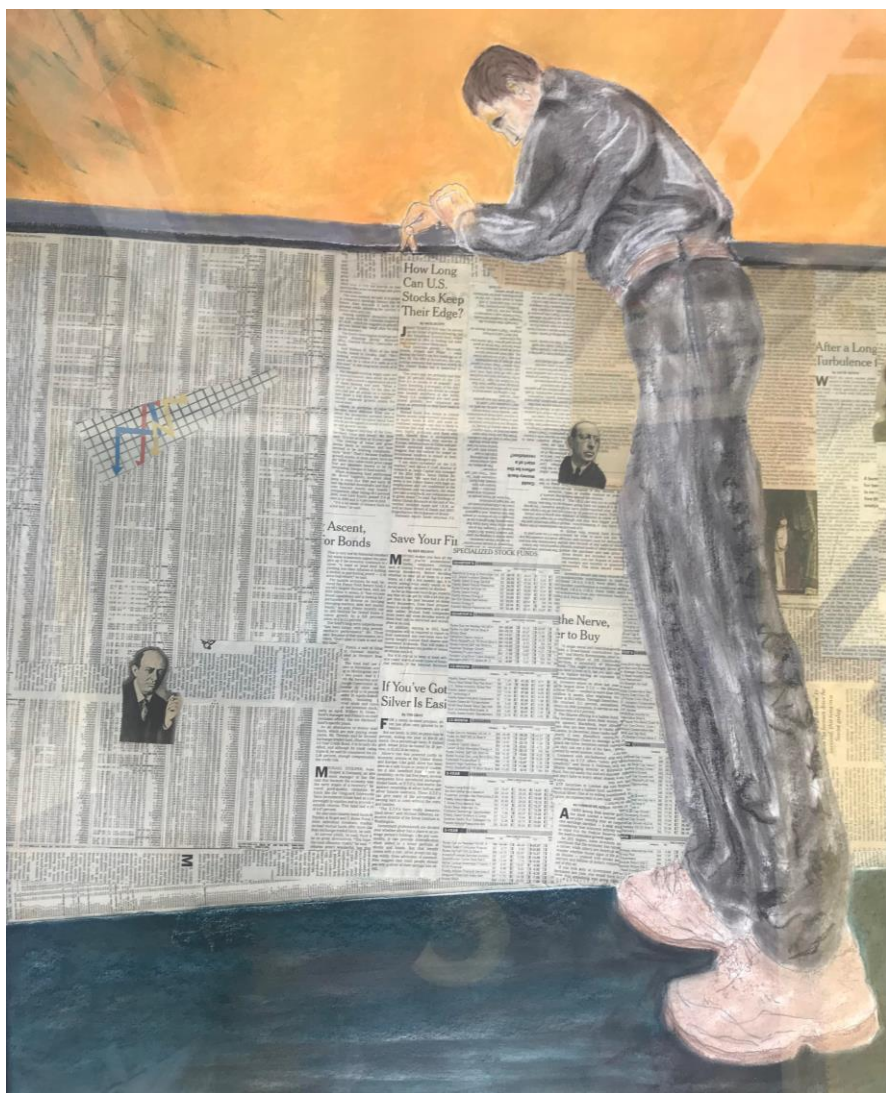


Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 17 Issue 1



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

\$6.00



Birmingham Arts Journal

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FRONT COVER: LOOKING OVER THE WALL STREET -

Mixed Media - 30" x 40" - The late Charles H. Winecoff. This figure in distorted perspective refers to the stock market crash of 2011 and is contemplating life and the future. Today, he might be contemplating life during the 2020 Covid Pandemic and the future.

BACK COVER: RUNNING FOR OFFICE - 8" x 10" Acrylic on Canvas

Darryl Richburg is a former member of Birmingham Art Association and has been published previously in Birmingham Arts Journal.

LIVING AFTERWARDS

Mike Wahl

Before there were cell phones,
there was you,
but you never called.

Before there was color,
there was black and white,
but you were a monotone of gray.

Before Samson knew Delilah,
there was strength,
but I told you all my secrets.

While the seven dwarfs fussed as you slept,
the prince came kissing,
but it wasn't me.

Once the poet wrote your poem
to offer to the world,
but you too rejected it.

.....

Mike Wahl writes at his organic farm in Limestone County, AL, where he lives with his family and dogs. His short poems propose to examine the nuances of politics, gardening, religion, and family. This poem first appeared in Living Adverbially.

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ONE MATCH

Libby Rich

Memory has it that at least one weekend a month was set aside for a tent camping trip. Preparations began early in the week with our camping gear being brought up from the basement or down from the attic. We were assigned a checklist of our responsibilities and God forbid if what was on the list failed to appear in the staging area. Sleeping bags, canteens, blankets, pillows, cooking utensils, Coleman stove, swimsuits, soap, etc. were stacked neatly by the back door, ready to be loaded into the station wagon. My mother was responsible for all the food, which was considerable because there were five of us. Grocery bags were stuffed full of bread, milk, juice, fruit, meat, crackers, eggs, bacon, snacks, ice chests the list almost endless.

Typically, my father would arrive home early on Friday afternoon, load the car in a precise fashion, and off we'd go on an adventure. When I look back, I am always impressed by my father's attention to details. He worked out what we might need, loaded the car in a last-in first-out method, so everything worked in clock-like fashion. I learned so much from his example.

Upon arriving we would sweep the campsite to remove rocks, unload the tent, and set it up. Bob and I, the oldest, would help with that task while Mama and Kathy would take care of the groceries. While we were hauling sleeping bags into the tent, Daddy would attend to starting the fire.

Gathering small twigs, pine straw, leaves, tufts of grass, bark, he set up the fire in a teepee format. Before striking a match, larger pieces of wood would be placed next to the fire pit to ensure success. And then he would strike one match, place it carefully in the center and blow gently. Never in all my years of camping did my father ever need more than one match. Pouring down rain or not, one match was all that he needed. As we grew older, he would say, "start the fire." After lots of failures and many attempts, all of us learned how to use just one match. I can hear him now saying, "It's in the preparation." And when I start my fires inside, I still take great pride doing it with one match. Thank you, Daddy.

.....

Libby Rich is a native of Birmingham AL. She retired after 38 years as owner of Plant Odyssey in Birmingham's Southside and now spends her time reading, writing, and gardening.

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SO GOES THE GRACKLE

Digital Photograph

Tom Gordon

Yellow-eyed anger
and no social distancing,
So goes the grackle.

Tom Gordon is a Birmingham-based free-lance writer and former reporter and editor at The Birmingham News. A native of Houston, TX, Gordon has an undergraduate degree in political science from the University of Alabama and a graduate degree in journalism from the University of Missouri.
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THE ICE BAG LEAKETH

Liz Reed

Somewhere in this house is an icepack. Seldom needed, it has no specific home and thus stays put in its last-used place. Occasionally it might be stored in the freezer for the next need, but not this time. After several frustrating dead-end searches, I reached for a large bag of frozen English peas, but we had eaten the English peas. Next choice: a large bag of mixed fruit, perfect for smoothies, imperfect as a stand-in for the icebag.

Migraines care little about what's perfect or imperfect, just what WORKS, so we (the headache and I) settled on the frozen fruit. The large bag of frozen mixed fruit. The large bag of frozen mixed red fruit – strawberries, cranberries, cherries. Red. Very red.

In the beginning of this adaptive use process, the large bag of frozen mixed red fruit worked well. Wrapped in a new (of course) white (of course) dishtowel, the large bag of frozen mixed red fruit was malleable enough to form itself nicely and focus on the most painful part of my head and for most of the night I slept pretty well, migraine notwithstanding.

About 2:25 a.m., there was a sudden rude awakening. Ice cold liquid soaked into the pillow, overflowed, ran down the pillow and onto the sheets (white of course) and the comforter (white of course).

What the? my sleepy and still-hurting head asked. The large bag of frozen mixed red fruit – strawberries, cranberries, cherries – had sprung a leak. Red. Very red.

Now imagine my predicament. Options surfaced: one, toss it all on the floor and find another pillow, hopefully without getting out of bed; two, toss the whole mess in the trash can nearby which would require either excellent aim or getting out of bed. Or three, get out of bed and drip the mess all the way to the tub. I chose the third option. Yes, there are red splotches on the floor, all the way to the tub.

A towel, dry & scratchy, covered up the wet, very red, and very cold stain. A fresh pillow replaced the soppy one. Sleep wasn't long denied but before I drifted off, it did occur to me that if Jim woke up and saw all that very wet, very red stain he would absolutely panic, at once figuring my head had exploded and left its mark. As I got out of bed about 6:15, I covered the stained mess with a clean part of the white (of course) comforter. He woke a bit later, none the wiser.

It is 2:30 pm now. Before too long, I need to go upstairs, find the tub (follow the red splotches), find the offending large size red mixed frozen fruit bag, place it in a sturdy plastic bag

before relegating it to the trash can (leakproof). Then I will rescue the pillow, find some bleach, fill up the tub and hopefully render this whole experience a faint memory.

P.S. Yesterday, after finding this story on Facebook, a friend brought a gift bag with goodies: a brand-new ice bag, Sausalito cookies, peppermint oil and lavender bath bubbles. The brand-new ice bag leaketh. The next day I returned the brand-new ice bag to Walgreens, sans receipt but replete with recitation of my experience. The manager gave me another new one. It leaketh, too. Beware the leaking ice bag. Turns out the screw tops reverse course easily during the night. *Et voila*, a surprise awakening.

.....

*Liz Reed is the art editor of Birmingham Arts Journal. Among other pursuits she writes stories, edits manuscripts, designs books, and makes wedding dresses for very special brides. **lizreedartist@gmail.com***

"All prayers work. It's just that sometimes we don't like the answer."

—Val Kilmer

THESE DAYS

Richard Luftig

The pitch pine bends
in winter wind,
their roots struggling
to keep a toehold

in eroding banks.
Down below,
an understudy of vines
tries to make sense

of water, dark gray
and flecked with ice.
A river so thin you think
you could reach the other

side with a well placed
stone but so long your thoughts
might just disappear around
the next meander and never

return. But I've learned
over this life that though
it's hardest water to read,
the deepest channel

runs most true,
this place where sunlight
yields to shadow, which turns
out to be your truest friend.

.....

Richard Luftig is a former professor of educational psychology and special education at Miami University in Ohio now residing in California. His poems and stories have appeared in numerous literary journals. His latest book of poems, A Grammar for Snow, has recently been published by Unsolicited Press. luftigrl@miamioh.edu

MASS EXTINCTIONS

Laura Saint Martin

Chapel Brunswicke peered out of her mobile home window into the late night. It was a newer home, and large. She looked back at her sleeping husband, listened to his soft, sloppy snores. A trail of drool glistened in the left corner of his mouth. She pulled on her pajama pants and a robe, slipped outside. There was too much moon and too much that needed fixing for sleep.

All the fixin's...

Before they joined the Family, Niall and Marva Brunswicke were at odds, both their birth families brash and opinionated; Niall's Scotch Irish mob prone to drunkenness and poetry and procreation, Marva's a turgid (is that the word I want?) mix of Creole Catholic and Southern Baptist. Both sides had their share of funny uncles, nut-farm aunties and incarcerated cousins. Neither side approved of mixed-race marriages and wanted no truck with any skinny, nappy, high yellow girls. Chapel was born an alien.

Chapel stood in front of her home, looked up the slight rise into the dark void of her neighbor's house. Moonlight glittered like broken beer bottles on the leaves in Paloma Solo's untended yard. The smell of night-blooming jasmine was nauseating. Chapel could hear the sawing of crickets, tiny rustlings, and imagined the caterpillars Paloma encouraged gnawing away in tangled underbrush.

Broken glass...

Oh, the beatings children received for dropped dishes in the Family! Chapel learned at an early age to be nimble, economic, and hungry. Food was grown by Family members, and none went to waste.

Chapel put a hand on her flat stomach, felt a rumble. Hunger was good, hunger was virtuous. As she dropped the hand, headlights blinded her. Paloma was home. Chapel watched as the young woman unloaded her car. Childish laughter launched into the night, unchecked.

Chapel had been a quiet child. There was little time for play in the daily life of the Family. There were chores to be done and lessons to be learned. Chapel was smart, smarter than average, and more disciplined than those around her. Paloma, like her mother before her, was a so-called free spirit. Sandrine Solo, rumor had it, left a comfortable trust fund for Paloma, enabling the girl to grow fat and unmotivated. The sight of that excess flesh and undone chores irked Chapel no end. Her own home was cleaner than an operating theater.

The day Niall and Marva went home to Jesus, Chapel couldn't get the big house clean enough. The Family soiled themselves when they left, and Chapel was left behind to scrub and scrub until she grew too heavy and sleepy to continue.

Chapel opened her Tuff Shed and pulled out the air compressor and the power washer and the hose. She knew her husband would not wake up. She didn't care about anyone else. She caught her reflection in a small mirror in the shed and was not pleased. Her mouth, once full, looked crooked and slack, like some Dali-esque painting melting right out of its frame. There was loose skin around her strong jaw, as though her white blood was too thin to fill out the flesh.

Chapel was one of a handful of children rescued from what the media called the first suicide cult. She was adopted by some kindly cousins on her mother's side and went through the motions of being African American. She sang hymns and acquired a modest repertoire of Southern and Hispanic cuisine, but she never found her outdoor voice. She remained a tourist in her own heritage.

Chapel's flashlight found the chrysalids easily, hanging green and eerie from the eaves of her porch. She turned on the power washer and swept the stream over the eaves until all the little space pods were gone. She thought she heard tiny screams.

Jesus' true children died quietly.

Battle Wing, who was sometimes hungry at night and busy at the Lantana with the moths, heard the screams. He awoke Big Eyes, who in turn found Moon Kiss, fluttering around his favorite bush, a night-blooming jasmine. The three of them raced to the tree cave where Knife Wing and Many Eggs sheltered, flapping about their sleeping forms until they stirred.

"The Monstrous One has killed the Ones Who Wait!" Battle Wing cried. Big Eyes hovered and Moon Kiss paused on a larger leaf. Knife Wing stretched his wings and woke Many Eggs.

Many Eggs sobbed once, roused herself angrily. "The pups kept crawling over there, no matter what we told them, and Moth Mother was always picking them up and bringing them back."

"But there was no food left," Knife Wing said.

"They weren't going over there for food!" Many Eggs was louder than usual in her agitation. "They went over there to pupate. Mother bought more plants."

"Why did you lay so many eggs anyway?" Battle Wing asked.

"Because so many of us are dying. They get sick, they have no more food. They migrate and never come back. Our people are going extinct!"

"Why are you arguing when the Ones Who Wait are dying?" Big Eyes cried.

Moon Kiss, however, was already gone, having decided to take matters into his own hands.

Chapel Brunswicke dropped the nozzle to the power washer with a screech when a moth the size of a small bird hit her in her right eye. The screech, in turn, awakened a neighbor, who called the police. The impact broke a sizable blood vessel in the sclera and even caused some discoloration of the delicate tissue of Chapel's eyelid. The police were not impressed with her story of winged insects plotting against her and opened an investigation of her husband for spousal abuse.

Seven Ones Who Wait perished that night, their torn chrysalids and crinkled bodies left to rot in the gutters. The remainder enclosed into exceptionally strong butterflies.

Moon Kiss took several days to rest and heal, but was soon strong again, with a nicked wing the only lasting damage. He fathered several batches of eggs before he made the final Moon Journey.

.....

Laura Saint Martin is an emerging writer of fiction and poetry, with several short pieces published in online journals and print anthologies.
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DILEMMA OF A MODERN MAN

Paul Bamberger

i reach out to the untouched the untouching to the unloved the unloving to the unforgiven the unforgiving to the unseeing the unseen to the unspoken of the spoken of to the untimely the unhelpful the unlikely the unlucky the unwanted the despairing desperately reach out to throw them all to the sea that i move on

.....

Paul Bamberger earned an MFA Degree in English from the University of Massachusetts/Amherst and has had several books of poetry published, most recently, On The Badlands Of New Times.

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"The best jazz says, 'Gonna live forever; don't believe in death.'"

—Ray Bradbury

ARCHIVES OF THE CLEAN PLATE CLUB

Jim Reed

Popeye canned spinach is being served tonight, straight from can to stove pan, where slices of hard-boiled eggs are added, along with white vinegar. Once steaming, the delicacy is transferred to chipped serving dish to family table, where it beckons to parents and kids.

For some reason, I am the only one of five children who endorses and gobbles up soggy warm spinach. Brothers and sisters will do anything possible to avoid having to face the prospect. Which is odd, because all five of us adore our cartoon hero, Popeye, who downs entire cans before each conquest.

Admire the superhero. Disdain how he got to be super. Losers all, I think smugly. I'm going to grow muscle and develop agility by imbibing a double dose of Popeye spinach.

Fortunately for my siblings, Mother's dinner table is loaded with plenty of other delectable leftovers—pork and beans, cole slaw, hot cornbread, cold fried chicken, apple pie...enough to hide from parents the fact that no-one but yours truly ever touches the Popeye spinach.

I am also the kid who eats everything on the plate. That's because it's a sin to waste food or toss out uneaten food. WWII ended just a few years ago. Our parents sacrificed and scrimped and saved and worked hard to bring home the food we are enjoying. We are constantly reminded of this.

"Think of all the starving children in China," Mother says whenever a plate is left uncleared. This is her way of letting us know that there are many children in the world who don't get three squares and a snack each day. We should be grateful. And we are.

But that, too, never convinces everybody that they should try spinach.

Children can starve, muscles can stay flabby, but some things just should not be eaten.

Still, whenever we go to the movies, the Popeye cartoons inspire us. Even if some of us don't care for his culinary habits.

No matter, I love Popeye's spinach. Even though I know that it's more fun to imagine being strong and mighty, than it is to exert the effort required to become strong and mighty

Maybe I'm just a eat-everything-on-your-plate hero. At least I'm thinking of the children of China, and not just myself.

Of course, later, as a sullen teenager, I will learn to retort, "Well, let's just pack up the leftovers and mail them to China." That line only works once, as you can imagine.

And another admonition that I wish I can whisper to my brother is, "Eat every carrot and pea on your plate." We could giggle and feel so smug for at least a minute.

It's those minutes that remain ever fresh and soggy in my mind to this day
.....

Jim writes and curates old books in Birmingham, AL. jim@jimreedbooks.com

*"Covering your face is a symbol that you
belong to a civilization and that you're not
necessarily a superbeing whose
contrarianism can outthink a virus."*

—John Hodgman

RECESS AT THE ALPHABET SCHOOL

Clela Reed

Make a scene, I tell them. They blink.
No, I mean make a pretty landscape.
My alphabet sits there, thinking I'm kidding.
You can do it, really. B, lie down and become hills.
O, the sun, and so forth. They hesitate.
Shoo!
They comply, mean-eyed, sulking,
but after A stretches tall
and positions himself as a fine spruce,
and E and F flip onto their backs
to form a bit of country fencing,
they begin to enjoy the task
as they find viable roles.
W stands on her head alongside M
to make distant peaks
and U, C, and G join hands and recline
to enclose a little pond. D and P join B
to add to the pondside hills,
and S and J stretch their languorous curves
into a lovely path. Z dozes,
waiting for someone to find a place for him.
N pulls his legs in tight against the fence
and declares himself a gate
H takes V by the hand and swings her up
to give his cottage a roof.
Q, already missing her U, dives into the pond
to become a fat tadpole.
The remaining letters, except for sleepy Z,
shuffle their serifs and whine
until strong man Y makes a proposal:
This is a winter scene, he proclaims.
T, give me a hand. We're the trunk of a tree.
K, L, R, and I, balance on top.

You're twisting bare branches!
I step in to applaud the letter gymnastics
and notice Z. Wake up! I shout.
Stretch out your angles
and spring to the roof of that cottage!
There, the scene is complete, with
chimney smoke zigzagging in the breeze
over pond and hills and trees
of this scene of ABCs,
this landscape letter perfect,
much alphabetter than I had dreamed.

.....

Clela Reed is the author of seven collections of poetry. Recently Silk won the Helen Kay Chapbook Prize. Her book Or Current Resident (Aldrich Press, 2019) was nominated for the Georgia Author of the Year. She lives and writes with her husband in their woodland home near Athens, Georgia. clelareed@gmail.com

“Even if you do paint your masterpiece,
what will you do then? Well, obviously,
you have to paint another one.”

—Bob Dylan

THE QUIETUDE OF A SMALL SPACE

John Richmond

It was a small house, so it was difficult to find a place where he could get away.

Yes, it had two floors and a partially finished basement, but the way it was laid out, the “sight lines” to the stairs going up and down and the two doors going out—the front door and the sliding glass one to the deck—made it almost impossible for anyone to disappear without their absence being felt immediately.

But that was only the half of it; the other was that the house also had “character.”

If by some strange quirk of chance, someone did make it up to the second floor, the “character sentry” would announce to everyone on the floor below exactly what was going on.

How?

The floors in every upstairs room creaked. This meant that anyone sitting downstairs could tell which part of the house above them—the bathroom, the three bedrooms, even the hallway—was being traversed and in what direction.

That’s why the little corner in the far end of the kitchen was perfect.

Well, actually, it wasn’t *really* a corner, it was more like a nook, a *space* just past the refrigerator, but before the counter and cabinets, against the back wall.

It was approximately thirty-three inches wide and sixteen inches deep, enough for him to hide in especially if he leaned back against a short section of counter where he kept the kitchen computer and the wine that was in-progress.

Usually, a mag bottle of chardonnay would be there and if it had been freshly opened, it could last him a good while.

At the beginning, it was just a retreat to slip into—disappear, if you prefer—but, over time, it became much, much more.

From that space he could see straight out the kitchen window and, off to the right at a forty-five-degree angle, out the sliding glass door. These were his own “private” views that ranged from the current reality of the moment to revisiting what he remembered from the past.

You see, over time, his space accumulated memories; the starlings who had to brave a biting snowstorm because they arrived a bit too soon while spring came a bit too late; the ever-present squirrels, looking to “score” anything they could; the deer, turkeys and occasional fox; the wind in the trees, the rain, and the moon shadows when it was full.

Of course, there were the changes. Both directly off the deck in what he called his “nature preserve,” as well as in the open expanse of the yard beyond; the time of day; the time of night; the seasons, from spring to summer to fall- the colors, all before his eyes.

Winter was particularly conducive for lingering a bit more than usual. It was when the space was warm, made so by both its size and a nearness to the stove and oven less than three feet away.

Yet, it was warm for another reason unrelated to temperature because the quietude that he found there, the peace in a place that was his, though not because he had marked it or staked claim to it in any sort of physical way.

No, doing so would have “given it away.”

He knew that everyone was aware of the space, but only he understood what it meant to him, because when it was time to leave, to rejoin the others, he stepped away with sometimes a nod or a partial smile, his secret intact and the quietude left waiting for his return.

.....

John Richmond has wandered parts of North America for a good portion of his life, from the Great Lakes to Tennessee, Georgia, North Carolina, and eventually, New York City. His works have appeared widely, and there are more to come. jrichmondnyc@gmail.com

*“No one can dub you with dignity, that's
yours to claim.”*

—Odetta Holmes

PLANTING SPUDS

Carolyn Prentice

I've made your bed, clean and smooth
Tucked you in, covered you well.
But it's not for sleeping.
You can drowse a week or two
But sunshine and warmth will nudge you awake
And you will yawn and stretch and stretch some more.
It's not so far, you can reach it.
Those pallid fingertips extending further than you expected
Standing on tippy toes until you feel
Almost like there's nothing left in between
But feet and fingers.
Then breaking through, the joy of discovering
You're not just a lump huddled in the ground,
inert and pallid, all of one substance.
Discover colors and leaves and flowers
And even romance on the wind.

.....

Retired from 33 years of college teaching, Carolyn Prentice lives on a sustainable farm in South Dakota, and writes and savors poetry. Her poems have often appeared in Pasque Petals.

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GENTRIFY THIS

Margaret McGinty

Winner, 1st Place National Story, 2019 Hackney Literary Awards

Knock. Knock. Knock.

You want to know how things are going? Well, they're going like this:

The kids from across the street were on my front porch again Sunday morning. Their mother had locked them out of the house so she could have sex with her boyfriend. I could sympathize, but I just wasn't in the mood to deal with them that morning.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I knew it was them, because they're practically the only visitors I ever have. The only other person who regularly knocks on my door is Mr. Jones, who cuts the grass for me, and he'd just been by the day before. I'd told him that I'd lost my job, so I couldn't afford to have him take care of my yard anymore.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

So it had to be the kids from across the street. And in my better moments I have found it charming that they like to come over and see me. But, as I said, I just wasn't in the mood for them right then.

"Hey, mister," DeVante yelled.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

His fist, raised high, was just visible through the glass as he pounded on the door.

"What's up, guys," I asked, opening the door and holding my dog by the collar as he strained toward their dog, who runs loose and often comes over and sleeps on my porch when nobody is home at his house. Again, I found this charming once. But now it just seems unfair to my law-abiding dog.

"Can we use your phone?"

Taja, a couple of years older than DeVante, is a textbook big sister. She's responsible and conscientious and appears to have accepted the assignment of overseeing her brother as a matter of course.

"Why can't you use the phone at your house," I asked. I didn't really want to know why. I didn't really think they wanted to use the phone at all. My question was just to flush out their true intention. DeVante, especially, was always coming up with requests that he hoped would gain him entry into my house. I'd drawn a firm line about that early on and had stuck to it. They didn't come in my house. I wouldn't give them food or drink. And they could not walk my dog.

"Both the doors are locked," Taja said. "The front and the back."

"Isn't your mother home," I said. Again, I wasn't really looking for an answer, as the mother's car and the boyfriend's car were right there in the driveway.

"She's sleeping."

"Do you mean that if you go and knock on the door, she won't get up and let you in?" This time I really was asking, even though I knew the answer and knew it would make me mad. I don't know why I pressed the point. Maybe it was just to confirm my bad mood.

"Whenever we do, she says, 'Stay the hell out of here,' or something like that," Taja said, looking away. Then she repeated, "Both doors, the front and the back."

"I'll get the phone. You can use it out here. Let me put the dog out first." I put my dog out in the back yard, where he went from one side of the house to the other, fretting at the kids' dog being on his porch.

I brought the phone out and asked them who they were going to call.

"Our friends."

Taja held out a crumpled piece of notebook paper with a phone number on it.

"We're going to the zoo," said DeVante. "Our friends are going to pick us up. We can wait for them here. We'll wait inside with you."

I glared at him.

"When I woke up this morning," Taja said, "I said, 'Mama, can we go to the zoo?' And Mama said, 'Go back to sleep, girl.' And I did, I fell back asleep. And we're going to the zoo." Taja smiled.

"Our friends are going to pick us up. We have to call them," said DeVante, looking around me as he spoke, trying to see as much of the inside of my house as he could from the threshold.

I showed Taja how to use the phone. Somebody appeared to answer. Taja had a conversation of sorts. No hello or good-bye. I couldn't tell if she knew who she was calling, if they knew her, or if this zoo outing was fact or fiction. The call didn't really conclude. Taja just looked up and said, "They're going to call back."

"They're going to call you back? At this number? Great," I said.

Thanks to caller ID, the person they called would have my number in their phone forever and I'd probably be getting phone calls for Taja and DeVante from somebody they may or may not know for who knows how long while they sorted this thing out.

After telling them no, they could not take my dog for a walk while they waited for their friends to call, I left the phone with Taja and DeVante and went back inside. They'd wanted to take the phone and go to "Bryan's," whoever or whatever that was, but I explained that the phone wouldn't work if they left the porch. So they stayed there while I went back in the house.

Next door to me is a family of three: a man, his wife, and their young daughter. They have two dogs chained up in the back yard, and the front yard is full of toys and tools and trash. For Christmas last year, they covered their house and yard with lighted holiday decorations, and they never took them down.

Every day from Advent on, this glittering display sprung to life at sunset and faded with the dawn. It continued past Epiphany and lit up Shrove Tuesday. Undaunted by Ash Wednesday, the spectacle endured through Lent, braved Good Friday, and celebrated Easter with gay abandon. Pentecost came and went. I was convinced that the cycle would be completed, that the circle would be unbroken, that those same old lights would shine on another Christmas and greet once more the ever-new babe who was to bring again for the first time and forever, joy to the world. But it was not to be.

Despite the drought all through the long lazy days of summer, the grass grew as high as a pit bull's eye, and on a recent autumn day, the man was at last inspired to mow the lawn. And he mowed the Christmas decorations right along with it. He mowed them to shreds, together with the weeds, a half-pair of shoes, cigarette cartons, a sofa cushion, two headless dolls, an armless stuffed animal, and numerous other objects that had grown up in the yard during the year.

About as frequently as this family mows the lawn, they take their dog for a walk. Once every other blue moon or so, the man will get a notion to take one—but, oddly, never the other—dog off its chain and walk it around the block. The other day, he and his young daughter came around the side of their house with the lucky dog on a rope.

"You want to go walking?" he called to his wife, who is very pregnant and who was on that afternoon, as on many others, sitting on their front porch having a Mountain Dew and a cigarette.

"Hunh?" she answered.

"We're going to go walking," he said. "You want to go?"

"If I can," she said, laboring to get to her feet.

And off they went, the woman pressing her hands against her back, the child holding the dog's rope and crying, from the excitement no doubt, and the man reaching down and yanking the rope every few steps, yelling at the dog alternately to "Come on!" or "Slow down!"

Not having gotten very far, they all stopped. There was a conference. Somebody needed to go back and get the wife's cigarettes she'd left on the porch. As she was too pregnant and the child was too young to dash back to the house, the man was elected to go. But he was also the only one considered able to manage the dog. The crying child, however, didn't want him to take the dog back with him. So the man told the dog to "Lay down!" and "Stay!" And then, for good measure, he kicked him.

Now this is the first time that I have ever seen somebody actually kick a dog, I mean really haul off and kick one. This was the kind of kick that you see in a movie where there is a representative from the ASPCA standing there to oversee the choreography of the scene so that the dog does not get hurt. It looks real, it looks painful, it looks violent, but you know that everybody is faking it.

This is not Hollywood, but fortunately it was a perfect take, and once was enough. The dog "stayed" while the man went back, retrieved the cigarettes, and returned to the bosom of his family. The group then continued in grim procession down the sidewalk, the dog slinking, the child crying, the man threatening, the wife smoking. They live next door, sure. But I would swear they fell out of a painting by Hieronymus Bosch.

The nicest, best maintained, and quietest house on the street is a halfway house. It's owned by one of those mega-churches. There are always two or three women living there. A van comes on Wednesdays and Sundays and takes them to church. Food is dropped off frequently. A yard crew appears regularly. And a maintenance guy was just by to change the furnace filter. It all seems to operate very smoothly.

I met the pastor who re-habbed the house. It is his particular ministry, within this giant church, to obtain and refurbish old houses—providing work and training to those his ministry serves—and then to make those homes available for those the church is sheltering.

The pastor has a special interest in this area, he said, because his mother used to live here. Someone broke into her house and killed her.

Consider this gargantuan example of arrogance: When I chose this house, in this neighborhood, I truly believed that my presence would improve the area. The place suited me, yes, and there were objective reasons for my decision to live here. But this incredibly egotistical presumption was definitely a part of that decision. I thought that simply by placing myself here and living the way I live, that I could positively influence the neighborhood.

What's happened, of course, is that rather than elevate my surroundings, I have instead sunk to the lower socioeconomic class or echelon of society or what have you of my neighbors. Having lost my job, I've in fact sunk below them, as mine is now the only household without an employed person in it. There may be a dozen people living in or affiliated with any one of the neighboring houses who, like me, are without a job and collecting unemployment, but usually at least one person in the house is working. Not so here.

Most of my neighbors are renters, not owners. I am an owner, which is another way that I lord it over them in my mind, or used to before I lost my job, and before I went to the bank last week.

I had gone to deposit my first unemployment check. I went to the drive-through, as it would've been too humiliating to take the check inside and be face to face with the teller. And I wonder if the teller would've asked me the question he did if I had been right in front of him instead of out in my truck.

"Thank you, sir. And, sir, do you happen to own your home?"

"Why do you ask," I responded. I was insulted, because, one, it was none of his business and, two, if he knew his business he would've known, that, no, I did not own my home—the bank he was standing in did. I had my mortgage with them.

He continued, "Well, we just happen to be offering homeowners a line of credit against the equity they have in their home at an interest rate of —"

"No thank you," I said, and drove away.

I was furious. I had just been converted from a valued customer into a lump of chum and invited to throw myself overboard into the shark-filled waters of a subprime loan.

"We just happen to be offering a line of credit," my eye. You're *always* offering a line of credit. You're a *bank*. That's what you *do*.

You just happened to mention it today because when you saw that unemployment check you smelled blood.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 38]

OBEYING STONES

Charles Ghigna

The earth accepts what rock must give in rain.
There is no law for this. It was before
the matriarch worshipped the sun,

before the patriarch hid inside the moon,
before we carved a cradle from the tree
and sent it rocking to the stars.

We now sow our forests into straighter rows,
measure each new seedling's worth with care
as though it grows for us and not itself.

We build stone walls around each countryside
and weigh each field with tombs to mark our past,
then pause to watch the season's final hare

spring from her yellow hutch to cross our path,
till somewhere just beyond our sight she stops,
turns to us, then runs the other way.

Her colors hint of every sign for snow,
that piece of fur from which we cut our cloth.
But we must search beyond the field for what we need

to where the mountains point above the coming clouds,
to the vast gray slate of birdless sky
where we will mark our future in the stone.

.....

Charles Ghigna has written hundreds of poems and scores of children's books from his
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ACT WITHOUT WORDS II

Mixed Media on Paper

*The late Charles H. Winecoff was an artist and architect based in New York City. The last 20+ years of his life were dedicated to his art.
<https://fineartamerica.com/profiles/charles-winecoff> - [https://charles winecoff prortfolio.blogspot.com](https://charleswinecoffprortfolio.blogspot.com)*

AFTER READING “I ONCE WAS LOST” BY JEFF HARDIN

Bill Brown

“I lose the thread / of what I’m looking for / as soon as I begin.”

Usually I’m in the closet

and a thread hanging

from an old work shirt,

I haven’t worn in years,

asks me why it’s still here.

The stain on the sleeve

says coffee, red wine,

but, no, blood—thorns

from a branch on Roan Mt.,

Appalachian Trail. I rubbed

the cut with alcohol, but

forgot the band aid,

because I couldn’t take

my eyes from a ridge

covered with gold finches

feeding on thistle, then

bright indigo from a bunting

darted into laurel—

my breath caught in my chest

which suddenly remembers

why I keep this shirt.

*Bill Brown’s book, *The Headless Angel*, has one poem first published in *Birmingham Arts Journal*. Brown’s new writing project: reading poet friends’ books and choosing quotes that he could jump from with poems as “sort of” tributes to their work.*

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SHAYNA

Miriam Ruth Black

Winner, 1st Place, literary fiction, Hackney Literary Awards

May 1919, Obodivka, Ukraine

A cloud of black smoke rose from the outskirts of Obodivka, a kilometer or two south of her home. It billowed like a black curtain in the sky as it moved closer. Would they come all the way into the shtetl?

The Rabbi hollered at her as he ran, “Come. They’ll be here soon.”

“Go tell the others I’m coming.” But she didn’t leave. She went back into her small house, and with a knife picked an opening in the hem of her skirt. She folded the paper tickets her older brother had sent from New York, eased them through the hole, then wrapped coins she’d earned sewing into a handkerchief and maneuvered that into another slit in the hem.

Shayna packed bread and cheese in a canvas bag. She added the only pictures she had of Papa and Mamme and her sister Perl’s family. She dipped a small cloth into the water bucket, wet a heavy shawl as well and ran to the shed where Papa had kept the horse and wagon. The horse sold months ago, the wagon still parked where Papa left it the day he was murdered. Shayna hoped she hadn’t grown too tall to fit into the heavy tin box hidden in the shadows. Papa made it for her only a few years before when they then feared the invading Germans.

Was it the Bolsheviks now? The White Russians, or maybe the Ukrainian Army? Drunken peasants? It didn’t matter. Nowhere to run. Since the Great War, no place was safe. She read the newspapers from Kiev but couldn’t track the turbulent politics. Even after the Bolshevik revolution, when the official Pale ended and Jews could live anywhere in Russia, the riots, rapes, and murders continued. Shayna heard about the pogrom in Khardorkov from her cousin who had escaped. The Cossacks chased them with horses, shot them like rabbits.

The sky to the south glowed as she ducked into the shed. She tried not to think of her sister Perl and her family who lived in that direction.

“Where are you? Run,” she heard her neighbor shriek just as Shayna crouched into the box and pulled the cover over her head. “We’re hiding in the basement of the synagogue,” someone yelled. She twisted and turned to find comfort and still see through one of the tiny air holes, hoping to see something, anything.

The lingering smell of their horse, long gone, drifted around her. Shayna tried to erase the images imprinted on her mind. Mamme thrown to the ground by a burly Cossack. Blood on Papa’s chest. No warning. She’d gone to the market for a minute. Maybe army deserters. No one recognized their uniforms. Drunk. They stole what they could and rode away.

Here, now hidden in the tin box in Papa’s shed, she could almost smell his pipe tobacco. It was as if his spirit filled the dark box. Her hand felt warm as if he held it. “You will survive,” she heard his soft voice. Shayna wiped the tears from her cheeks and clenched her body against more tears.

How long had she been in the box? An hour? Two? Three? Her stomach grumbled but she saved the food, put her fist in her mouth and sucked. Her legs tingled as she adjusted them higher in the box landing her back against the bottom. She could hear the goat in her pen across the yard. Bahahahah. Bleats loud in the silence. Another few hours, it would be dark.

She knew the raiders by now would be drunk on blood and on any liquor they'd found. They would have loaded the wagons with everything they could steal and probably had left Obodivka. Shayna knew they were superstitious. Afraid to be on the road at night. Afraid of devils, witches, vampires.

A rumbling sound grew louder. The ground quaked beneath the box. Horses. Ten? Twenty? Gunshots. Shayna tried to recognize voices, but heard only noise and rough shouting in Ukrainian, "You can't hide. All Jews outside. Now." Laughter, the neighing of horses. More gunshots. Shayna coughed into the wet cloth. Not enough air holes. Not enough air. Not enough room for air.

The door to the shed creaked open. "A wagon," she heard a man's voice, "and a saddle." Through the air hole she saw a dark shirt, gray pants, and a saber hanging from a belt. No face. Only a voice. "In here, help me." More voices and then the sound of wagon wheels against the dirt floor and the grunts of men as they pulled it out. Shadows covered the corner where she hid, but she had no illusions about her fate should they find her.

"Please God, who has forsaken us, save me," Shayna believed prayer was useless. Still, after seventeen years, the entire span of her life, the habit of prayer was a comfort. She covered her ears to extinguish the sound of laughter and wailing. Fire crackled close now and then she heard horses on the road again. The box shuddered. From the street came high pitched howling like wounded animals. And then voices in Yiddish. They must be gone.

Shayna's hands shook as she gathered her strength and heaved. Her legs quivered as she unfolded herself and stepped out into the smoke-filled shed. Acrid fumes snuck into her lungs. She crouched down, crawled out the door. Her goat was gone. Flames flickered in the ashes. Nothing remained of her tiny home.

She listened as people came out from wherever they hid, scream as they found husbands and sons shot in the street. How many dead? Who? Where the synagogue had stood, she saw smoke. What happened to her neighbors?

Shayna turned away from the sobs and the charred remains of her home. She didn't bother to look through the rubble. Instead, her legs still shaky, she moved toward the outskirts of the shtetl, to her sister Perl.

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The novel Shayna grew from Miriam Ruth Black's short story entitled, "Prayer to a Feckless God," published in 2016. Her previous novel, Turtle Season, won the First Place award for Literary Fiction from the Midwest Independent Publishers Association in 2013. She lives and writes in Tucson, Arizona.
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DE RERUM NATURA

Jane Craven

In early spring, in the suburb where I live, swans
 build massive nests on a paved greenway circling
 a man-made lake. They regularly threaten

passersby, mostly young mothers pushing strollers,
 with long hisses from their black beaks,
 or, if seriously perturbed, will rise up breast first

and hoist their giant wings like broken umbrellas
 over their eggs or cygnets. Grey riprap lines the shore
 and there is a small dock where teenagers drop

their legs over the edge and stare across the water
 into the future. Some mornings a great blue heron
 juts motionless as a fence post

from the dark bay at the lake's far end,
 or a small green heron plucks its way along the shallows
 to feed on minnows and snails.

Yellow wrens cling upside down to reeds, cattail spikes
 explode in clouds, glide
 onto the lake's surface in flaxen clumps.

In winter, neighbors string small boats with colored lights
and set them adrift, their children
at the oars, as they watch from shore, drinks

in hand, wood smoke in the air. Each evening we walk the loop
once or twice, point to the brightest object
in the sky and ask, *planet or star?* I can't say

if it's loss that moves me to now think of my own parents.
I have no memory of them walking
side by side as I do here with you.

In planetlight, starlight, we round the lake's willowed curve,
and I can only imagine my mother
telling us, in her throaty drawl, how one

heavenly body differs from another. Then, my father,
with uncharacteristic calm, would say, *listen—*
to your mother.

.....

Jane Craven earned her MFA in Poetry from North Carolina State University. She was awarded the Vern Rutsala Poetry Prize for her collection, My Bright Last Country.
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INK / MUD

Laura Schwartz

Winner, 2nd place National Story, the Hackney Literary Awards

“You’re like a pair of magnets these days,” our mother said. “You’ve haven’t stuck so close together since you were little girls.”

Our gravity labeled like leftovers in the freezer, Nicole set her jaw and scooted to the other end of the couch. Where we had been leaning on instinct towards warmth and comfort, now we were watching ourselves lean and were embarrassed, as you are when you’re a teenager and you don’t really know what you’re supposed to defend about yourself and what you’re supposed to change for others.

The magnolias suffocated us all that summer. The pungent humidity bullied Nicole and me inside the house, in chilled stasis after our high school graduation. I’d look up from my phone and find her next to me on the couch, unsure who had come in from the other room, who had moved towards who. We were consumed by the looming bifurcation of our shared life into two separate ones, me to an in-state arts school, her to a lauded university for mechanical engineering, four hours north on the highway. It was impossible to talk about; the emotions were too big to get out of our mouths.

People liked to see twins together, names and outfits in sync – Nicole and Katherine, Nikki and Kitty – and classified us out loud to their children and friends. You get used to being looked at as something special. Whenever our parents took us out separately, on excursions recommended by psychologists to encourage us to develop as individuals, I felt uninteresting, reduced. But Nicole hated being part of a set. No matter how much she loved me and I loved her, I couldn’t change that. She constructed a firm boundary around her, one I had to knock on to enter, one where permission was not always granted. At least in high school, even if we rarely spoke on schoolgrounds, she was nearby, her orbit tugging at mine.

Freshman year at college was like re-learning to walk after the loss of a limb. Autumn settled into a belligerent winter. My incessant texts to my sister went unanswered for days. She’d mention weekend plans or new friends, and I’d pretend I was busy too. If my roommate was out, I escaped to the library or the art studio or a party. Anyone’s party. When I was by myself, I wound down, my clockwork actions growing slower and slower until I could only stare into space. But by the time the campus belly-flopped into spring, I managed to reach a wobbly equilibrium. I was beginning to see myself as my own center of gravity when, in the final heat-swollen days of the semester, Nicole appeared unannounced at the tattoo parlor where I worked part-time. Thrilled, bewildered, I was simultaneously reset and off-kilter.

“Hey Bonnie,” she said.

It was never, “Hey Kitty.”

“Hey Clyde,” I replied.

Boots on the floor I’d just mopped, she gazed around with her hands on her hips, a tougher version of me. “You set on this?”

“Yeah, think so. How long are you staying for?”

“How long does it take to get a tattoo?”

“Really? I mean, like, fifteen minutes if it’s small. And I’ve only done small stuff so far. Music notes, simple words, you know.”

We decided on a flower, a minimalist magnolia, for the back of her shoulder. Hair pulled to the side, bra strap slung down, she lay on the bed, patient with my painstaking needlework. My heart was close to

bursting. The distance that had sprung up between us over the last year contracted. I was stitching it closed; she'd asked me to. The slow upturn of her lips above the finished tattoo in the mirror was everything.

"I dropped out," she said without preamble.

"Are you serious?"

"Got a flight to New Mexico that leaves in a few hours. There's this ashram in Santa Fe and whenever the spiritual mother visits, it rains – like, droughts *end* – so I feel like she'll really be able to help me find my center. I mean, an engineering degree? It's so fixated on the tangible and temporary. And Mom and Dad expect *way* too much from it, y'know? They're so disconnected from this potential humanity that—"

"You're just going to leave?" My voice scraped and broke, cold panic rising in my throat.

She shrugged and pointed to the bandage hiding the fresh magnolia. "This way, you'll be coming with me."

It clicked then, the cock of a gun against my head, that that warm, wordless place we'd inhabited up until last summer had been sealed off and contained. She had no intention of letting me past her barriers again. All I could do was paint murals on her walls.

Nicole's vanishing act was a bombed-out crater at family gatherings. But she didn't legally qualify as a missing person, to our parents' chagrin and sorrow. No law against aloof adult children. Their desperation for Nicole cast a cool glaze over my accomplishments, my graduation, my salary. One wasn't enough when they'd counted on two. They suspected I knew the reason she'd evaporated, and while this distrust was irritating, the regular reminder that I *didn't* know why Nicole stayed away was agony.

It wounded them, but I began keeping my distance too. I moved to Los Angeles, made excuses not to visit, procrastinated replying to their messages and calls. I pieced together and fortified walls of my own. Though the shoddy craftsmanship crumbled whenever she materialized, a combination of memory and prophecy, my face but thinner, drumming her fingernails on the tattoo parlor's glass door.

It was dark out. I'd only just flipped the Open to Closed. Nicole never appeared during working hours and to be honest, I didn't really want her to. I didn't want to explain her to my coworkers, one of whom was my boyfriend. I wasn't sure I could put into words what we did.

"Hey Scylla," she said, slipping in, bell tinkling above us.

"Hey Charybdis," I replied after a long pause I covered up with two twists of the latch.

Last time it was George. Before that, Luigi. Before that, Bert. And I'd had to figure out that I was Fred, Mario, Ernie. If I didn't get it right, she didn't stay, even when I begged. She also didn't stay if I asked too many questions about where she'd been or what she'd been doing, which city, whose bed. Or if I brought up how worried our parents were. She'd dropped the guru a few years prior and had drifted off the grid since. I hesitated to accept invitations to go out of town, worried I'd be absent when she reappeared. My reflection in a window or store mirror stopped me mid-step; I'd have to confirm that it was really me. Because once in a while, it wasn't.

She dumped her ragged shoulder bag on the parlor's couch. I looked her over, critical of her health, pleased and relieved she hadn't picked up any tattoos in the interval. My art alone divided our images further, line by line, shade by shade. It was difficult not to feel possessive. Nicole was my canvas, a gallery featuring the two of us and carrying us both through the world. She'd cuddle up to me under the needle, head on my lap as I drew the tiny crescent moon behind her ear. The full-color mandala at the base of her spine. The short stack of favorite novels on the back of her left calf (*The Odyssey*, *Harry Potter*, *Anna Karenina*). Swooping under her right breast was the delicate sprig of cherry blossoms dripping with a beaded necklace. The word *Happiness* above her anklebone, *Adventure* on her hip, *Faith* around her ring finger. While all the

designs were hers or mine, my favorite was the minimalist cat on the inside of her forearm. With an oily measure of guilt, I considered it my signature.

"Still none of your own?" She asked, shrugging off her jacket.

A huffed laugh from her when I shook my head. I didn't even have my ears pierced, which was remarkable in my circle. When all your colleagues and friends were riddled with holes and glittering with metal and coated in layers of paint, being completely unmarked became its own statement. Well, not completely unmarked. Age had started to leave its own lines and shading on my body. Time, the Greatest Tattooist. With the amount of ink in her skin, Nicole appeared more at home in my life than I did, like she could step in and take over at any time, the final draft to my rough sketch.

I traced the paisley petals of a lotus onto her wrist with my needle, her pulse bouncing beneath my fingertips. The skin glowed pink, the same shade of sunburn we both got in summer. She could have been sitting in the chair for this one, but she always chose to curl up on the bed, a child waiting to be tucked in, talking to stave off sleep.

"The lotus is such a big deal in Buddhism and Hinduism because it symbolizes purity of the mind, body and spirit even while being rooted in mud," she was saying. "The flower is at the top of a long stalk, all fresh and clean above the murky waters of attachment and desire. It just captures everything, you know?"

But the flowers couldn't exist without the muck, I nearly said, and the flowers died off while the muck remained, so what did that say about attaining purity?

Finished, I switched off the machine and disposed of the needle into a biohazard container. The absence of the buzzing was its own sound. Nicole examined her wrist with a satisfied smile I began to mirror.

"I want to give you a tattoo," she said.

My smile faltered and flattened.

"What? Why?"

"Can I?"

"You don't know how to use the machine."

"I've watched you enough. I'm the engineer, remember?"

"Oh, did you finish your degree finally?"

"You don't need to be bitchy."

"You're not an artist either."

"Yeah, but I've watched you enough."

The quiet of the shop was invaded by the noise of pedestrians, cars, music from upstairs. I hesitated, studying the tattoo machine as though I'd never seen it before.

"I don't know, Nic."

"Come on," she pleaded. "You've given me so many. I feel like I've left, like, no mark on your life."

"That's not true."

But I wondered, balancing the visible against the invisible. My wormy feelings of ownership over her against her sudden, uncharacteristic neediness. Did I, somehow, owe my sister this? I was suddenly very aware of my skin, the stretch of it over my muscles, how it held all of me in. It was the price of entry to her border. At long last, she had come to the gates to offer me a visa. A permanent visa.

"What kind of tattoo?" I asked, tongue dragging in my mouth.

She sat forward, a volt of energy and another smile. "Trust me!"

"It has to be small."

"It will be."

“And somewhere out of the way.”

“Like behind your ear?”

“I’m not letting you near my skull with a needle you’ve never used. You can do something – something *small* – below my ankle.”

Nicole squealed. My heartbeat kicked in my throat as I sterilized the equipment in the autoclave, opened a new needle, prepared fresh ink. Instructions tumbled out of me. She hunched over the sheet of tracing paper, staring intensely as she made her blueprint.

“No peeking,” she teased.

I disinfected my ankle and handed her a pair of latex gloves, my own hands shaking. I switched the machine back on and the familiar noise sawed the air like a threat.

Don’t do this, I nearly said. But she kissed me on my forehead. I lay down, stomach curdling, blinded by the ceiling lights. The tracing paper was pressed into my cold skin, depositing the stencil of her drawing.

A breath.

The buzzing bit into me, a stinging path, the unevenness of which I could feel. After a painful zigzag, she lifted the pen. When she descended to begin a different section, she dug in far too hard and fast. I screamed. The needle jerked towards my anklebone. Blood beaded along the line of ink.

“I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry!” she cried.

I curled into a ball, clutching my throbbing ankle. It was impossible to look at her, though I knew I’d be welcomed into the full, raw blaze of her if I did. Her disappointment and distress smoldered, a thrashing heat I could finally feel, her walls leveled.

“Can I keep going?”

“I—” My cheeks burned. I swallowed hard.

“Kitty?”

Eyes squeezed shut, I heard the door jangle as she left.

I don’t know how long I lay in the unmoving quiet before I plucked up the courage to unstick my palm. I winced as it peeled away wet. Carved into me was a wobbly *N* in thin, black ink and then the jagged slash of an *I*. The rest of her name was only in the innocuous blue of the stencil. Tears poured out of me, clogging my nose. I gingerly cleaned the area but stopped before putting the bandage on.

Some mistakes remained, raw, yours, hidden just below the skin, but all tattoo artists knew tricks to weave a broken heart into something prettier, to paint over someone else’s imprint on you, to correct stains and bad ink. I carved into myself for the next five hours, the world nothing but black lines, careful colors and the buzzing lullaby of the needle. I conjured a girl with closed eyes and a dreamy smile, her torso dissolving into a cluster of magnolias and lotuses. And orchids and chrysanthemums and daisies, too, why not? It was my bouquet to scatter over the memorial to my sister. I was quite proud of how recognizable the face turned out. Though if anyone asked, I would tell them it was me.

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Laura grew up in Tokyo, Singapore and New Jersey before majoring in Japanese Studies at Bard College, New York. Her fiction and non-fiction writing has appeared in a range of publications, including The Wall Street Journal and Ohio State’s The Journal. A voracious traveller, Laura has visited over 30 countries.

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THE BOYHOOD TRAIL

John Grey

The trail never changes,
still snakes between
highbush blueberry and rock,
climbs hills, crosses fields,
returns to where it begins.

Viburnum mist cloaks the way ahead
but the crunch of my footsteps
on last year's leaves
is all the navigation I need.

On each side, firs compete with oaks
to see who can block the most sun.
For a time at least, the deciduous triumph
over the tall green lords of winter.

I find the pond where I once scooped up tadpoles,
run my fingers down the deep furrowed bark of white ash,
listen to the caw of the unwelcoming crows
and the piping curiosity of chickadees.
All is as before.
A forest is memory outside the head.

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John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in Sin Fronteras, Dalhousie Review and Qwerty with work upcoming in BlueLine, Willard and Maple and Red Coyote.
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You see, it was also an inclination toward conservation that led me to choose this house in this place and to live here the way I do. I did not want to get in over my head. I wanted to live within my means. I wanted to abide by the Thoreauvian maxim that says we are rich in proportion to the number of things we can do without.

In our culture of exploding materialism, I increasingly, some might say, perversely, lean toward the smaller, the older, the shabbier. But that too has backfired—since I've given up wanting to *have* better, I seem to have given up wanting to *do* better.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

It was DeVante. There was no sign of Taja.

"Hey mister, I wish you had some cookies or maybe some pizza that you'd give me," he said when I opened the door.

"Sorry," I said.

"Our friends called. They're going to pick us up over at Bryan's."

DeVante handed me the phone, and he left.

I tried to leave this place once, for somewhere else, with someone else, but I couldn't do it. For better or—more likely—for worse, I am wedded to this house and a life of solitude. The qualities that make me fit to live here, make me unfit to live anywhere else.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

It was DeVante again. A couple of hours had gone by.

"Can I use the phone?" He now had the crumpled piece of paper with the number on it.

He pushed the buttons on the phone.

"Are you coming?" he said into the phone.

I heard, "If you'd like to make a call, hang up and dial again."

DeVante said to me, "He says to wait inside with you."

"Let me dial the number for you," I said.

This time DeVante reached someone.

"When are you going to get us?" he said.

Then, "DeVante."

Then, "Okay."

Apparently finished with it, he handed the phone back to me.

"Are they on their way?" I asked. At this point I was as committed to the zoo idea as the children were.

"What did they say?"

You see, it was also an inclination toward conservation that led me to choose this house in this place and to live here the way I do. I did not want to get in over my head. I wanted to live within my means. I

wanted to abide by the Thoreauvian maxim that says we are rich in proportion to the number of things we can do without.

In our culture of exploding materialism, I increasingly, some might say, perversely, lean toward the smaller, the older, the shabbier. But that too has backfired—since I've given up wanting to *have* better, I seem to have given up wanting to *do* better.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

It was DeVante. There was no sign of Taja.

"Hey mister, I wish you had some cookies or maybe some pizza that you'd give me," he said when I opened the door.

"Sorry," I said.

"Our friends called. They're going to pick us up over at Bryan's."

DeVante handed me the phone, and he left.

I tried to leave this place once, for somewhere else, with someone else, but I couldn't do it. For better or—more likely—for worse, I am wedded to this house and a life of solitude. The qualities that make me fit to live here, make me unfit to live anywhere else.

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"Let me dial the number for you," I said.

This time DeVante reached someone.

"When are you going to get us?" he said.

Then, "DeVante."

Then, "Okay."

"He asked her 'Do you know who is Taja and DeVante's mama,'" DeVante said inscrutably.

I dialed the number again and instructed DeVante.

"Say, 'Hello, this is DeVante. I'm calling to find out when you are picking Taja and me up to go to the zoo.'"

A not-very-close approximation of that statement was made. But the response, whatever it was, seemed to satisfy DeVante. He handed me the phone and hopped, feet together, down the steps.

"Where are you going," I said. I don't know why.

"To Bryan's house. Our friends are going to pick us up at Bryan's house. They're going to take us to the zoo."

At this point I was about to give up and take the children to the zoo myself. I half suspected that they'd been told they were going to the zoo just to keep them quiet for a while. The best-case scenario was that the zoo offer was sincere, but the parental obligation to actually arrange for the outing had not been fulfilled.

But they were out of my hair and off my porch, so it was no concern of mine.

Later I noticed the boyfriend's car was gone. Then I saw Taja and DeVante and their mother get into her car and drive away. Sometime after that a woman drove up with a carload of children. She sat in the car and honked the horn several times. Then she got out and went all the way around their house, knocking at the doors, the front and the back.

Sometimes I can't believe that I chose to stay here, and I'll wish that I had moved to a nice place, a place where there is a little more effort to conceal the vulgarity of human life. A place where new crops of used condoms and broken liquor bottles don't spring up in the front yard overnight, every night. A place where people shut themselves and their children, their fights and their lust, their excesses and their emptiness away out of sight, behind doors not falling off hinges in houses without broken windows. A place where other people's lives that you don't understand and don't want to understand don't intrude on yours.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

So, yeah, sometimes I wish I lived somewhere else.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

But, you know, for all that I thought that I would be saving this neighborhood by moving into it . . .

Knock. Knock. Knock.

. . . it is, in fact, the neighborhood that is saving me.

Because every time I put the gun to my head, the blade to my wrist, or the pills in the palm of my hand, I am interrupted.

I am interrupted by a police car's siren,
a father shouting a warning to his kid to keep its ass in the yard,
a stereo thump-thumping in a car creeping menacingly down the street,
a smoker coughing his lungs up and spitting them off his front porch,
a woman hysterically confronting the man who molested her child,
the clatter of a beer can hitting the sidewalk,
the snarling of junkyard dogs running amok,
or a knock at my door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I opened the door.

"Mama took us to the zoo!"

"We went to the zoo!"

"Our friends came and got us, but we were gone!"

"We were gone to the zoo!"

DeVante and Taja were shouting over each other in their excitement.

"I liked the lion best," said Taja.

"I liked the elephant," DeVante countered.

"There was a snake," Taja shuddered. "A big snake that could swallow a whole person."

"The giraffe was the scariest," said DeVante.

"We've got to go now," Taja said.

"Yeah," said DeVante. "We're going to the zoo."

"What?" I said. "You just came from the zoo."

"We're going again," explained Taja.

"We're going back," DeVante said, "with our friends."

"We're going to the zoo with our friends," Taja said. "Bye." And she skipped down the steps.

"They're going to pick us up at Bryan's," called DeVante as he jumped off the porch and ran to catch up with his sister.

For a couple of days, I hadn't seen but one dog chained up in the neighbors' back yard. I'd heard a big ruckus one night. A roving pack of

neighborhood strays had rolled in, and it sounded like there was quite a set-to between them and the resident dogs. I assumed that the now-missing dog (the dog-walking dog) had been killed. Puppies and kittens were born and died next door with some regularity and without apparent ceremony, so for this dog to just disappear was not particularly remarkable. I was surprised, then, to see the wife and the little girl lead that very dog out of the house this afternoon and take it for a walk.

"We brought him in," the wife said. "Some dogs came in the yard and tore him up. I decided to bring him in the house. He's getting old, and the weather's getting cold, too. I decided to bring him in."

Knock. Knock. Knock.

It wasn't the kids.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

It was three o'clock in the morning.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I had been asleep, for once. On the floor next to the bed, my dog snored.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I got up and went to the door. What else could I do?

When I turned on the porch light, I could see a man, about my height, about my age, smoking a cigarette. My brand.

"Yes?" I said, moving quickly to the side and out of his view.

The man stepped back and squinted through the glass, trying to get a look at me.

"Let me in," he said.

I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. What was the suitable response in this situation?

"I don't mean any trouble," he said, "I just want to talk to you for a minute."

"Is there an emergency?" I asked.

"No. No. Nothing like that. I just want to talk to you," he said. "Let me in."

My dog wandered groggily into the room, lay down by the door, and instantly went back to sleep.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

It was three o'clock in the morning. There was a man I didn't know at my front door. He wanted me to let him in—so he could talk to me for a minute?

It was one thing for DeVante to try to weasel his way into my house—in the daytime—to see what groceries I might have on hand. But what kind of a stranger knocks on your door in the middle of the night—to talk?

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"I don't mean any trouble," the man said again in a level, deliberate voice, as if reserving the right to change his mind.

I suppose I should have been alarmed, but mostly I was indignant. Was this one of my neighbors? Maybe I am a snob, because all I could think was that civilized people didn't pull stunts like this.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Can I just talk with you for a minute?" he asked again.

"About what?" I answered stupidly, out of curiosity more than anything.

There was a pause. I heard him sigh.

"A couple of bright spots," he said. "That's all it was."

Now it was my turn to peer through the glass. I took a harder look at the man.

Groaning, I turned and slumped against the door. It wasn't a stranger after all. Not by a long shot.

"Maybe." I said.

"Don't be naive," the man said. "You're ignoring the big picture."

He was right. I had been ignoring the big picture. On purpose. And it had been working.

"Two bright spots, and you think everything's going to change," he said. "Come on. Do the math."

"You can't look at it that way," I argued feebly.

"Oh, right," he sneered. "Let me polish my rose-colored glasses and reconsider."

I slid down the door to the floor, next to my dog.

"It's not worth it," he said. "You know it's not."

I put my hands over my face. "Go away."

"Why stay here where it's miserable all the time?" he said.

"Damn it!" I yelled, jumping to my feet and scaring my dog. "It's not *all* the time."

"*Most* of the time, then." He was getting impatient. "More than half the time."

He finished his cigarette and threw the butt over the porch railing into my yard. "It's a pit. And it's always going to be a pit."

"Not everybody sees it that way," I said, trying to sound calm, for the dog's sake.

There was a low, satisfied laugh from the other side of the door. "You have hit the nail on the head."

Like an idiot, I took the bait. "What?"

"You're absolutely right. Not everybody sees it that way." Then his voice turned harsh. "But *you* do. *You* see it that way. Because you know that's the way it is, and that's the way it's always going to be, even when—like now—you try to pretend that it's not, you pretend that things can change."

He had a point.

"Even if things do get better around here," he went on, "you know they won't get better for you. For other people, sure, but for someone like you? You'll be completely left out. It won't touch you, simply because of *who you are*. You'll never even notice it."

"But the kids went to the zoo," I protested. "And the Bosch family brought their old dog inside. I noticed those things."

"Like I said," he answered with exaggerated patience. "A couple of bright spots. That's all."

"It's a start," I said.

He fired back. "Starting's not the hard part, though, is it?"

I just barely kept myself from punching the door.

"You're great at starting," he said. "I'll give you that."

"Okay," I said angrily. "So?"

"So," he said sardonically, "you can't keep it up. You know you can't. That's the problem."

I stopped and faced him through the door. "I'm not going to listen to this now."

"You don't have the, the . . . call it capital," he said. "A couple of bright spots *could* be a start, yes. But you don't have the wherewithal to sustain it."

"How do you know?" I said. Which was dumb of me. I had a history.

"It's never over, you know. Even if you managed to build something solid, you'd have to maintain it." He searched his pockets for his cigarettes. "I'm telling you the work is never done."

"I know it's never done," I retorted. "That's not the point. The point is to be, to be . . .," I had to search for the right word. "Engaged."

"Sure," he snorted. "You're *engaged*. The sun is shining. Things are humming along." He lit a cigarette.

"But then what happens?"

"Don't," I told him.

"One little cloud—," he said.

"Don't do this," I pleaded.

"—and the whole s---house comes crashing down. Am I right?" he asked. "Isn't that what always happens?" I was back on the floor.

"Do you really think anything's going to change?" he asked.

"Yes!" I shouted. "No! I don't know!" I just wanted him to stop.

"You got carried away," he said. "But you know you'll never belong here."

I wrapped my arms around my dog.

"If you'd only let me in, I could help you." He sounded sincere. Was he? Or was I just worn out.

"No," I said into my dog's fur.

Bam. Bam. Bam.

"Now come on and let me in! This has gone on long enough!" He'd lost his temper.

"No," I repeated. I lifted my head and said it again. "No."

"All right, all right," he said, composing himself. "But just listen to me." He took a long drag on his cigarette. "If you let me in, I think we could work something out."

"What do you mean?" I asked. I couldn't help it. I wanted to hear what he had to say. Consider it. Roll it around in my mind.

"I'd like to make you an offer," he said.

A shudder ran through my body. Something inside of me quietly gave way.

"You've got to be kidding," I said.

"What," he said.

I began to laugh. Big, overwrought laughter. At him. At myself. At the irony.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"I will pay cash for your house! Any condition!" I recited, still laughing.

"Hunh?" he said.

"You know," I answered, wiping tears from my eyes. "Those predatory postcards. They come practically every day in the mail. 'No commission! No closing costs! No hassle!'"

"Sounds like a good deal to me," he said. "Pretty tempting, isn't it?"

I patted my dog and got to my feet.

"Only if I was planning on—," I took a long, deep breath, "moving."

Then I opened the door and stepped out onto the empty porch.

"But I'm not going anywhere," I said, as the sky began to lighten.

.....

Margaret McGinty lives and writes in Greenville, SC. mmcgintymail@gmail.com

MOM WAS A SAINT

Mike Gargis

My mom was a saint. She was a devout Catholic but her kindness to everyone was as much due to her nature as it was nurture. She did have a little ditzy side, as she was honest to a fault. She and my dad reminded us of Edith and Archie Bunker. Here is a story my dad told on her:

They were driving down the road, came to a stop sign and the crossing road had the right of way. He couldn't see around her, so he asked.

"Marie, is there a car coming?"

She looks right. "No."

My dad starts to pull forward.

My mom continued, "But there's a big truck."

Mike Gargis is a fan of Birmingham Arts Journal, Red Clay Diary, and very short stories.

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"You teach me, I forget. You show
me, I remember. You involve me, I
understand."

—E. O. Wilson



IN THE GARDEN

Zoe Radford

8.5" x 11"

Black Sharpie on White 24# Bright White

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

TARGET PRACTICE

James K. Zimmerman

one day we decided
to take the rifle out
and shoot at each
other just to see what
it would feel like

we took turns

I hid safely behind
a rock too big for anyone
to move, didn't think
of Nam or Mosul or
Vegas, arms and legs
blown off, oozing caverns
where eyes should be

I remembered instead
sounds we made as kids

vip vip, we'd say, ack ack
budda budda, or kuh-
shiiwww (if the bullet
happened to ricochet)

but when you shot at me
it was more like you
clapped your hands and
immediately there came
the sound of the period

at the end of a sentence

.....

James K. Zimmerman's writing appears in Pleiades, Chautauqua, American Life in Poetry, Vallum, Nimrod, and The Bellingham Review, among others. He is author of Little Miracles and Family Cookout and is winner of the Jessie Bryce Niles Prize. jkzim@verizon.net



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