard drove home - his lights illuminating the narrow, cracked road leading back to town, he thought about the costs of retirement homes. Then he shook his head and didn’t think about it again.

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*Matthew Tyson is a writer and English teacher who lives in Anniston, AL with his wife and three children. [matthewallentyson@gmail.com](mailto:matthewallentyson@gmail.com)*

*"Every cloud has a silver lining  
and every plate of vegetable  
soup is filled with vegetables."*

*—W. C. Fields*

## ATTENDING

Cathy Ann Kodra

*In memory of Mary Oliver*

In one sleek, watery motion, a mouse  
trickles across my fresh-painted deck  
already sticky-dry under an August sun.  
Streamlined apparition, she transforms

the flat plane of late morning. My eyes  
rise from poetry in my lap just in time  
to watch her skim from mint to nettle-hidden nest  
beyond the gray space devoid of cover.

This small, triumphant moment  
opens me to the day, makes me  
hold each holy minute that follows  
with more precise intention.

Cleave to what amazes  
and delights you, to the magic  
that often lies just above  
or below your line of sight.

These are only words, but your heart  
might wake and leap to pluck them  
from the infinite promise of white page  
where the little mouse—so alive

with living her one precious life,  
hastening along on her errands,  
returning to the babies she tends  
with such attention—finally catches your eye.

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*Cathy Ann Kodra's poetry appears in New Millennium Writings, Psaltery & Lyre, RHINO, Still: The Journal, Whale Road Review, and others. She is an associate editor for MSI Press and the Iris Publishing Group. Her first poetry collection, Under an Adirondack Moon, was released by Iris Press in October 2017. [ckodra17@gmail.com](mailto:ckodra17@gmail.com)*

# THE MAN AT THE POST OFFICE

Debra Joy Gordon-Hellman

The last reddish glow was fading, and red-mauve popsicle buildings studded the sky. Dusk was settling over Birmingham when I made my last stop before heading home, the main post office downtown.

The end of workday bustle was in process with cars jockeying for position in that last act before joining the homeward migration, when a lucky space opened for me right in front of the building. I parked and sat in my car awhile, addressing some envelopes to mail.

More than once I've seen a person sitting by the right hand, front door, begging. Just a month before, a disheveled, gray-haired woman sat sprawled there with a fist of dollars and a hoard of drinks and food on the ground. Sometimes the needy people reaching out get run off. This time, however, a somewhat trim, slim man with a listless air about him sat cross-legged and empty-handed in front of me. In the dubious security of my car, my eyes kept flitting back to him as I wrote.

Oddly, the man wasn't begging. His head was in his hands as if pounds of problems bore down on him. His sad demeanor wet my eyes. Slowly he raised his head gazing blankly into the parking lot unaware of my imaginings, but then for a frozen, shaken moment our eyes met. I wanted to turn away, but in that riveted, searing blink was connection. Like the small fish my Dad and I used to catch, I was caught and then released as the man lowered his head again. A partial sense of relief rolled over me, but like the fish, the uncomfortable, hooked feeling still smarted.

Options, the three doors in close proximity that lead into the front of the post office, confronted me. It was hard not to notice people giving the man a wide berth, a guilty path I have also taken before. Finally, it was my turn and I pushed, purposely taking the door by him, pausing long enough to say hello. In a slow, soft monotone he responded as I self-consciously hurried in to do my business.

Minutes later I got back in my car protected by the deepening cover of night and sat waiting, wanting to do something but not knowing exactly what. When in town, I always keep money in my pocket for the homeless, for beggars and buskers, a five dollar bill these days, but he wasn't asking. Deeply bothered, uncomfortable and conflicted, I hesitantly drove off loaded down with a litany of excuses. Yeah, it was late, and I needed to get home, an hour away. Still though, I was drawn back to this man, and an inner debate ensued.

From past experiences of being approached by people asking for money, I know it is easier to engage each time you do, but there is always a little fear.

Perhaps the person is an ex-con or has mental issues, maybe I am being scammed, or just some nameless threat sets up the roadblock. Certainly danger is out there, but the suffering I perceived and my need to reach out and help, trapped me in this turmoil as I headed for I-59.

Caught by a traffic light, more long, tussling moments passed, but the next brought breakthrough. Some barriers of convention, of fear and self-consciousness were inexplicably dashed. I whipped around the block and parked back near him. I got out of my car again, moving quickly this time with the conviction of decision and asked him if he was waiting for someone though I didn't give him time to answer. Even with only my five feet, I was uncomfortably aware of towering over him and blurted out that he looked so sad, and I had to come back to see if I could help. He said he was very hungry; did I have any food. I did, so I popped back to my car.

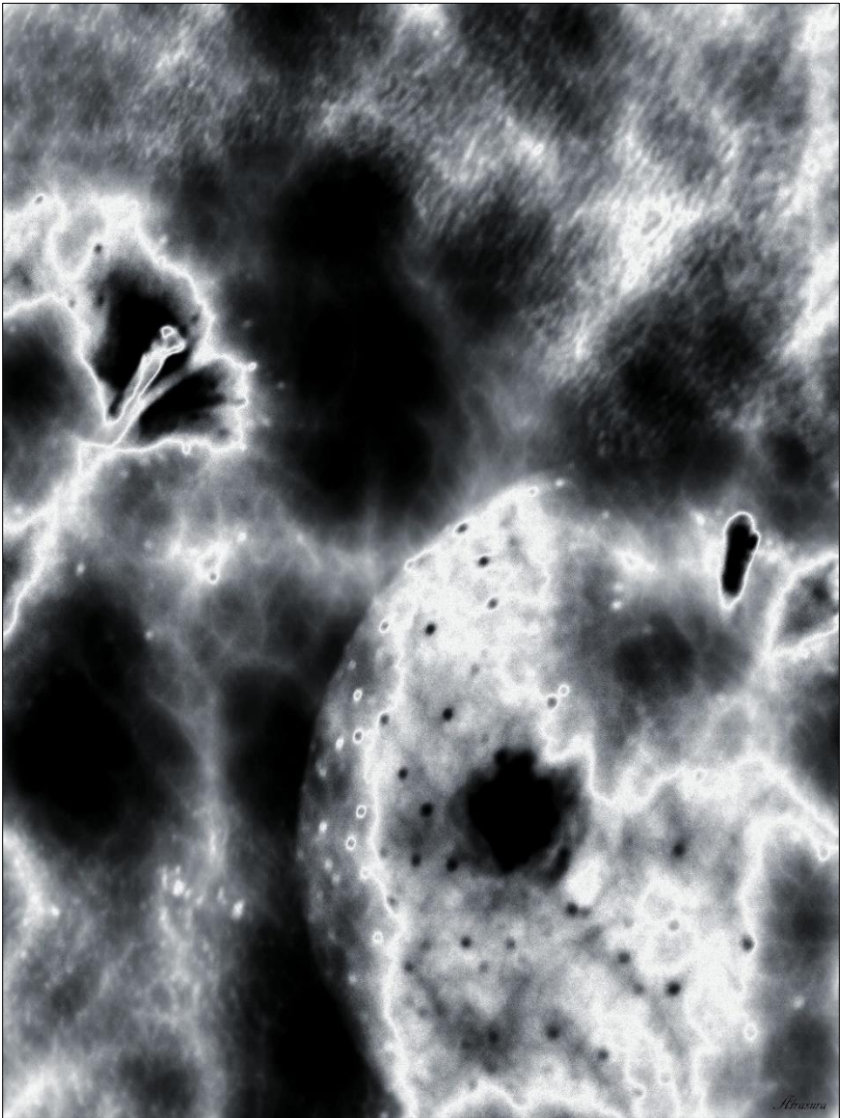
In my experience it is unusual for someone to ask for food instead of money. I wished I had more. I often do, but all I had was a new pound bag of salt and pepper pistachios. At least they were healthy I thought as I gave him the bag, five bucks, and wished him well. An odd look at the bag in his hands seemed to confirm my suspicion that this was unusual food. He thanked me, got up and headed off with the bag and money in his hands while I turned towards my car still watching him cross the parking lot for the street.

"Where was he going?" I wondered. Was he heading to a store to buy beer, to his wife and child or to other homeless people to share? As he retreated from me, going forward into the night, I let these thoughts vanish with the last hint of light. No one wants to beg or sit on the ground at the post office. The decisions and results are the receiver's right in this deal. So, whatever the need — be it liquor, cigarettes, food, clothing, or something else; it is out of my hands, not my business. I let go of judgement and control but not hope.

Taking a chance by reaching out and being open to those different than ourselves is core, is community. Maybe like a pebble in a pond, acting sends out a ripple over our land, spreading out, touching, spilling over in some new, positive way; but that outcome isn't ours to know.

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*Debra Joy is a self-confessed wanderer, dabbler, environmentalist, and Birmingham native. While a teacher, she modeled the sting of rejection after joining her students in entering an Alabama School of Fine Arts writing contest. Residing near the Locust Fork River, a source of inspiration, she's Chair of the Education Committee for Friends of the Locust Fork River. **debragh1@gmail.com***



## **MERGING OF MINDS**

Digitally Manipulated Photograph

**Atraxura**

*Atraxura is a photographer, artist and poet, for whom art is a weapon to defend her deep love of melancholia, introspection, and solitude. Her current work explores the affinity between the dead and the dreaming and the idea that there is more to existence than merely the obvious physical and social aspects we often call "reality." She lives in France. [a.renaegrimes@gmail.com](mailto:a.renaegrimes@gmail.com)*

# SEIZE THE DAY

Natalie Isom Sansom

Along with the smell of hot dogs and popcorn floating through the air most Saturdays, and the sounds of ducks quacking and children's laughter, the pings of aluminum are heard. Many are enjoying themselves while, awkwardly, with my head hung low, sitting on the uncomfortable piece of metal, feet dangling inches from the dirt base, a burst of energy wells up like a volcano, and I spring into action to address my destiny.

\* \* \*

Oh, the land is beautiful and relatively abundant in the city. There's a lovely dirt and sometimes muddy trail around the little pond. Crisp and refreshing, this pond looks inviting, yet I know never to step foot into it because the depth and cleanliness are unknown. On the hill, there's an amphitheater snuggled in and surrounded by trees, hosting summer movies and concerts. Ancient-looking stone gazebos are scattered around filled with cookouts and birthday parties. I believe the park is as sprawling as Central Park in New York City, but in reality, my park is probably less than the size of a hundred of my neighbors' yards combined. Is it that small? It couldn't be!

It is a warm spring day. Excitement is in the air. The day we have all been anxiously awaiting. My mother dropped me off at the park and left to run errands but would return shortly. Upon her return, she couldn't find me with the other girls.

\* \* \*

Once again, I am a retriever. I hate it. I am mad. All I want to do is to have my chance to hold the soft, rubbery grip and feel the vibration in my hands as I swing. My brother, Hugo, has spent countless hours with me in the little Triangle Park just across the street from our house. I am good because of him. He made me the tomboy I am, maybe because I am not the brother he hoped for. My brother spends countless hours coaching me. He has made me tough yet good.

During practice, due to my being the youngest and smallest, I am left out. Overlooked. I have worked too hard to be excluded. The girls are older, bigger, and stupid. They ignore my little 7-year-old self. Feeling frustrated and furious, I bolted from the metal bench. Trying to hide my tears and embarrassment, I ran back around the lake. As I wipe my tears away with my hands filthy from scooping up their balls, I leave dirty, wet stains on my face. That's when I see him—Frank Holt! He is a family friend as well as one of the coaches.

As my mother frantically scours the park asking person after person if they'd seen me, she is starting to grow concerned. Panic sets in until

someone says I am with Frank. Then there is the crackling of the speaker calling everyone to the main field for *Recognition Day*. All teams have on their uniforms, and team pictures are being made. Knowing I am ok, Mom climbs the cool, metal bleachers and takes her seat. She waits. Team by team introduced, and I am not appearing.

“Mr. Frank, Mr. Frank,” I call as I run to him. I describe the torment of being shunned on the big girls’ softball team because I am little and young. He knows me and my gifts. “I’ve got a uniform for you,” he responds. I know pretty much all the kids on all of the teams. Most are friends from school, and we even play after school or on weekends.

“I got my own big kid uniform!” The pants are sparkly white, well, for now at least. I even have a bright red jersey, socks to match, and a stretchy blue belt. The clothes still have that brand-new dye smell that is breathtakingly wonderful and foul in one breath. The uniform looks fabulous with my favorite blue glove that Hugo helped me pick out. We rubbed it with oil to soften it and pounced on it in the dirt to give it the tattered and used look. (That “new” glove smell is like the “new car” scent at the Washee Quickee Car Wash on 3rd Ave. I love watching the cars go through the car wash.) I get a great red matching cap with white lettering, and Frank writes my name on the inside with a marker. It’s official.

I feel electricity shooting out of the bottoms of my feet as I stand and wait. In reality, I am probably bouncing up and down. The excitement is building and building like waiting for a volcano’s eruption. My mother hasn’t even crossed my mind until we are about to be introduced. I quickly scan the bleachers hoping she’d be there for that moment. My moment. She is. Here we go. “Now, let’s welcome one of our first-grade teams, the Red Sox coached by Frank Holt,” the announcer in his southern accent calls out on the crackly loudspeaker. I finally made it. The stadium erupts in cheering, even my mother. Despite the dirt still on my hands and face, my smile beams as I bounce and wave.

My favorite positions are third base and shortstop. I love the outfield too, but most of the action happens in the infield with the younger teams. I am fast and limber, quickly scooping up a ball at third and whizzing it to first. My balls typically are fast, hard, and accurate. I love seeing players shake their glove hand after catching one of my throws. It is exhilarating to feel the rush of wind by my ear as the ball zooms from the unfolding of my hand releasing a barrage as if flames are highlighting its trail.

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As I stand in the “batter on deck” circle practicing my swing, my sense of excitement is radiating everywhere. The stadium lights may be on, but I doubt they are during the daytime. I feel warm and flush. Maybe it’s the



excitement. Maybe it's nerves. "Ball," the ump calls. "Ball two." Someone yells from the stands to "keep your eye on the ball." Right then, the perfect ball. The kind every batter dreams of. Straight down the middle and not too fast. It is perfect. My teammate steps and swings. It is perfect execution, or maybe dumb luck. He makes contact with the ball. The hit makes a sound like a palatal click. You know, that sound when you click your tongue to the bottom of your mouth. The bat drops and the runner takes off. There is no reason to run through first base as we were taught because the second baseman catches the fly ball. "He's out!"

"Next batter," calls the ump. I proudly make my way to home plate. I put my left foot in the box while twisting on my back right foot while my right hand dangles the bat over my right shoulder. Once my feet are feeling content, my right foot joins my left in the faded chalked-lined box surrounding home plate. I carefully make sure I don't step on home plate or I'll be out. So many details to remember. My left hand meets my right on the rubbery grip. I'm ready. I have a little bounce in my step as I await the first pitch. "Ball," he calls. Two more just like it. None worth swinging at but I'm ready. The last pitch comes fast and hits my left shoulder. My big batting moment and I end up "walking" to first while rubbing my stinging shoulder as my eyes well up in tears.

When I come to bat and my friend from school, Michael, is the opposing pitcher, he manages to "walk" me every time, hitting me with the ball. He is my friend except when I am at bat. His pride would be hurt letting a girl hit off his pitches. I love it anyway.

\* \* \*

At the time, I had no idea that I was breaking tradition in many ways. I was the first girl ever to play on an all-boys baseball team at Southside Baseball at Avondale Park. I learned early that I must take control of my own destiny. If I wanted to play ball, I had to act and not sit back keeping the bench warm. This simple act of taking charge has continued throughout my life of speaking up and making things happen.

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*Natalie Isom Sansom is a native of Birmingham, AL. Married to Ken, an attorney and mother to Jake, 21 and Maxie, 18. Natalie lives in Birmingham and enjoys taking classes at University of Alabama Birmingham, is active at St. Luke's Episcopal Church and is the Chairperson for the Commission on Spirituality for the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama. [nataliesansom@gmail.com](mailto:nataliesansom@gmail.com)*

## THE DOVE

Holly Day

The bird hides inside, tucked inside my ribcage  
the feathers hide my heart. You can smell its desperation on me  
even through the cigarette smoke and birthday cologne  
huddles dark and black and wet.

The bird is in here, barely visible  
damp, white feathers pressed into a tight, red space  
flailing in the sick hot summer  
midnight heat. We have all become  
other women over time, there is no need  
to confess.

*Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction, Grain, and Harvard Review. Her newest poetry collections are In This Place, She Is Her Own (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press), A Wall to Protect Your Eyes (Pski's Porch Publishing), Folios of Dried Flowers and Pressed Birds (Cyberwit.net), Where We Went Wrong (Clare Songbirds Publishing), Into the Cracks (Golden Antelope Press), and Cross Referencing a Book of Summer (Silver Bow Publishing). Her newest nonfiction books are Music Theory for Dummies and Tattoo FAQ.*  
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*“There are darkneses in life and  
there are lights. You are one of the  
lights.”*

—Bram Stoker

# GOD'S WIFE

TK Thorne

It is not easy being God's wife. Especially in the Beginning. What a grump. But after all this time, I know how to handle Him. "For heaven's sake," I told him, "quit complaining. It's just the first day, already!"

I am known by many names, but my favorite is Lady of the Sea or Queen of Heaven. He just calls me, Word. He likes things simple . . . or maybe He thinks I talk too much.

"Word," He said, "I think I will rest now."

"What? You just started. Surely you're not going to leave things in such a mess!"

The Rumble, let me tell you, was loud, but the next day He did straighten things out a bit and at least decided to separate the matter from the energy. Of course, typically, once He did that, He settled back to admire things. If I'd let Him, that would have been the end of that.

"God, are you just going to sit around now?"

"What are you talking about? Look at how magnificent I AM."

A quasar spits into the dark.

I sigh. He is really into being praised.

"That's it?" I asked. "All that work to get things going and you're just going to leave it like this?"

"What do you want Me to do?"

"Well, at least make something."

"*Something?* What do you think all this is?"

Silence. I study the colors of a nebula.

"Okay, make what?" he finally asks.

"Winged creatures would be nice." *Oy vey.* I should maybe not have said anything. What he made was not what I had in mind, and that Lucifer turned out to be a pain in the—never mind.

"Now see what you've done?" He boomed. "Now we've got Hell. Are you happy?"

"Try again."

"Why would I want to do that? Isn't one mistake enough?"

At that moment I'm distracted by a lot of clamor. "Oh God, why in the universe did you let those galaxies collide? What a mess.

“You never know what’s going to happen when you do that,” He mused.

“True and you only fail when you stop trying.”

“So you’ve said . . . many times. “What is it you have in mind now, Word?”

“Let’s start small. Look at this third planet here. It’s got a nice distance from a star. Not too hot anymore or too close to the black hole. What about a cellular organism? You can’t mess that up too bad.”

“Word, you have no faith.”

“That’s not fair. Would I push You if I didn’t believe in You?”

That’s when things got interesting. Those little organisms really took off—all on their own and figured out how to divide. Everything happened so fast. God got distracted, but I was fascinated. Every morning I looked to see what was new.

Plants happened. Lovely. I would stir up a little wind and watch the fronds dance. But when things started crawling out of the sea, I went over the moon! Not literally, of course. It’s just a saying I made up.

I’ll skip all the development because it was depressing how many creatures and plants we lost to earthquakes and fires and cosmic crashes. I couldn’t get God to pay much attention. He said it was my baby, and probably wasn’t going to work, and He had more important things to do. God-the-pessimist.

So, He wasn’t really watching when the most interesting development occurred. It came from the ape line. When it stood on two legs, that’s when He noticed.

“What is this?”

“I think it’s a Man.”

“Man?”

“Yep.”

“Does it have wings?”

“No.”

“Good. Let Us keep it that way.”

“I thought You had a non-interference policy.”

“I can always change My mind.”

“You said that was my prerogative.”

Word, what are We going to do with this Man?”

Don't think I didn't notice the sudden "We" in the picture.

"Do with him?" I asked.

"Well, what is his point?"

"I don't know yet."

"But he is definitely 'aware'?"

"Seems to be."

"Then he needs a point."

"Don't forget what happened with Lucifer," I said.

"I don't forget anything."

"Of course You don't, dear."

I'd like to take credit for the Woman because there was no doubt she improved things. But she happened along by herself.

This time, God checked back fairly soon. "What's Man doing now?"

"Building things." I couldn't help but notice that He only asked about Man.

"A nest?"

"Sort of. Did you notice the Woman, God?"

"I notice everything."

"Of course You do, dear."

The next time God deigned to check in on my little project, he was pretty critical. "What a disaster this Man has made. Look at that, he's changing everything. I think the temperature is going up."

"I know."

"What seems to be the problem?"

"He won't listen to Woman."

"That's how you interpret everything."

"Sure, what do I know? I'm just Word, and You are God, the Great and Terrible."

"That is not really fair."

"I'm sorry. It's just that You stay away and then You criticize."

"I AM sorry too. It's not just about Me. We're together. I AM incomplete without you."

That was nothing less than a cosmic event—God apologizing, and then saying something sweet ... I was suspicious.

"So, what do you think, Word?" he asked.

Another cosmic event.

"About Man and Woman?"

"Um hmm."

"I think the birds are prettier."

"You can start over on another world, you know."

I sigh. "I know, but it's such a waste."

"Maybe Man will get better and take care of things."

"Oh, so We're God-the-optimist, now?"

"Maybe."

.....

*TKThorne's childhood passion for storytelling deepened when she became a police officer in Birmingham, AL. "It was a crash course in life and what motivated and mattered to people." Her fourth book, House of Rose, is excerpted above. T.K. loves traveling and speaking about her books and life lessons. She writes at her mountaintop home near Birmingham, often with two dogs and a cat vying for her lap. [TK@tkthorne.com](mailto:TK@tkthorne.com)*

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**UNTITLED**

24" x 12"

Acrylic on Canvas

Jill Billions

*Jill Billions lives in Vestavia Hills, AL. She studied medicine and art at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. When she is not practicing medicine, raising a family, volunteering, gardening, and visiting Italy, she finds time to paint.*

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# ALARMING INSPIRATION

Kim Shackelford

Everything we were ever told to do upon hearing a fire alarm was ignored.

Ms. Sue, a small statured, seasoned with a lifetime of unusual, but common experiences in Northern Alabama, was making us laugh with her Alabama southern lady charm and wit, and because we were enjoying her so much, it was just irritating to hear Errrrr Errrr Errrr - Errrr Errrr Errrr - Errrr Errrr Errrr blasting from the space above our heads. We all knew it was a fire alarm. We registered an initial acknowledgment, but no one moved. There was stifled laughter at the inconvenient interruption.

Sue made out like it was her fault...she and Jim agreed that she was on fire...and we laughed. Jim, our host and leader, was shaking his head, and generated laughter at the predicament. We were thinking, *“What should we do?”* We wanted to hear the stories and poems read by their authors and listen to the artists tell of their inspirations. We wanted to stay in our comfortable seats, around the twenty or so round tables, in the auditorium at the Homewood Public Library. We had cheese, crackers, fruit and sweets to eat, and coffee to drink. We were not leaving the building just because a fire alarm was sounding. We wanted to be inspired.

The annoyance did not stop. We looked at each other with disbelief, and above the Errrrr Errrr Errrr - Errrr Errrr Errrr - Errrr Errrr Errrr, explanations were barely heard.

“Maybe the construction going on?” ...

“Think someone pulled an alarm?” ...

“Smoking in the bathroom?”

We then collectively glanced toward the door while thinking, *“Is someone going to tell us what is happening?”*

A lady with authority came to the door. We did not hear what she said, but knew she was motioning for us to leave. With Errrrr Errrr Errrr Errrr Errrr Errrr - Errrr Errrr Errrr becoming a sound we were now used to, we got up, gathered our belongings, and strolled out. The readers and researchers in the library joined us in the foyer, and we filed outside. We could hear sirens.

“That is a fire truck.”

“It is coming here.”

“Should we move to let the fire truck in the driveway?”

We stood next to the building, in the front entrance, milling around like we were at a cocktail party with no cocktails, making the best of our time getting to know the participants in the Birmingham Arts Journal quarterly gathering. We knew we were supposed to move away from the building. We did not.

As we stood in the chilled air, Errrrr Errrr Errrr - Errrr Errrr Errrr - Errrr Errrr Errrr was not as loud from outside the building.

“At least it isn’t raining.”

“It feels good out here.”

“Kind of cool, though.”

We turned to look as a second fire truck turned off Oxmoor Road.

*Hmmm...*

“Do you think there is really a fire?” was answered by, “Naw, probably just the construction going on.”

“This library used to be a church. You would never know it. Well, it was a metal building church. You know the kind.”

“How long has this library been here?”

Faint frowns were burrowed on some participants’ brows. “Wondering if there is a fire...no, it can’t be...it’s the library.”

Errrrr Errrr Errrr - Errrr Errrr Errrr - And silence. There was a collective sigh of relief (that exhaled breath that comes when there was no realization that breath was being held), as welcomed silence created the same satisfaction as making the seat belt chime go off by putting on a seatbelt.

“Can we go back?”

“Have to wait.” Everyone glanced at the entrance, then watched for the doors to open, and even though it took too long, they opened.

We took bathroom breaks, got our cheese and crackers, filled coffee cups, and Jim convened us with calling on Sue to continue. Jim accredited our alarming collective experience as being part of the show.

We now have, “Were you there the time we had our meeting at the Homewood Public Library and the fire alarm went off?” tucked away for future use, and a new story or poem to be told about the time we forgot everything about what to do when a fire alarm goes off...except to be calm.

.....

*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](mailto:kshackel12@gmail.com)*



## SOCIAL DISTANCING, Humor During Dark Times

Allen Johnson Jr.

Having been stuck in my home for several weeks, a victim of “social distancing,” I decided to walk around the neighborhood in the hopes of finding someone to talk with. All I found was a brown, skinny hound-like dog who was standing at the end of his driveway barking at me. Well, he was better than nothing, so I decided to answer. I can do two rather credible barks—a small-dog bark and a large-dog bark. I tried the large-dog bark and the hound looked bored, so I tried the small-dog bark. He responded with enthusiasm. I wasn’t sure what I had said, so I said it again. Same response. I am not sure how long we kept this up, but finally, when he was having his say, I started to think the following:

*“This dog is speaking dog and knows what he is saying. His behavior is normal. I, on the other hand, am a human being speaking dog and haven’t a clue what I am saying. My behavior is stupid!”*

At this point, I stopped speaking to the dog and looked nervously up and down the street to see who had been watching. (No one wants to be observed behaving stupidly.) Phew! There was nobody on the street. Saved by Social Distancing!

Woof!

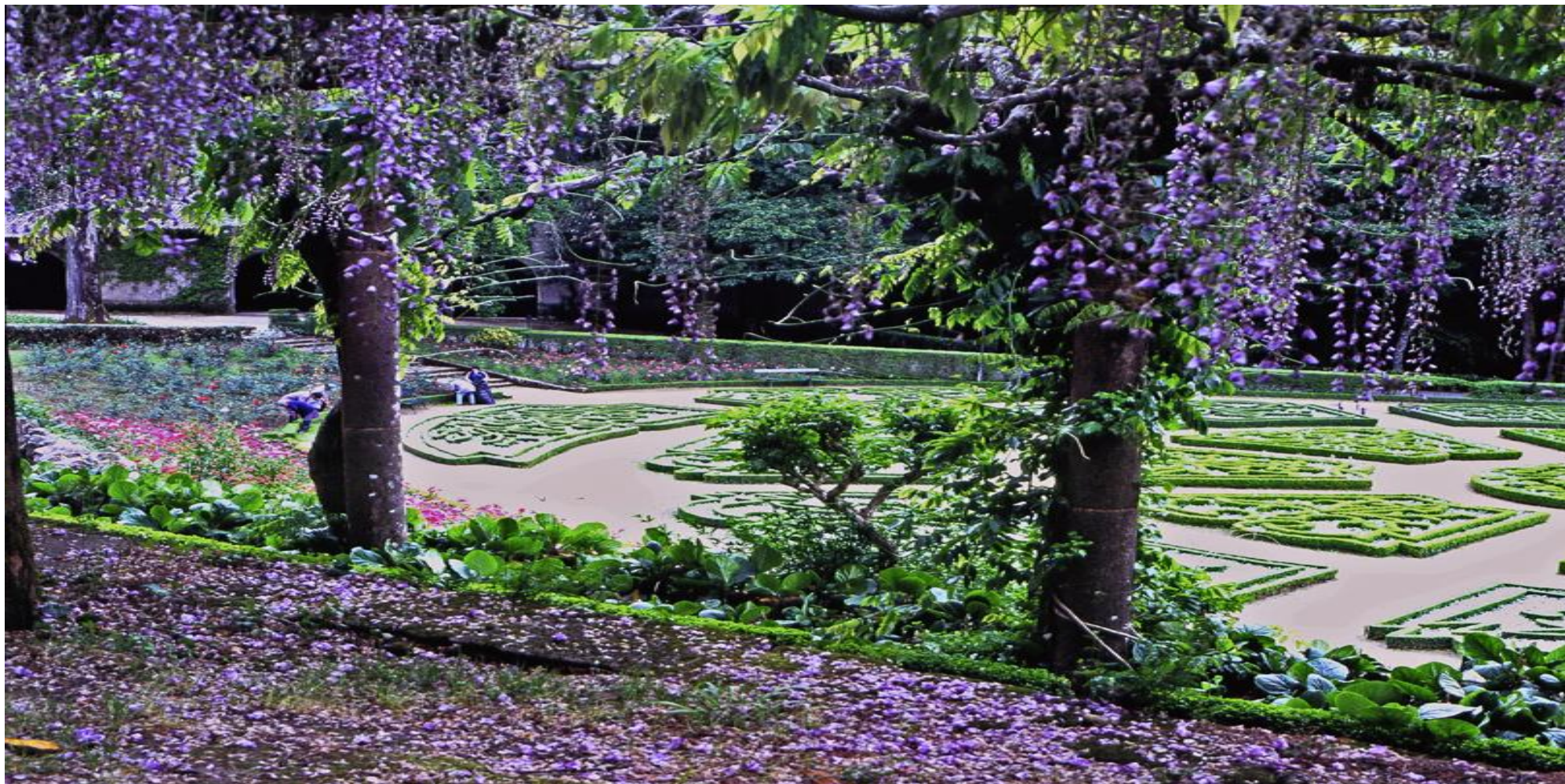
.....

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

*"He eschewed the jungle method of attempting to commit intellectual mayhem upon any of his listeners who might fail to share his opinions."*

—Clarence Cason





## FORMAL GARDEN IN SPRING

Digital Photograph

Enikő Szűcs

*Enikő Szűcs, a professional photographer and design manager is from Budapest, Hungary. She studied Visual Communications at the Hungarian Arts and Craft and Design with further studies in industries graphique in Paris. She specializes in architectural and landscape photography. Her work is shown in many galleries throughout Hungary. [photos@enikoszucs.com](mailto:photos@enikoszucs.com) [www.enikoszucs.com](http://www.enikoszucs.com)*

# GREEN BEAN CASSEROLE

Jai K.

When is the house payment due?  
Did you pay it?  
Where is that pop-up book I made you?  
I know you saved it.  
What is dad supposed to do?  
And what about your green bean casserole,  
how do I make it?  
And I need to tell you more about the boy,  
and that I still got the one you never liked blocked,  
and my sister,  
and your sister,  
and me,  
well we all just want to talk.  
And I stole some more of your things  
but I'll always keep them close to my heart,  
and you finally gave me my necklace back  
and now I'll never take it off.  
And I will work on my drinking  
so you don't have to worry anymore,  
and I will try to be nice to people  
because you've pulled me out of that so many times before.  
And I will do up the rest of your laundry  
and vacuum all your floors,  
while others will wash your dishes  
and we will still wait on you hand and foot.  
And I'm sorry I couldn't save you,  
and I didn't answer when you called,  
and I'm sorry for everything.  
I am so sorry for it all.

.....

*Jai K. (aka Jami Lynn Miller) is a "lifetime creative" whose work has appeared in Pennsylvania English, Penman Review, Where the Mind Dwells, Literary Yard, Georgia's Best Emerging Poets 2017, The Evening Street Press, America's Emerging Poets 2018: Southeast Region; she was also accepted for publication in the Sandy River Review, Route 7. Her first poetry collection Just a Fly on the Wall Inside My Mind was released in January 2019. When not writing, she hunts waterfalls, an actual sport, not a metaphor.*

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# CASTELLO DI POSTIGNANO

Barry Marks

Every summer your great grandma  
made us climb halfway into  
the Carolina blue sky  
to look for blueberries on *Satulah*,  
a Cherokee word I think means  
*mountain where everything  
grows but blueberries.*

She found berries there once.  
So she kept trying, defying logic  
and the definition of insanity.

Which might explain why  
I'm at another writing retreat,  
this time at a castle, a real one,  
learning again to show, not tell.  
It's the last night,  
my bags are by the door,  
I'm climbing the tower  
to look for constellations,  
though we both know I do better  
stringing lights between fireflies.  
I'm trying to reach you one more time.

I want to do more than tell you  
the workmen here found frescoes  
behind a wall that collapsed,  
a sort of architectural *pentimento*.  
I want to show you how  
the colors never faded.

I want you to know I will look  
for you in the stars as I look for  
you at the stars.

I will write you  
though I cannot write you  
back into this world.

.....

*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. Sounding, his second book, was a finalist for the Eric Hoffer Award for Independent Publishers. Barry was Alabama's Poet of the Year for 1999 and twice President of the Alabama State Poetry Society. He is a frequent reader, lecturer and workshop leader. [barry@leaselawyer.com](mailto:barry@leaselawyer.com)*

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## VACATION CRUSH, 1992

John Davis, Jr.

In young summer, everything spirals:  
your beach house staircase, those shells  
we find by drilling sand with tanned toes,  
porpoises' paired rolling through deep green,  
loopy smoke of dusk-lit bottle rockets.  
Your face is framed by the spin of sunlight blond  
as your smile begins a curling ribbon path  
toward dizzying kisses and Twistee Treat ice cream.  
Even fling is a form of turning –  
a stretched piece of circle in history's scroll.

.....

*John Davis Jr. is the author of Hard Inheritance (Five Oaks Press, 2016), Middle Class American Proverb (Negative Capability Press, 2014), and two other collections of poems. His work has appeared in Nashville Review, Steel Toe Review, The Common online, and The American Journal of Poetry, among many others. He holds an MFA from University of Tampa.*

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# THE TUSCALOOSA SEARS STORE DOUBLE-DIP CAPER

Jim Reed

If I close my eyes for a moment or two, I find myself traveling back to days that are long gone but always right here, awaiting reanimation.

This time, I am back in long-ago Tuscaloosa, speeding toward the Sears Roebuck store on 15th Street.

My secondhand—maybe thirdhand—wobbly-wheeled bicycle bounces over curbs and along railroad tracks on the way home from the old Victorian home housing the public library. I have exited Shangri-La, book in hand, and am now headed for nirvana.

I screech to a stop at Sears, park the unchained bike (who would bother stealing it?) and head indoors, hoping against hope that the candy counter is open for business.

You won't remember how the Sears candy counter was structured if you aren't as old as I.

It is a free-standing island in the middle of the store, a blocked-off area surrounded on four sides by glass display cases filled with every dentist's dream: tons of sweet confections.

The ritual is simple. I slowly encircle the rows of candy displays, gazing carefully at each and every item, imagining the taste and texture and heft of all these wonders, until I return to the spot where I began.

Then, invariably, I do the exact thing I've done a hundred times before. I approach the counter wherein the double-dipped chocolate covered peanut clusters beckon.

I wait patiently for the candy counter clerk to notice me, never once removing my eyes from the peanuts, afraid someone will buy them up before I get my shot.

The clerk comes over, stares down at me over the scales, and asks pleasantly, "May I help you?"

I try to contain my excitement. I say in a steady if sometimes crackling voice, "Yes, I'd like some double dipped chocolate covered peanut clusters, please."

"How much do you want?" she asks. I look at the per-ounce price and quickly count the change in my pockets.

"Uh, two dollars' worth, please."

The clerk opens her side of the case to access the candy, fills an aluminum scoop with just under the correct amount ordered, and places the coated peanuts in a white paper bag atop a shiny scale.

Then, she does a most remarkable thing, a thing few clerks know how to do these days.

She weighs the bag, notes that it needs just a few more peanuts to rise to the two-dollar mark, scoops those up and bags them, folds the top of the sack, collects my money and hands over the goods.

The other clerk, who is absent today, is the one no-one wants to deal with. She is the clerk who scoops up too many peanuts at once, bags them, then tilts the bag to empty its overloaded contents down to the two-dollar mark.

The first clerk makes me feel I'm getting something extra; the second clerk appears to be taking something away from me.

A life's lesson I carry with me to this day.

I love going to the old Fife's Cafeteria these days in downtown Birmingham for precisely the same reason I used to go to Sears. The servers in the line always add a little something to each serving, as if they're slipping me an extra treat.

Blinking back to the present time, I am now in my bookstore, reminding myself to treat each customer as if there's something extra in the book bag. I throw in a bookmark, give a modest discount, add a smile and a "hope you have a great day," hoping that here and there, a customer will "get it" and appreciate these small attentions.

Even if the customer doesn't notice, I do. I notice. And I go home feeling just a wee bit better about the world.

And, now and then, these days, I search the countryside in vain for some great double dipped chocolate covered peanut clusters served in a sparkling white paper bag

.....

*Jim Reed writes and edits and publishes and curates books in Birmingham AL.*

**[www.redclaydiary.com](http://www.redclaydiary.com)**



# DANCING IN VALENTINO

Lenny DellaRocca

for Marie

My wife makes the sign of the cross  
at the altar of Louis Vuitton.

She's standing on the Champs Elysees  
at a window with a single pair of shoes in it

praying to the Trinity of Cavalli, McCartney  
and Kors for a size six or seven.

In Venice,  
she wore Bottega Veneta,

walked up and down the shop  
queen on a cloud

before pulling them off  
thanking the salesgirl,

who tried to close the deal  
but the price was twice the gondola

with man and accordion  
singing "Delilah" by Tom Jones,

who used to wipe the sweat off his face  
with panties thrown onto the stage,

but I doubt they were Cosabella lowriders  
designed with soft, elegant stretch bands,

chevron lace, cotton gusset  
and moderate rear coverage. \*

Marie calls Dolce and Gabanna the Boys.  
I'd never heard of them until

"The Devil Wears Prada"  
when Andy, Miranda Priestly's secretary,

asks someone on the phone  
to spell Gabanna, which I thought

was a logical question,  
but the caller hung up.

Marie stacks Cosmopolitan and Vogue  
on the table in Barnes and Noble

week after week; fashionista with Chanel  
in her blood, which she'd spill

for her gods: Versace, who died for her sins,  
Alexander McQueen, who rose on the third day,

and Gucci, who waits for her  
with a lambskin clutch in the confessional,

which is a small fitting room  
where she talks to herself

justifying a second mortgage.  
More than anything

I want to buy my wife  
a black and white Dior.

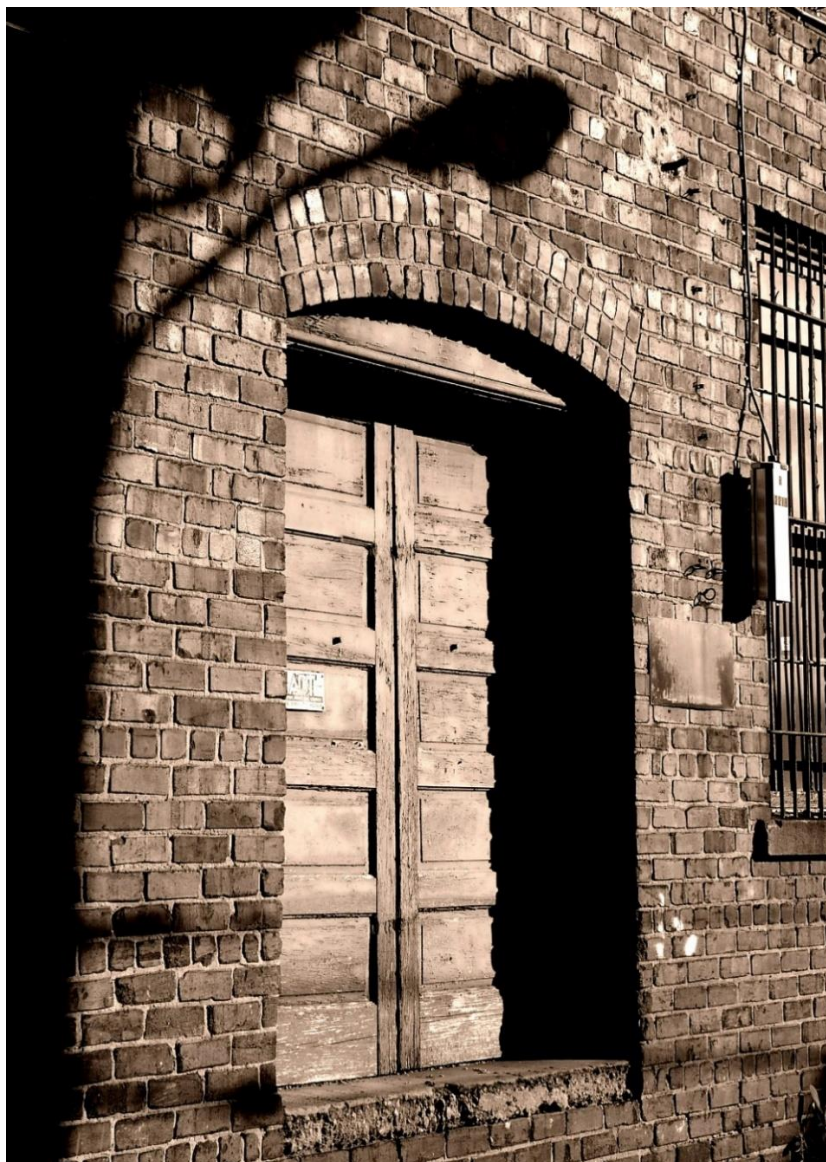
I want to see her dancing  
in stained-glass heels by Jimmy Choo.

Her devilish smile under a ball of light.  
Halo by Givenchy.

*\* from a magazine ad*

.....

*Lenny DellaRocca is founder and co-publisher of South Florida Poetry Journal—SoFloPoJo. His 4th collection is Festival of Dangerous Ideas (Unsolicited Press, 2019). His work has appeared in Fairy Tale Review, Seattle Review, Laurel Review, POEM, Sun Dog, Nimrod, Poet Lore and others. His lives in Delray Beach, FL. [lenny.dellarocca@gmail.com](mailto:lenny.dellarocca@gmail.com)*



## ALONG MORRIS AVENUE

Digital Photo

Lisa Oestreich

*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, shoemaking, and breathing life into an old farmhouse in St. Clair County, AL. She and her husband live in a loft in Downtown Birmingham, AL, with their dog, Baker.*  
**photolisa.lo@gmail.com**

# GOING OUT

Carol Hamilton

To step outside is revolutionary ...  
to listen to aviary opinions  
instead of inside twitters  
and tweets, to hear squirrel  
complaints and harsh rhetoric  
instead of air wave outrage,  
to wonder at the woodpecker  
beating his head against the wall  
past all sense .... and perhaps  
to just breathe in the moisture rising  
from the grass with sweet whispers.  
The trees may be gossiping  
or thrashing their heads about  
to the morning gales with rhythms  
come from the latest craze.  
To go out takes intent  
and follow through.  
It may mark you as wooly-headed  
and strange to the neighbors.  
But do not worry ...  
they are most unlikely to look  
out from their windows to see you.

.....

*Carol Hamilton has recent and upcoming publications in San Pedro River Review, Pinyon, Sandy River Review, Commonweal, Bluestem, Southwestern American Literature, Pour Vida, Adirondack Review, Broad River Review, Shot Glass Journal, Poem, The Sea Letter, Abbey and others. She is a former Poet Laureate of Oklahoma. [hamiltoncj9608@gmail.com](mailto:hamiltoncj9608@gmail.com)*



## 'TIL DEATH DO US PART

Pencil on Paper

Lindanne Phillips

*Lindanne Phillips retired after teaching art in the Jefferson County Schools for 45 years and 7 months. She holds a master's degree in art education from University of Alabama at Birmingham. [lindannephillips@aol.com](mailto:lindannephillips@aol.com)*

## FLAG DAY

David Swan

Darby knelt next to the weathered headstone, pushed the little wooden pole into the ground, and said a short prayer. Then he stood up and saluted Private William Clark, 8<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry, killed on August 30, 1862, whose resting place he'd just decorated with the Stars and Bars for Confederate Memorial Day.

Darby smiled to himself, proud as ever and savoring the warm spring sun, as he headed toward the next and last of the dozen or so graves he visited on this day every year. He knew some folks thought he was a racist redneck—and a few would tell him so to his face—but he had a right to honor his heritage whether the snowflakes liked it or not. And unlike the big flag his brothers in the SCV had put up by I-65, no one would see these unless they drove out to this cemetery, on a quiet country road a couple of miles from town. A few flags in a little old graveyard wouldn't hurt anybody.

His final stop was a family plot dating back almost two centuries, where many of the markers were discolored, faded, and barely legible, but the one for Sergeant George Knox was still clear. After completing his ritual, Darby brushed the dirt off his pants, straightened his gray cap, and was about to leave when he noticed he still had a flag in his satchel.

Wondering if he'd missed someone, he pulled out a map of the graves but couldn't read it without the glasses he'd left in his car. He debated whether to go get them, then saw another stone a few feet from the sergeant's, smaller than the rest and worn almost smooth. He bent down, squinted, and couldn't make out the inscription either. Might as well give 'em an extra, Darby thought, and stuck his last flag in front of the second stone.

As he walked back to the car, pleased with his afternoon's work, he noticed the air seemed cooler and the wind had picked up. A minute later he stopped, suddenly not sure where he was going. He'd parked just off the entrance road by the sweetgum trees—only where were the trees? He couldn't spot any landmarks, and even stranger, everything beyond a few yards looked blurry.

Now it felt like the temperature had dropped thirty degrees. Shivering and starting to get nervous, Darby looked overhead and saw dark, roiling clouds blowing in fast. Before he could move, the wind rose to a howl and out of nowhere a slashing rain came down. The gale tore off his cap and drove him backward, stupefied and struggling to stay on his feet.

A violent crack shook the earth, followed by a woman's scream. In an instant the rain turned to hail, not little stones but jagged chunks that drew blood. Another crack and scream. Another. Another. The noise was deafening, the sky pitch black.

Darby tried to run but slipped on the ice-covered ground and fell hard, breaking something inside him. With pain flooding his chest, he lifted his head and realized he was on top of the grave where he'd planted the second flag.

As he watched, the flag began to burn, the flame rising like a torch amid the hail and wind. He clawed at the mud in agony and terror, trying to drag himself away. A face appeared and the fire leaped toward him.

\* \* \*

"What do you think happened?" the groundskeeper asked as he stared down at Darby, lying on his back, mouth open and eyes pinched shut.

The deputy shrugged. "Won't know 'til the medical examiner gets here. Not a mark on him, though."

"I like to had a heart attack myself when I saw him," the older man said. "Probably sounded pretty shaky when I called 911."

The deputy opened his notebook. "You ever seen him here before?"

"No sir. Not yesterday neither," the groundskeeper replied. "He must've come in after four thirty, when I left."

"I'm wondering if he's kin to these folks," the deputy said, glancing at the Knox stones. "Looks like they been here a long time."

"They have," the groundskeeper said. "And this one is something you don't see every day," he added, pointing at the small marker in front of Darby's head. "I met one of the family one time and she told me this woman, Sylvia it says, was a slave. She died in 1830-something and they buried her right here like she was one of their own."

The deputy leaned over. "What's that?" He squatted and stared at something on the ground. "Looks like ashes. Wonder how they got there. Guess it doesn't matter to him though."

.....

*Dave Swan is a blogger, ex-journalist, and lifelong writer. He found inspiration for his upcoming novel on the Florida Panhandle, which is warmer and more hospitable to writers than his previous homes up north. He lives in Atlanta and is a member of the Atlanta Writers Club. [davesswan@gmail.com](mailto:davesswan@gmail.com)*

# MANY HAPPY RETURNS

Clela Reed

Of all the letters on my keyboard,  
only the R is wearing away.  
Just half of it remains—  
a P really, with loop lopped.  
Should this be stopped?  
And how did it happen?  
Of course, all those robust words  
like *ravishing*, *rushing*, and *rankle*  
and the tender ones like *ripple* and *reticent*  
I've probably used enough.  
And how could I write poems  
without *roots* and *ravens*?  
How less tasty without *rhubarb*,  
*rum*, and *remoulade*,  
without the fragrance of *roses*  
and *raspberries*,  
the joy of *romp* and *ricochet*,  
and the spunk of those  
*rascals* and *rogues* who  
pepper my verse?  
Oh my! Just typing this poem  
made it worse!



My ridiculous r-ification,

lines rife with r-ness.

Oh me! No wonder, no wond...

Wait a minute, so what?

I know the key by touch

(left index visits it so much)

and will find it no harder to press

when it wears just a simple black dress.

.....

*Clela Reed is the author of seven collections of poetry. Recently Silk (Evening Street Press, 2019) won the Helen Kay Chapbook Prize. Or Current Resident (Aldrich Press, 2019) is currently nominated for Georgia Author of the Year. A Pushcart Prize nominee this year, her poems have been published in The Cortland Review, Southern Poetry Review, The Atlanta Review, Valparaiso Review, The Literati Review, and many others. She lives and writes with her husband in their woodland home near Athens, GA. [clelareed@gmail.com](mailto:clelareed@gmail.com)*

*“When I die, I want to die like my grandfather who died peacefully in his sleep. Not screaming like all the passengers in his car.”*

—Will Rogers

## EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

Sue Riddle Cronkite

Jolene rounded the corner and stared. Blooms on the tulip tree! In February! She looked both ways, grabbed a few sprigs then went up the sidewalk and into the Homewood Library, muttering as she zig-zagged among people headed for the conference room.

She handed over a bouquet of tulip tree blossoms and a few daffodils to Libby, the librarian at the checkout counter. “Couldn’t reach the redbuds,” she explained, “they get taller every year. Guess I oughta brought my step-stool.”

She pointed to the crowd.

“A meeting of the Birmingham Arts Journal writers. They have a new member. Wrote a book.” Libby smiled. Her face was not sweet, exactly, but soft, with curved lips and mild, wide Irish eyes.

Jolene and Libby stood at the door and listened as the author said her book *Louette’s Wake*, in addition to being a funny, thought-provoking, novel about a woman who decided to throw herself a wake, was written in the language of the Alabama Wiregrass. “Instead of laughing at our use of early-English words, many straight from the mouth of Shakespeare, we should appreciate them as a national treasure.”

As Sue Riddle Cronkite read from her book a skirling burst through the room, loud enough to wake the dead. “It’s the fire alarm,” Jim Reed, Arts Journal editor, called out. “Sounds like bagpipes. Probably a test. Hope Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* hasn’t self-ignited.”

The sound filled the downstairs of the Homewood Library, not dying off with a whine but upping the decibels to an ear-splitting roar as a big red fire truck circled the building.

Jolene stood transfixed as the crowd, with Libby joining them, ran outside and started milling around, talking and laughing. “Don’t smell no smoke,” she muttered and filled a paper plate with strawberries, celery, ham sandwich, and headed to the back shelves to eat. No peace and quiet with that fire-alarm wail. She watched Sadie the Great Dane and Scotty the Schnauzer, run from one row to the other.

“Scat,” Jolene told them around a mouthful of food. They stopped and stared expectantly at her.

“Oh, okay.” She divided the rest of her sandwich, snapped the celery into two pieces, and surrendered the food.

“You better get out of here or they’ll throw you into the pound.”

The noise had become somewhat familiar, thus more bearable, when Jolene headed for the checkout desk. She heard the Arts Journal folks whooping it up outside, talking as fast as their mouths could move.

“Wow, my book speech set them on fire,” the silver-haired author yelled, turning her hands out as if to catch rain.

Libby returned. Fred the fireman stomped in, headed for the fuse box. The noise stopped.

“Did it again,” he said, smug in his firefighter’s garb, looking just like the firemen in the children’s books. “Such aggravation,” Libby said. “Must be kids snuck in and pulled the handle.”

“It was the dogs.” Jolene wiped her mouth with a napkin. “I told you before about them. Sadie and Scotty it says on their collars. A Great Dane and a Schnauzer. I see ’em in here all the time.”

“I know you do.” Libby rolled her eyes and shrugged her shoulders at Fred. “But nobody else does.”

Fred raised his eyebrows.

“This is Jolene,” Libby told him. “Says the song’s named after her. She’s harmless. Reads lots of books.”

His eyes considered Jolene. Old woman, gray hair, slacks and shabby sweater, whole package the worse for wear.

“Did you pull that handle” he asked.

“Not me. I told you the dogs done it.”

He turned to Libby. “You need a proper fuse box back there.”

“I brought it to the attention of the library board. They say it’s historic.”

He shook his head in its tall fireman’s helmet.

“I’ll ask them again,” Libby told him.

As he turned away and the ruckus blared out from the conference room, Jolene walked closer to the checkout counter. “Why is it that nobody listens to me?” she asked rhetorically, “when I tell about the dogs who live here?”

“It’s your wild imagination running away with you again, Jolene.”

“Be that as it may,” Jolene propped her elbow on the counter. “I didn’t come in here for no fire alarm, I looked for Rosemunde Pilcher’s latest book. I’ve read every one you got, some of them twice, and I want to know about her newest, if it’s been checked out and when it’s expected back.”

“She died in 2019, Jolene. I told you before. *Winter Solstice* is the last book she published. She won’t be writing any more books.”

“Guess you’re right. Can’t hardly write books if she’s six feet under. She was pumping them out about two a year there for a while.” Jolene took a deep breath in respect for the dead. “I’ll go get *Winter Solstice* if it’s on the shelf.” She started off, then turned back.

“What about Terry Kay? He ain’t dead, is he?”

“We’ve ordered his newest, *The King Who Made Paper Flowers*. It should be in about Wednesday.”

“What about that woman’s book she was spoutin’ off on when the fire alarm started raisin’ hell?”

“She gave us copies,” Libby pointed to her desk. “We’ll have them on the shelves by tomorrow.”

After finding and checking out *Winter Solstice*, Jolene sauntered off home, with that extra lift to her shoulders as befitting a woman who had a song written about her, swishing her fanny just a tad, carrying Rosamunde Pilcher’s last book.

The library would have the newest Terry Kay book in a few days. There was no more happiness in this world than living near the Homewood Library. She could just keep on reading ’till her eyeballs busted out.

Behind her trotted two dogs, a Great Dane and a Schnauzer. In the Great Dane’s mouth was a book, *Louette’s Wake*, by Sue Riddle Cronkite, without the least bit of slobber on it.

.....

*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.**

*“Everything takes longer than it  
does.”*

—*Gayle Wykle*



**EDEN OIL**

20" x 30"

Oil on Canvas

Hakima

*Dr. Malaika Hakima is a family medicine doctor in Flomaton, AL. She received her medical degree from Meharry Medical College in Nashville, TN, and has been in practice for more than 20 years.*

## FRAGMENT

Benjamin Persons

On a cold visit to a city on the coast, you indulge your taste for mischief. There is a neighborhood full of old, unkempt mansions in sight of your hotel, and in walking among them by streetlamp, taking in the craftsmanship of a century before, you find one at the end of the way that looks abandoned. The bottom-story windows are all boarded up and someone has scrawled his name in looping red letters over one side. A large crack almost splitting in half its concrete support on the right, the low gate hangs at an odd angle. You try the gate, find it unlocked. Then you are at the pair of Romanesque doors at the entrance, no memory of having crossed the lawn to get there.

The doors, too, are not locked though they open with the sound of wood splitting. You leave one slightly ajar rather than force it back into place in the warped doorjamb. Enough light comes through that opening to walk the hallway. Against one side, rows of empty beer cans are carefully arranged in a triangle, but otherwise the hall is bare. It eventually leads, your hand tracing the wall, into a great room, where all the more like a presence risen onto its haunches feels the absence of sensation in the dark.

You contain the panic that you will not be able to find the unfamiliar light switch, telling yourself that there is no electricity in the house. Still, you hesitate at the mouth to the grand blackness, inviting. The only way to separate yourself from the wall is to run headlong into the room. A minute passes, then five; maybe. Time seems to have slowed. But the horn from a train passing somewhere through the city's outskirts reaches you as though a signal and you push off, bursting into the space. Immediately you reproach yourself for acting like a child, for running around an unknown house in an area you have explored for less than a day, even if you do pretend to appreciate architecture. You fix yourself at what you think is the center of the room but constantly circling lest you be too easy a target for whatever waits in here.

Inevitably you come crashing down on your elbows. Looking up into the light from the landing's high window, you see that you are at the base of a stairway. Gain the high ground, you think. The steps bow as you put your weight onto them.

Your anxiety eases a bit on the window-lit second floor. Opening doors increases the light, and you walk from one entryway to the next, confidence growing. A stutter step—you veer into a room. In another, you jump trying to reach the ceiling. This was a billiard room, this a library, from the series

of tall shelves. You circle back at the end of the passage to revisit each, to find every hidden alcove, every unassuming feature. Soon you are making notes by way of talking to yourself. Quite loudly you talk to yourself, but there is no one to hear.

In the room closest to the stairs, you corner a window to glance at your watch: Is it that late, window? Back to the hotel, then. Need to get ready for tomorrow.

After bounding down the steps, you pause to make certain your bearings. It is no different, so you walk the length of the great room with your eyes closed. Only ten and a half steps, goose steps, you have counted them out with the pace soldiers use in those countries that try too hard. Manageable, now. The house is already receding from you, peeling away, with you in the front hall. Your mind has switched to tracing the route back to the hotel; it is just far enough to be trying in this weather, a little over a mile. You feel it beforehand in your chest, at the slenderness above your ankle where the legs are least protected from the chill.

In the moonlight, the gate spreads angular harp strings on the sidewalk. You watch them fold and unfold as you play with the heavy iron, listen to the hinges chirrup. While you bring the gate to, you toy with the idea of setting the side pillar upright. Right foot at its base, you place your shoulder just above the crack. A light comes on in the house at the last dormer window of the third story. Someone stands looking out, a black torso that fills the narrow square. Your lead leg gives way. You cannot see the face, but you know that he is staring down at you. You rise up, trembling, cannot see the face but know that he looks into you, straight into your seizing breast.

You run . . .

.....

*Benjamin Persons/Benjamin Gray is a lapsed medical student living in the Birmingham area. His poetry can be found at*

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*"I wonder whether my own shadow is  
scared of me."*

—Jim Reed

# BOOKS

John A. Sleicher

The book publishers have a serious complaint. They say that the people don't read books anymore.

Read books? Why should we? Haven't the people the one-cent yellow newspapers? Haven't they the muckraking magazines for those who can afford to pay a nickel, a dime, or a quarter?

Why do we need books? Aren't we busy listening to the alluring voice of the demagogue, the persuasive sophistries of the Socialist, the loud call of the "Reformer" and the insistent demand of the political walking delegate?

Who has time to read books nowadays? Do our legislators read books? Have our editors any use for them? Can they teach our rulers in authority anything they didn't know before? Moulders (sic) of public opinion may write books, but read them? Never! What use are books? Give us liberty or give us death.

Books were made for other days when men thought, and statesmen studied. They didn't know it all in those times. We do.

Those were the foolish days when the venerable Constitution was revered, the judiciary respected, and conservatism was at a premium. All that is past.

We know better what we want. This is a progressive age. Away with the Constitution recall the judges; exile the publisher; banish his books!

Let the people rule! Everybody's doing it!

.....

*Editorial published April 17, 1913, in Leslie's Illustrated Weekly Newspaper, edited by John A. Sleicher. Newspaper archived at Reed Books / The Museum of Fond Memories.*



# CITYSCAPE AT NIGHT

Robert Bullard

The hunger for something new set in.  
The thirst to keep going flared up.

The painter prepared his oils.  
The musician tuned his guitar.

Light tripped down the staircase  
behind the buildings on the horizon.

The painter and musician recreated,  
mixing their sense of style.

Night shattered into shades of blue and black,  
making a scene that could be heard for miles.

A fresh painting froze time,  
and constant music kept the rhythm

even as memory mellowed,  
and the sky melted into dawn.

.....

*Robert Bullard is a writer situated in Montgomery, AL. He has a review forthcoming for Alabama Writers Forum, and his poetry has appeared in Filibuster.*

**robertjbullard@outlook.com**



## **NIGHT GLARE**

Digital Photograph  
Isidore Ray Sanders

*Isidore Rae Sanders has been a writer since she was sentient. She lives in the West Midlands, UK, with too many notebooks and a head full of ideas.*

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