Birmingham Arts Journal

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

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FRONT COVER: **TOUCANS AND TURTLES** – 18" x 18" – *Acrylic on Canvas*
Ebeth Scott-Sinclair's drawings and designs reflect a quirky, emotional world of juxtapositions filled with texture and color. In the process of painting or drawing, a piece of art reveals the world from which it came, and stories flow with snippets of dialogue, music, relationships, and emotions. ebeth.scottsinclair@gmail.com

BACK COVER: **OLD MAN MUSING** – 17" x 23" - Mixed Media – Nancy Milford
Nancy Milford is a gardener, baker, artist, and writer, living along Baldwin County Alabama's charming coastline. **gessner8905@yahoo.com**

BEACH STORY

Ben Thompson

I kneeled down beside an old Hawaiian woman with nicotine-stained teeth. As she took a long drag from a hand-rolled cigarette, her cheeks disappeared into two dime-sized sinkholes. I turned my ear towards her wrinkled lips, and she blew a beam of hot smoke deep into my ear canal. The pressure from her breath hit my infected ear drum like a hammer, but I clenched my teeth, held still, and let her finish.

"That should help draw out the water," she leaned back in her chair and flicked her ashes. "Now you gotta lean your head to the side and jump." I tilted the pounding side of my face towards the pavement and jumped out of my flip-flops. For a week I had carried around a piece of the ocean lodged inside my ear right behind the ear drum. A souvenir I acquired while trying to impress a girl wearing a white bikini with green polka dots.

At first, the sloshing sound inside my head nearly drove me to banging my head against a hot rock. But then the pain of infection set in, and I became so desperate for relief that when a yellow-tooth woman said she knew how to fix it, I didn't care if she jabbed the hot end of her cigarette into my ear. I just wanted the pain to stop.

I was twenty-five when I bought a one-way ticket to Hawaii's Big Island. When the plane landed, I found my cell phone charger in the top pocket of my backpack busted into pieces. I flipped open my phone and went through my contact list, writing down the numbers that I wanted to remember. After the phone died, I wrapped it in a Ziploc bag, stuffed it into a sock and buried it deep inside my backpack.

In exchange for my labor, I was offered a free place to stay at a makeshift hostel that offered abandoned Volkswagen vans as rooms for rent. After a few days of fighting off mosquitoes and hauling razor sharp lava rocks across the hostel's three acres, I packed my bag and waited for an opportunity to escape. When the owner drove me down to the beach so I could take my first shower, I quit the job the moment I saw the ocean. From then on, until I left the Island, I lived amongst the loose ranks of Hawaiians, hippies and hobos who never left the beach.

Each morning I rose with sun. Every night, I'd smooth out a place on the sand to sleep. During the daylight hours in between, I might go join the other beach people and listen to their lies. But most of the time I stayed off to myself, working up a sweat in the sunshine over a book and then cooling off in the ocean. When I tired of the scenery and needed a ride, I'd stand by the road with my thumb out. If the first car didn't stop, then usually the second or third one did. Then whoever

picked me up would take me further than they intended to go, just for the sake of Aloha. Hawaii had a way of always leading me to where I needed to go.

Now, contrary to hobo belief, cigarette smoke does not draw water out of an infected ear. The morning that followed our smoky attempt, the entire side of my face was numb. I became worried that if I didn't get real help soon death was imminent. Either by exhaustion or suicide. So, I caught a ride to the closest hospital and five minutes after walking into the emergency room, I was walking out with a written prescription for an antibiotic and a single pain pill bouncing around the bottom of an orange bottle.

Later that afternoon I woke up lying on a picnic table. Dried blood watered down with pus stained the towel I had rolled for a pillow. The pain in my ear was gone, and so was my hearing. Just as the emergency room doctor had promised, my ear drum had ruptured.

I washed the dried crust out of my beard below a stenciled sign reading NON-POTABLE WATER. My mouth was dry, and my water bottle was empty. I had to fight off the desire to drink from the tainted faucet. I walked to the road and caught a ride with a guy who was heading to the other side of the island. I decided then that I needed a vacation. So rather than getting out at the first place where I could refill my bottle, I watched miles of coastline pass before I asked him to drop me at the old Hotel Manago famous for its cheap rooms.

For twenty dollars I got a single room with a shared bath. After my long hot shower was interrupted by a couple of knocks at the door, I went back to my room and sat on the edge of the single bed beside the open window. There was a party going on across the street and I could hear one voice above all the others. I couldn't make out the exact words, but I could tell by his inflection and the laughter of those around him that he was telling one hell of a story. I had a story, but I was alone inside my empty room.

I took out my notebook and stared at the list of contacts I had written down when I arrived. In blue ink there was a new addition. An email address of the girl who wore the white bikini with green polka dots. I walked to the lobby, sat down at the courtesy computer, and sent her a message.

Two years later, she and I were standing barefooted on a beach in Alabama. As the sun went down over the Gulf of Mexico, we were married.

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Ben Thompson is a husband, father, storyteller, writer, and Birmingham firefighter. His work has appeared previously in Birmingham Arts Journal. He and his family live in Pelham, AL. **benthompson11@yahoo.com**

I WILL MEET YOU AGAIN

Anannya Uberoi

through fractals of branches five points
west of North Ave with its old bars and
timeworn birds perched on rootless trees,
racing threads of time that have swiveled
a hundred times, following the burnishes of
your footsteps that
        leak into an unforgiving
        forest of one-way trains,
unto your chest,
my boneyard of tired legs.

I will meet you again when the umbra that
separates our planes is mellowed every
afternoon on the discretion of my chair
against the curtained window, every twilight
when my sleeplessness like a disease,
absorbed by down cotton falls in flicks of
ash on your storm cellar.

I will root a tree in my heart so my barren
branches when laden with cerise may touch
you in gentle ways from afar, our yarns of
existence like
        the loose thread on your
        sweater I pulled and pulled
until you vanished, the undone ribbon in
my hair I chase and chase until it completes in
the palm of your hand.

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Anannya Uberoi is a full-time software engineer and part-time tea connoisseur based in Madrid. Her work has appeared in The Loch Raven Review, LandLocked, Deep Wild Journal, Tipton Poetry Journal, Lapis Lazuli, *and* Marías at Sampaguitas. *She also works as a columnist for* The Remnant Archive.
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LITTLE BIRDIES DO WHAT THEY CAN DO

Jim Reed

An old wood frame home like ours, built in 1906, is an echo chamber. Each movement, each settling, each creaking stair, each dropped fork, is heard throughout the structure. Like a living being, this old house keeps us aware of what's going on both inside and just outside, through sound and vibration.

Tonight, spasmodic fluttering within the downstairs fireplace indicates we have a visitor trapped behind a cast iron shield. I freeze in place, making sure the noise is not imagined. A second flutter is all that's required…and there it is!

"I think we have an unwilling guest in the fireplace…probably dropped down the chimney," I tell Liz. Her brow furrows with concern and she helps me verify the shuffling.

We've done this before. We drift into action. Liz retrieves a small blanket, I find a soft rubber-stoppered reacher we use to retrieve wandering objects.

We brush aside first concerns—fear of a panicked bird flying into our faces, fear that in the process of capture and release we might harm the critter, fear that a freed animal just might hole up someplace obscure and never be found. Things like that.

But, as age and experience kick in, we re-enter reality and know that we simply have to face this challenge and do what we can do.

I groan as I pull back the fireplace covering inch by inch, Liz stands ready with blanket, I clutch the reacher, the theory being that if I can capture the bird long-distance I won't risk hurting it or being pecked.

Another inch and a large totally soot-black bird zooms past us and heads for the suddenly white sky above. Unfortunately, the sky is actually the high ceiling and little birdie bounces from room to room, confused that the heavens now have plaster limits.

Finally, as we follow this displaced creature, our hearts beating as fast as little birdie's, it comes to rest on the kitchen floor just long enough to have a tossed blanket restrict its flight.

Liz gently holds the fluttering body through the blanket, takes it to the front yard next to the bird bath, and releases it to its homeland—the great urban outdoors.

"The bird didn't move, but maybe it just needs to rest," Liz says. We grin at each other, concerned about the future of little birdie, relieved that we can go to bed knowing that we at least tried.

Next morning, Liz reports the bird has disappeared, so we try to imagine its birdly existence has been guaranteed.

I drive to work, and a tune plays itself in my head:

"Little birdie, why you worry like you do?
Don't you worry, you just do what you can do."

It's a love song by Vince Guaraldi, about a small yellow un-blackened bird named Woodstock. When trouble arises, don't panic, just do what you can do, he seems to say.

Bye-bye, blackened bird.

You and Liz and I survived the evening.

We three just do what we can do

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Jim Reed is editor of Birmingham Arts Journal and a rare bookseller in Birmingham, AL
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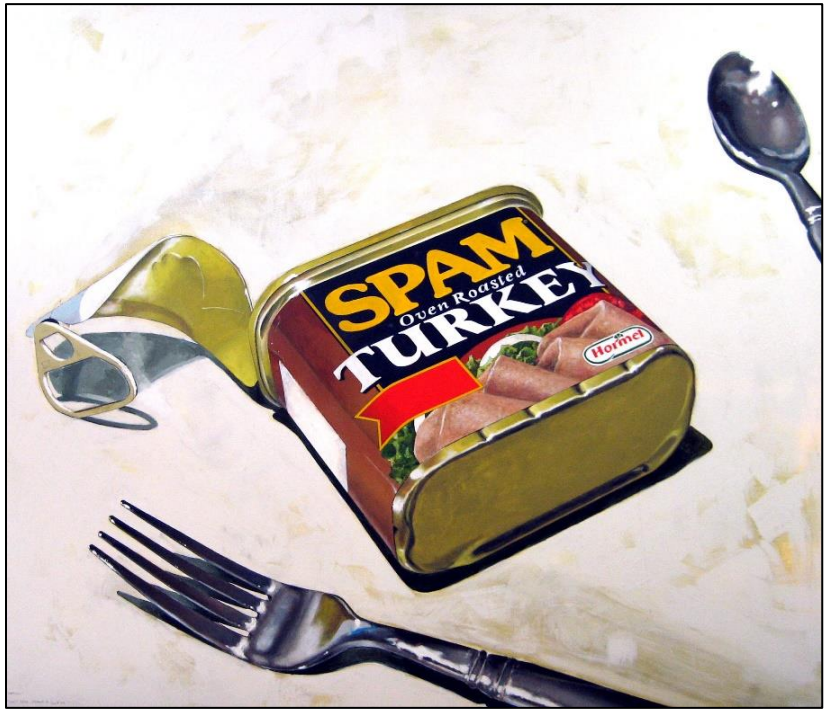
"Life has taught me the world is NOT full of idiots, but they are strategically placed so that you come across one every day."

—Argus Hamilton

THE INVENTION OF THE KETCHUP DISPENSER

Science Newsletter May 3, 1947

"Ketchup Dispenser, for Table Use, applies the Tomato Sauce in the Quantities desired By Use of a Plastic Pump That Fits on Any Popular Brand Ketchup Bottle. Thumb Pressure on the Head of the dispenser operates a piston that forces the ketchup up a central tube and out a nozzle on the side."



SPAM

Shawn Huckins
Acrylic & Enamel on Canvas
41" x 46"

Shawn A. Huckins received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Studio Art from Keene State College, NH. He currently lives in CT working for a firm fabricating architectural models. His most recent exhibition was on display at the Viridian Artists Contemporary Art Gallery 19th National and International Exhibition in New York City.
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ZOOM, ZOOM, ZOOM

Nancy Milford

"We are in this together" and ZOOM is in it with us. Zachary Zoom forcefully entered my life as abruptly as Covid-19 appeared. My college classes went "on-line," and working from home was my only employment option. Suddenly, I found myself researching home wireless hot spots, and my employer demanded "accountability." School, work, and church all issued ultimatums: befriend Zachary, or you'll have no school, work, church, friends! Like a possum staring into the headlamp of an on-coming semi-truck, I was stunned.

Lacking options, I attempted my first meet with Zachary. He whispered, "Do I have permission to change your device? My breath caught.

Zooming with Zachary was like a regretful blind date. Conversations were awkward, lacked social cues, and had an eccentric cadence. I couldn't focus my eyes appropriately and kept interrupting him. I prayed for the date's end and that Zachary would soon be out of my life.

Instead, he introduced me to my co-worker's pets and gave me a peek into others' home environments. I wasn't sure if the experience was intended to be pleasurable, or just creepy?

ZOOM, ZOOM, ZOOM! Another 18 months of Zachary; I will either be completely Zoomaphobic or will find myself snuggled in his arms watching another re-run of the Great British Bake-off!

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Nancy Milford is a gardener, baker, artist, and writer, living along Baldwin County Alabama's charming coastline. **gessner8905@yahoo.com**

BEFORE

Rosemary McMahan

Before we cast aside the morning's blankets,
untangle our limbs or touch bare feet
to the floor—
before you part your lips for "good morning"
or clear the sleep from your throat
to hum a silly wake up song—
there's something you should know.
I greet waking
like a blind woman walking down
an unfamiliar hall or like
a cat uncurling from a box
in a foreign alley. Morning words
are sticks and stones.
Before you speak,
give me a quilt of silence,
strong coffee in an earthen mug,
a rocking chair by a sky-filled window
until I unfold myself
from the night.

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Rosemary McMahan is the recipient of two first place and one second place awards in the Hackney Literary Awards competition for poetry. Over the past two decades, as an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), she has written more sermons than poetry but is now returning to her first passion.
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AN INDEPENDENCE DAY TO REMEMBER

Joey McClure

The Fourth of July 1957 was the first Independence Day I can remember; just as it is the one I'll never forget. I had turned five years old that past April, so I really didn't understand just what Independence Day was. But I knew what fireworks were and I knew what homemade ice cream was and I always loved seeing all my cousins, so I was rather excited.

As was usual on holidays or long weekends, all of my daddy's family (there were thirteen of them who still lived somewhere close to the old home place) would gather on the Coosa River or at one of the brother's or sister's houses. This Fourth of July was no different as everybody came to Uncle Lowell and Aunt Margie's. Their house was on a small farm which had been the old family home place. Their actual house had once been a country store, so it was no more than fifty feet off of US Highway 231, a main highway that runs from St John's, Indiana, to Panama City, Florida. Their house was not big enough to hold everybody so family gatherings that were at Uncle Lowell's happened in the front yard under huge water-oak trees. Everybody driving by honked their horn and waved and we all waved back.

As one of the few children in the family who did not live on a farm, I was always fascinated by the fact that Uncle Lowell had yard birds, or as they're now known, free-range or cage-free chickens. Most of my uncles had a pen and coops for their chickens but not Uncle Lowell. He had open coops for the hens that were on the nest, but you were just as likely to find fresh eggs in the flower garden as in the chicken coops. Each evening as the sun ducked behind the western hills across the highway, the roosters and chickens would fly up into the big water-oak trees in the front yard where they roosted each night. Needless to say, you quickly learned not to park your vehicle under those trees at night.

I don't remember what we had for lunch that day, but it was likely hamburgers and hot dogs, or maybe barbeque chicken and/or ribs. Either would be accompanied by baked beans, potato salad and cole slaw. As usual, the men cooked over homemade bar-b-que grills which no doubt meant that

the meat was cooked until it was pretty much charred through. This was regardless of the fact that the wives, every last one a great cook, stood over them directing their every move until the man with the spatula or tongs in his hand turned to them and said, "Now momma, go on back in the house and leave me alone. I know what the hell I'm doing here. You act like I hadn't never cooked a damn chicken before."

Then Aunt Whoever would put her hands on her hips and say, "Well alright then. Just go on and burn it up just like you always do!" and she would stomp off toward the house.

After all bellies were filled, the socializing and the telling of tales and lies started winding down. Late in the afternoon or early evening, there'd be homemade ice cream, no less than two five-quart freezers full. One would be vanilla made with Eagle Brand milk (because that's what Grandmother liked) and one would be the same homemade vanilla with fruit, generally fresh peaches or sometimes strawberries. I only liked the vanilla because the fruit would freeze right along with the ice cream and become hard as a rock and rather tart against the sweetness of the ice cream.

The kids, all my dozen or two cousins and me, would have to work for our cold summer treat. No electric motor freezers for us. Oh no. Hand-cranking was required, or the frozen treat would not be fit to eat. Someone, usually a couple of cousins who had their driver's licenses would head to the icehouse in town where they'd have three or four, eighteen-inch blocks of ice run through the crusher and put into big tall triple layer paper sacks. Along with the ice they would buy a box of ice cream salt which is the key to making the concoction freeze. When the filled-to-a-certain-line cylindrical tanks were placed in the freezer and the layers of ice and salt poured around the tanks, it was time to crank.

At only five years old, I doubt if I lasted more than a few turns, but turning those cranks was a ritual that each and every boy-child in our family had to experience. The young ones went first and then the taking of turns passed progressively to the next older child until the ice cream began to freeze and the crank became more difficult to turn. Eventually and inevitably, as the teenager finally struggled to get another turn out of the old crank, one of the uncles, usually my daddy, would grab the handle from the boy and say,

"What's wrong with you, son? I thought you're a man." Daddy would spin the crank as if it were no effort at all. "This is still just mush. Which one of you thinks you're man enough to finish this thang up? Somebody go get yo' grandmama. She'll show you how to do it." The older boys were wise to that old Tom Sawyer trick and would slink off around the corner to shoot more firecrackers and M-80's.

Upon the uncles' consensus that it was finally ice cream, it had to "set" for a little while with newspapers covering the top so it could firm up. Man, that homemade ice cream was the best stuff in the world. It seemed an eternity until the bowls and spoons were passed around. When the ice cream was finally dished out, it was time for the fireworks.

The older boys were responsible for buying and setting off the fireworks. Of course, the boys loved the exploding ones, the louder the better. If it had been left up to them, all they would buy would be Cherry Bombs, M-80's, Silver Salutes, Repeaters and Aerial Bombs. But the girls and women loved the pretty ones and hated the loud ones. So the uncles set rules that if the boys did not buy an equal number of pretty ones to exploding ones, they couldn't shoot off any. I don't remember ever seeing anyone count. Most of the aunts would have been happy not to have any.

As darkness fell upon the little rural community of Stewartville that Independence evening, ice cream was served, and everyone moved their webbed folding chairs so they could see the fireworks show. The boys had been shooting firecrackers and M-80s all day but now it was time for the big stuff. M-80's packed a big explosion that could send a 50-gallon oil drum twenty feet in the air and generally would destroy anything close to ground zero. But an Aerial Bomb detonated a hundred or more feet off the ground, contained four times the power of an M-80 and had been known to shatter windows.

Requiring a level, stable surface away from the spectators on which to set up the fireworks and light the fuse, the highway was found to be perfect. The road in front of Uncle Lowell's was a long straightaway so cars and trucks could be seen coming for almost a half mile in each direction. When everyone was gathered in the front yard with their full bowls of ice cream, the spectacle began.

There were the oooos and aaaaas as the bright, beautiful floral array of fireworks lit the night sky. Then there were the squeals of all the girls each time there was an earth-shaking, window-rattling explosion of the aerial bombs. But after a half hour or so, unexpectedly, one of the giant rocket propelled bombs was lit. Instead of zipping at a blinding speed, emitting a steady stream of sparks behind as it rapidly climbed high into the night sky, this one sputtered as it made a slow, lazy arch to about tree-top level and began its decent bouncing through the huge water-oak tree's limbs. There was a loud groan of "OH CRAP!" from one of the boys as everyone paying attention put their hands over their heads and ducked down just as the huge, earth-shattering explosion ripped through the trees.

Let me say right here that there were no injuries caused by the dud rocket (the explosion was anything but a dud); that is, if you don't count general deafness throughout the small crowd and Uncle Carmel falling out of his folding chair. But what did happen was a rain, a nasty rain. A rain of water oak limbs and leaves. A rain of feathers, blood, guts and chicken parts. Lots and lots of feathers, blood, guts and chicken parts. And a rain of fecal matter, lots and lots of chicken fecal matter. No one was spared, everyone was covered. Leaves and feathers stuck all over everyone. And believe me when I tell you, there was nothing in anyone's ice cream bowl that you would want to eat. The smell was awful. Even those in the family who were life-long farmers were gagging.

Uncle Laud was on his knees laughing. Uncle Carmel got up off the ground and yelled, "YOU DAMN IDIOTS!!! WE GOT CHICKEN POOP ALL OVER US!!! MOMMA, LOOK AT US!!!WE GOT CHICKEN POOP EVERWHARE!!! LOOK AT MY GODDAMN CAR!!! ITS COVERED IN CHICKEN POOP."

I personally found it to be all great fun and was laughing harder than Uncle Laud, harder than I had ever laughed in my short life. Uncle Lowell was screaming "MY CHICKENS!! YALL DONE KILT ALL MY GODDAMN CHICKENS!!! WHY DID YALL BLOW THE HELL OUTA MY GODDAMN CHICKENS?!!! YALL DONE KILT ALL MY CHICKENS!!!

The sound of screeching tires joined in the symphony of upheaval as Uncle Lowell's three daughters' boyfriends (who were the main culprits of the

fireworks show) sped away in their souped-up hotrods, away from the "wrath-of-Lowell" that surely was about to be brought down on them. Uncle Laud was still laughing so hard he could barely catch his breath.

Now all of my uncles normally cussed a blue streak, worse than sailors. But I had never heard such language come out of the mouths of my church going aunts. I also had never seen them dance around stomping their feet, shaking their hands in the air while squealing steady streams of profanity. The aroma of burning rubber had joined the smell of burning carnage, gun powder and chicken poop.

Uncle Lowell and Aunt Margie did not have a shower, so everyone removed as much of their clothing as they dared and turned the hose pipe on themselves. Me, personally, I had no issues at all of running around the yard nekkid. I often since have wondered what those neighbors who slowly drove by pointing and laughing thought of the spectacle of a yard full of people that looked to have been tarred-and-feathered (or in this case chicken-pooped and feathered) dancing around tearing off their clothing.

But the best part, the most fun I had had during my life up to that day, was the ride home with Mother driving her new Buick in just her slip and bra with me nekkid and Daddy in his underpants, sitting in the trunk riding down the road with the trunk lid wide open. And the sheriff who pulled us over, he thought it was all very funny, too.

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

"Every joke is a tiny revolution."

—George Orwell

THE GIVER OF THINGS

Anannya Uberoi

Tell me about the dream where we met
the giver of things.

He painted our burnt
tongues plum and aquitaine rose,
his hands were
a roiled mess of broken crockery
we tossed at each other,
grand gifts and offerings we
buried in the backyard with the dog,
things so soft we melted.

He gave you a punnet of
crimson berries (tell me how they tasted) I
walked back the undone road alone with
a box of biscuits for the birds;
they smelt of
your cornsilk-checked summer scarves
furrowed with grains of words that never
came out (your scarves from twenty years
ago were something else.)

I left some crumbs
for you to follow into the muddy alley
where we made a house before it formed its
wings and lifted at once to the giver of
things.
It became a little ladybug in his
open palm.

Our children sat in closed cauliflowers,
the tiny ones fit themselves in pea pods;
they shut the tops with
rolled-up leaves and slept without a sound.

Tell me what he whispered to you before the sky
was all pewter and arcade ash
(was it my name?)
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Anannya Uberoi is a full-time software engineer and part-time tea connoisseur based in Madrid. Her work has appeared in The Loch Raven Review, LandLocked, Deep Wild Journal, Tipton Poetry Journal, Lapis Lazuli, *and* Marías at Sampaguitas. *She also works as a columnist for* The Remnant Archive.
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"Little brooks could not flow, without
rain from the sky;
Nor a poet get on without dreams."

—Dorothy Parker

JUNE 1975

Maria Mercè Roca

As it's Saturday, there isn't the crowd of boys and girls from the high school at the Students Bar that's usually there during the week, studying, going over notes, flirting, or discussing how they'd set the world straight.

Seated at the table in the rear, Lidia is waiting for the boy she likes. She's liked him for three very long months, she likes him a lot and likes all of him: his straight hair combed back, his almond-shaped eyes, the freckles on his face, his wide mouth, his hands, his laugh, his voice, his voice when he says her name – "Liiidia," leaning a little on the first *i* … Everything pleases her. Pleases her very much.

They're meeting at the same bar where they go every day, because they don't know any other and because they're so young that they wouldn't dare to go anywhere else. She's done all the assignments she had to do - each one not necessary, almost made-up, hardly urgent – and is waiting for him with a tense body and eager eyes glued to the door to see him the minute he enters. In the square outside, shaded by leafy mulberry trees, one can perceive the high school, which today seems to be asleep.

He arrives right away, in a hurry, frightened that she's not there or has gone without waiting for him. Yes, his friends tell him that it's obvious she likes him, but how can one be entirely sure? He's lit from the back when he enters. Lidia finds him so tall and lithe, so attractive, that her heart begins to throb: he's come and she was so afraid that he wouldn't, or that it would be too late or, still worse, that it wasn't true that he liked her. Her friends tell her that it's obvious he likes her, but how can one be entirely sure? Her timidly raised hand says: "I'm here waiting for you," but he's already seen her, his heart and his eyes find her immediately, because love is a very precise compass that always points to the person loved. He sits opposite her, looks at her and smiles. He thinks she's so pretty and he wants her so much! He explains vaguely what he's been doing, lights a cigarette that they share: audacious, they enjoy putting their lips where the other has just put theirs; that's, up to now, the most intimate contact they've had. They barely talk. She's waiting. She knows it will be today. Minutes pass, quarters of the hour,

then half hours go by. Hardly a word passes between them. He's on the verge, a thousand times, to say something he doesn't say. The light that was entering from the open door grows dim. The clients enter and leave, sit down, have a drink, chat, buy tobacco in the machine: they're alive. In contrast, the two adolescents at the last table form a "nature morte;" they're immobile, tense, suffering from desire that's new and painful. They still don't know what to call it. The afternoon disappears. Soon the last train will be departing.

"Do you want to go out with me?"

Finally. That was it. A few words with little meaning. After hours of waiting. He said them as if they were offspring born from his mouth in a long and difficult birth. Lidia laughs. At last, she thinks, but it took time! And she says, simply, yes, that she'd like to. Then, being practical, she looks at the clock and gathers up the things scattered on the table.

"The train!" she cried.

They walk quickly to the station glancing at each other, laughing like children without knowing exactly why they're laughing, when, without meaning to, they brush arms or hips, it jolts them. I'm going out with him, Lidia thinks, and I don't know exactly what that means. She said yes, he thinks, and he doesn't know either exactly what, from now on, the future holds for them.

Halfway there, she stops because she has a cramp. She leans against a doorway, puts her hand on the right side and makes a face. "It hurts," she says. He comes closer, very serious, without knowing what to do. It's the first time they're so close and so alone since they've been going out together, for the last six minutes, now.

"Is it going away?" he asks, and she tells him that she thinks so.

They come closer and kiss each other, what they've been wanting for so many days. Lips on lips, without moving, only placed, because they don't dare, don't know what else to do. When they think they are suffocating, they stop, separate, and laugh; then start again. They're intoxicated with kissing and could stay like this their entire life: outside of kissing, there's nothing and no one. Their heads spin. Between kisses, they sigh.

"The train!"

They run holding hands, fingers intertwined, until they're in sight of the station. They stop and catch their breath. Going out with a boy is this, Lidia is thinking, kissing and running hand in hand. And she says, satisfied, that she thinks she's going to like it very much.

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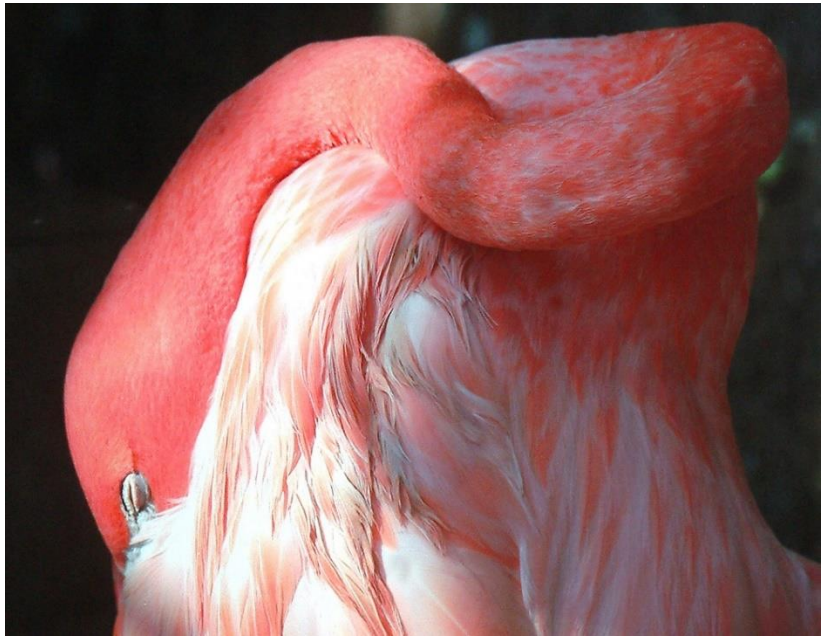
Maria Mercè Roca has written numerous books, many of which have been awarded prestigious prizes in Catalonia. She has also written TV scenarios and texts for young people. **sonia.alland@gmail.com**



EL PÁJARO RARO

Digital Photograph

Jose Alfredo

Jose Alfredo was born in Colombia and studied graphic design and photography at the National Center for Graphic Industry in Colombia. Winner of several awards, his work has been shown in Spain and Chile as well as his native Columbia and the United States. He lives with his family in Huntsville, AL.

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RING, BING, PING, ZING, SING, DING

Liz Reed

The microwave rings when the timer is exhausted. The car door dings when opened and dings again when closed. The refrigerator door sings when left open longer than prudent.

The oven bell goes off when the right temperature has been reached; it dings again when the meatloaf is ready, or whenever it thinks the meatloaf is ready. Thank goodness for override.

At the gym, a ding lets me know I've been stair-stepping for 15 minutes as if my thighs cannot tell. The arm cycle does the same thing. *My muscles know,* I want to yell. But I don't because there are other people rowing, pushing, pulling, lifting, grunting, sweating, running, and they might want to yell too. The noise of the tv no one watches is enough.

The elevator dings when I get to the floor of choice. Trucks and forklifts ring or ding when they back up. My watch pings when I get a new message. The café kitchen bell rings when my order is ready.

The telephone rings, the bird sings, NPR dings every hour on the hour. Hearing aids bing when the batteries are tired. My heart zings when my husband arrives home from work.

And that's the best reminder that I'm involved in this world. Should my mind wander there's always a bing, ding, ping, sing, or zing that refocuses my attention on life as it's happening.

.....

Liz Reed is the art and layout editor of Birmingham Arts Journal. Among other volunteer efforts, she is a quilt maker, weddding dress maker, wedding veil embellisher, home maker, dinner maker, doll maker, etc. When not volunteering, she edits and designs books. She is married to bookstore owner and writer, Jim Reed.

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“When I was a child, I spoke as a child,
I understood as a child, I
thought as a child: but when I became a
man, I put away childish
things. Then, after a while I looked
around and thought, ‘Well this sucks,’
and went and dug back out all my
childish things.”

—Joey McClure

THE YEAR I HAD STRAIGHT HAIR

Joan Dawson

The Three Stooges, inane and ridiculous, tried for laughs in a too obvious way. Slapstick with a slap from some ugly guys with crazy hairstyles was not my kind of humor.

Oh, Moe! Yours was the worst of all—a bowl-inspired hairline that, to this day, is the stuff of jokes. I didn't like your straight hair and never planned to imitate you, but in the months of the 2020 pandemic, I did.

There were no chemical curls for me while in safer-at-home mode.

Oh, Moe! It's not fun being one of the Stooges. Straight hair isn't sexy. Someday I'll return to better living through chemistry, and if I have to choose a Stooge—Hello, Curly!

.....

Joan Dawson is a teacher and a musician who has lived in the woods on the Cahaba River most of her life. She and her husband, Frank, enjoy music, poetry, art, and lively conversation with friends, thanks to Zoom and the Internet!

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THE THREE STOOGES

EMPTY HANDS

Carl Schinasi

He sat in his wheelchair staring out the window. Just as he did every day, binoculars in hand. He reminded himself of the character Jimmy Stewart played in Hitch's *Rear Window*. Only he didn't have a beautiful blonde at his side and wasn't surveying a murderer, acted ironically by the future Perry Mason. He was watching for birds. Most days he spied them. Sparrows, wrens, finches, cardinals, titmouses, and juncos all flew into the old hickory tree long enough for him to examine their delicate beauty. Their fluffy bodies, fragile wings, varied colors, and instinctive movements entranced him. They allowed him to leave his disabled body, retreat from the memories that now held little succor for him and lift him from the otherwise dullness of the day.

A blue-gray tanager lighted in the old tree. He picked up his binoculars to make sure. Yes, he thought, that's indeed a blue-gray tanager. What's it doing here? he wondered. It wasn't uncommon to see a scarlet tanager in Alabama. It was far rarer to see the blue-gray one. Through his binoculars he closely eyed the bird's bright blue wings fading to a deep blue, almost black, as they tapered into its tail feathers. Its pale powder blue belly looked puffed out. He wondered if the bird had just dined, maybe on the ripening blueberries growing in the yard, or on a succulent worm shown up in the soil moist and muddy from last night's heavy rain. *What the hell are you doing here?* he wondered again.

As quickly and from as out of nowhere as the bird had lighted on the tree, a vivid and full-blown memory surfaced in his mind. There was Marie, his beautiful wife, her soft, luxurious hair falling on her tanned shoulders. She stood in the midst of the magnificent botanical garden in Oaxaca.

She wore that many-colored Mexican cotton blouse she bought the day before, the one she fell in love with immediately. She grabbed it up from the pile in the vendor's stall and held it up, admiring it. She turned it this way and that in the light. It's so beautiful, she said and instead of haggling with the vendor she paid his full asking price. Marie was good at haggling. She understood the nature of the dance between buyer and vendor. She even said once, *I would love to come to Mexico just to bargain with these guys*, and I laughed her bright girlish laugh.

She saw him standing there immobile among the spiny cacti, the agave plants and her favorite, the colorful fluorescent pink coquito blossoms, staring at her. She saw his tenderness for her in his eyes, the love she shared for him, the visceral sensation and connection between them. What she saw in his eyes

wasn't sexual, though between them the sex was there, and more than good. It wasn't some lopsided heated passion that drove her to him, or him to her. It was in no way a need for completion of self that either felt for the other, though that may have been there, too. It was merely an unstated comfortable sense each was there for the other, like the jigsaw puzzle of their lives had been by some accident of fate pieced together filling a space completely. That was it.

She looked so beautiful. He yearned to hold her there, in the garden, close to him when just like that a blue-gray tanager flitted between them landing on top of a spiny pipe organ cactus. She spied it, exclaiming, Look at that blue! Those wings look psychedelic.

Something knocked the on window, a falling branch, a hickory nut, or maybe a disoriented bird. Whatever it was, roused him. He blinked a few times and his mind refocused. He looked down to see his arms outstretched with his hands open and fingers extended. He remembered immediately. He was reaching for her. He quickly shook away the memory. It frustrated more than consoled him. It's not real, he thought. It ain't here no more.

With his arms still out-stretched, hands open, and fingers extended he reached out for something concrete, something he could touch. Yes, mysteriously, somehow, he thought he'd reach through the window and caress the blue-gray tanager he'd been watching. But time had passed. The tanager had flown, vanished like a passing memory leaving his hoary hands closing on empty air.

.....

Carl Schinasi lives in Birmingham, AL. Previous works have been published in Ducts, Mr. Beller's Neighborhood, Slow Trains, *and* Left-Hand Waving, *among others*. Some of his stories have also been collected in books including Baseball/Literature/Culture *and* The Man Who Ate His Book.
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"A journal is your completely unaltered voice."

—Lucy Dacus

STARS FELL ON ALABAMA

Digital Photograph

Glenn Wills

Glenn Wills is the author and chief photographer of a series of books titled FORGOTTEN ALABAMA. *He travels far and wide and off the main roads to capture long-ignored places.*

Wills is part historian, part artist, and full-time appreciator of all things Alabama. Photographs from all of his books may be found at ***ForgottenAlabama.com***

MERRY-GO-ROUND

Paul Pruitt

Dreaming of whirling, soaring,
Bible School flying—all the while snipping construction
Paper the worst way, with shiny rounded
Scissors that just won't work for a lefty.
Then trying, dabbing the glue bottle's rubber
Tip where it should go, reciting in mind the
Verse that will get me a cookie when
We're let go.
Running, then, to the rough
Wood of the circling bench, working the fat
Metal tubes with hands and feet, pushing, pulling,
Moving at last: Bush. Bricks. Trees. Bush-bricks-trees,
Bushbrickstrees, *bushbrickstreesbushbrickstrees*—
Whirling up from a dead slow spindle, through the clouds,
Gyrating toward the blur, joining
Earth and the quick bleeding colors of the sky—
Then slowing. Then stop.

. . . . . .

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

EVERYONE'S WAITING...

Bethany Bruno

I'm on autopilot.

My dad is in front of me, laid out awkwardly on a hospital bed. He has a fever of 103 and I can feel the heat rise from his skin as I place my hand over his arm. The heat makes my hands unfreeze from his icy room. He feels like his insides have started a campfire and only his skin is holding back the flames.

I can handle him being in a coma, the heat, and even the smell but the seizures are the worst. He occasionally seizes up and loses control of his facial muscles and blinks rapidly. His body twitches and in those brief moments I feel utterly useless. All I can do is rapidly push the button or scramble out of the room and find a nurse. I don't know if this is it or if it's just another sign that the end is near. I wish there was a guidebook or an answer. No one knows. It's up to my dad and he's being very stubborn about it—as usual.

But regardless of my jump scares I still need to be quiet--my mom is sleeping on the pullout couch in the room with my dad. She has barely slept in the last week and I don't want to wake her. Plus, it's not time. Yet. I keep calling these moments "quiet emergencies." How ironic.

All I can do for him at this point is continuously put a cold rag on his head every 10 minutes. The hospice nurses pump him full of morphine every two hours—which is great. He can stay asleep and completely relaxed. I need to stay here with him until it's time. I owe him that. I owe my mom that too. I feel like someone flipped a switch on inside of me that is making me stay on autopilot mode for grief. All I can do is stay present and remain calm.

Help everyone around me.
Focus on myself later.
Thank you, God, for creating Xanax.

They say he can still hear me and everything around him. "The hearing is the last thing to go" is a phrase that's repeated over and over again. His brain is filled with cancer that is slowly yet rapidly making his body shut down. But somehow, through the confusion and damage from the tumors, my dad can hear my voice and find some comfort.

I tell him, "it's okay. I'm here. I'm right here. I won't leave you until you're ready. Mom's here too." I find that it calms him down and helps him relax his muscles. Maybe I'm delusional but I feel it helps him, truly.

The one phrase I keep saying, which I can't wrap my head around, is "Everyone's waiting." Everyone, I thought, was us. Us, meaning my family here in the room or my mother, brother, and myself. But no, I don't think I mean that. "Everyone's waiting" is not my family here in this room; it's everyone he has lost. Every one of his family members and friends who have passed. My dad constantly talked about seeing his mom, dad, brother, friends, and even old pets again. He truly believed that when he died, he would go to heaven and to see everyone there, waiting for him.

I want him to go to them. I want him to know that it's okay to want to go to them. To stop making them wait so damn long. "Stop being so stubborn and go to them," I say as I brush back his once thick black hair with my nails. I don't want to remember him like this. He would not want me to remember him like this.

So come on Dad, everyone's waiting.

.....

Bethany Bruno is a born and raised Florida writer. She attended Flagler College and the University of North Florida. She has worked as a Ghost Tour Guide, Library Specialist, English Teacher, and a Park Ranger with the National Park Service. Her work has been widely published. **bbruno@alumni.flagler.edu**

FEEDING (PRAYER)

Cody Stetzel

Luck favors the lucky. So we

avoid a snatch, the nets of fate,

the ineptitude of progress, the

misgivings, malady by daybreak, a

consortium of apocalypse, thin air,

burst bubble, dahlias in bouquets,

and the royal fern. If tomorrow happens.

If tomorrow happens to devour us

may we be so lucky as to remember

all we have acknowledged and deceived

in anticipation of expiration.

.....

Cody Stetzel is a Seattle resident working as a staff book reviewer for Glass Poetry Press. He earned a master's degree in creative writing for poetry from the University of California at Davis. His writing can be found previously in Boston Accent, Aster(ix), *and more. Find him on twitter @pretzelco.*

LAST WORD: HENRY JAMES

Richard Weaver

Draw the curtains. I know it isn't night yet.
Draw them all the same. Make the room darker
than night. Humor me. Please. And light candles
along the north wall only. It is a detail I prefer,
and, as such, you would do well to enjoy. I need
no water or laudanum. No emetics or purging.
My life has run its course, and I'm to be
shipwrecked on the shoals of this moment.
Now, I think is most precise. I'm waiting, patiently,
to my mind, for what is approaching; content to pass
time between each tock and tedious tick, between
the flies that buzz and those that maddeningly don't.
I am here. That much I can attest. Exactly where here is
is another conjecture I am forced to admit. Still, as I
approach my last moments, this much is clear.
My thoughts leap towards what? I have no idea.
Who are they, these thoughts, such foreign energies
settled in my mind? I am cautious, but curious.
Awkward and anxious as they approach.
"So. Here it is at last. The distinguished thing."

.....

Richard Weaver's poems are loosely based on Walter Anderson's Logs, his watercolors, oil paintings, and conversations with his family. Many of Weaver's poems have been accepted or appeared in Southern Quarterly, Stonecoast Review, Gloom Cupboard, Steel Toe, Allegro, The Little Patuxent Review, Edison Literary Journal, Foliate Oak, Linden Avenue, & Deep South Magazine.
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THE MILKWEED'S MISSION

Joan Dawson

Gossamer silver hair catches the autumn sun and sparkles, each strand shining as if fresh from some magic spindle. The milkweed-seed paratroopers prepare for the mission of life itself. Their capsule opens, but most stay bound to each other, reluctant to go, judging the perfect moment, awaiting the "Geronimo!"

The delicate beauty of invisible glittering hairs, detected only in the bright sunlight, mesmerizes me. The incongruous tick-sized, camo-brown seeds are infused with the life that will nourish monarchs. Their mission? To lay a path and set up camp for the migrant butterflies.

The breeze at two knots is not enough to launch, and it affords time to lay bets on who will go first. My money's on the intrepid one that is testing the current, straining upward to loosen the last tether. It twists in the gentle gusts, but it does not break free.

Hours pass, and I keep watch. No one has taken to the air yet; still time to lay a bet. Will they deploy singly or in tandem to guarantee success? Now they are getting ready, struggling to catch the light breeze. I want to cheer, to throw my cap into the air, to wish them Godspeed and safe travels.

.....

Joan Dawson is a teacher and a musician who has lived in the woods on the Cahaba River most of her life. She and her husband, Frank, enjoy music, poetry, art, and lively conversation with friends, thanks to Zoom and the Internet!
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MOTHER'S DAY

Ric Stueker

Hugging mother is like hugging a lobster,
all hard shell and sharp pincers. I am
her only son, her project, her ambition.
Age 95—she called 15 times in a row
last night, every three minutes, at 4 a.m.
I gotta get out of here, locked up in room 311,
locked in by Covid-19. *I want a lobster roll*
from the Lobster Hut down at Plymouth.

I escaped to Hingham once, where there were
plenty of lobsters, 1200 miles from home.
She called: *Your father is dying*.
In my memory lurks a lobster bake in
my New England cousin's back yard,
dug out pit, ocean water, seaweed, clams.
Sometimes I stop by Kroger, bring home a pair,
boil them in a steamer, crack open their shells
dig out the sweet meat inside. On Mother's Day
I crack open her heart, pick out whatever sweetness
I find there, landlocked in Kentucky, we both erode
like granite lining the North Atlantic shore.

.....

Ric Stuecker is a poet and writer who graduated from Duke University in 1970. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he is a student at the Bluegrass Writer's Studio MFA program at Eastern Kentucky University. His poems have appeared in or been accepted by Tipton Poetry Review, Tilde, Former People, Pegasus, Main Street Rag, Poetica Review, Rubbertop Review *and* District Lit. *Kelsay Books will publish his first chapbook in December. This poem first appeared in* Otherwise Engaged: A Literature and Arts Journal. *Vol. 5.*
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IT'S COMPLICATED

Drew Adkison

December 1, 1955, began a little differently than most days. My dad's car was in the shop and we had some errands to run. So, we decided to take the bus into town. Dad and I walked a few blocks to the Empire Theater bus stop. As soon as the bus pulled up, my dad and I loaded on with a few others. As we stepped through the door of the bus, we realized the front of the bus was already full, but before we went any further, the bus driver yelled in a sharp voice to four black passengers, "Let me have those seats!"

The situation made me feel a little weird. Those four people were there first but it didn't seem to bother my dad.

Three of the passengers immediately stood up but one lady remained in her seat. The bus driver repeated his command, reminding her that the front of the bus was for "whites" and back was for "blacks."

It's okay," I said. "I'll stand."

Dad grabbed my arm and gave me a look, telling me to be quiet. Again, the bus driver insisted that she stand in the aisle in the back and allow us to sit down.

In reply, the lady said, "I don't think I should have to stand up."

To be honest, I thought she was right, but the next thing I knew, the police were there arresting her. I was shocked! That seemed way overboard for a punishment.

That night as I lay in bed, I couldn't sleep. The incident kept me awake as I kept replaying it in my head.

How was it fair that those people who were on the bus before us were forced to get up just so we could sit down? I thought about how I would feel if the same thing happened to me. I wouldn't like it at all.

The next morning at breakfast, I drummed up the courage to ask my dad about what happened the day before.

"How is it fair, Dad, that that lady was forced to get up? She was there first."

Dad said, "That's just the way it is, Son."

At church last Sunday, the pastor preached on the story of the Good Samaritan. He talked about how we are called to love our neighbors. He even talked about how Jesus was like the Samaritan and loved us unconditionally.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Son?"

"Remember what Reverend Bixby talked about at church, about the Good Samaritan? Does that apply to black people? Are we called to love them too?

"It's complicated, Son," he told me.

But to me, it didn't seem very complicated. In the story, Samaritans and Jews didn't like each other and yet the Samaritan showed love to the Jewish man that was left for dead. It seems like we should do the same, no matter the color of their skin.

.....

Drew Adkison is a fourth grader at Southminster Day School in Vestavia Hills, AL, and winner of the annual creative writing award founded by the late Dr. Glenn Feldman, a former professor of Southern history at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Sources: "Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott," U.S. History.com; "Bus Boycott in Alabama," U.S. Library of Congress.com; "The Montgomery Bus Boycott, Khanacademy.org. c/o jeanniefeldman@att.net

"'Cause you're black, folks think you lack. They laugh at you, and scorn you too. What did I do to be so black and blue?"

—Fats Waller

HOME SWEET TENEMENT

Christopher Shaffer

Teaching in Slovakia

It was common for Americans living in Slovakia to be asked to teach privately in addition to their regular jobs. It was a good way to make a little bit of extra money, hopefully help someone improve their English-speaking skills, while also gaining some more insight into the people and culture of Slovakia.

I would have two such jobs. The first came to me by way of Lucy, who introduced me to Susan and Samuel. Their boy, also named Samuel, was 8 years old, and they wanted him to learn English from scratch. Samuel was a handsome boy with blonde hair and pale blue eyes. He loved playing soccer, and attended a sports-geared elementary school, as opposed to a traditional one. He had a bright and happy personality, and the only English he seemed to know was how to say, "Chrees, I am jester." He was a true beginner. I had no experience teaching children so young and the only type of English I had expected to teach was at the conversational level. It was also fairly clear to me that I was not going to be able to avoid taking the job. Slovaks have an impressive way of passively applying pressure when they want something. Essentially the argument becomes, "I understand that you don't feel you can take this job, but just know you are all that stands between my son being a successful businessman or a low-level factory worker."

We settled on 70SK per lesson, and three lessons per week. That was the equivalent of 7% of my regular salary. On top of that, Susan looked at me and was clearly evaluating my weight. She then said she wanted me to tutor Samuel around lunchtime and she would make me lunch before each lesson. Next, she invited me to Sunday dinner for as long as I was living in Banska Bystrica. I didn't meet another lector during my stay in Slovakia who had such an amazing deal. Susan was a marvelous cook, and I do not recall ever having the same dish twice. She introduced me to a custom that all cultures should adopt—Sugar Day. Sugar Day is the happiest day of the month. For the main meal, everything she would cook would be sweet. It wasn't unhealthy though. She prepared dishes like crepes with apricot jam, or some other fruit. Sometimes it might be a pastry made with poppy seeds.

It was always excellent, and new to my palate. Each time we would eat together Susan sized me up, and seemed to be thinking to herself, *At least I have given him one more day of life.*

I needed to develop a strategy for teaching Samuel. We began by simply walking around the apartment. I would point to items, he would tell me the Slovak word, and I would teach him the English equivalent. After that, I began teaching him some basic verbs. I needed help from Susan with that. She spoke very little English, but she did speak German, so we were able to fall back on our second languages to communicate. Toward the end of my stay, I was writing fairy tales with Samuel as the main character and having him read them to me. I don't know if I was the best English teacher Samuel could have ever had, but I know he learned more English than if we had never met, and I met a family who showed me great warmth and provided me with insight into what family life was like in Slovakia.

Magdalena was a student in one of my morning classes. She was the only 30-something in a group of 18-year-olds. She also stood out because she had Multiple Sclerosis. Europe in general, but Eastern Europe specifically, is not a good place to have to cope with a physical disability. Magdalena walked with a crutch, and each step appeared to be painful. Her wish to learn English stemmed—I believe—more from a need for human contact than from any need to pick up another language. Within a week she asked me if I would teach her privately. I agreed, and we decided to meet at her house a couple of times per week. She lived just west of the old town square across from the park. Her house needed some serious renovation, but at one point it must have been a grand place. It has two stories, and looked as though it was probably about 100 years old. To this point, I had not met a Slovak who lived anywhere other than a suburb like Sasova, with its identical grey high rise apartments.

If ever there was a sad story, it was Magdalena. She had a husband who emotionally abandoned her following her MS diagnosis. He bluntly told her he no longer was attracted to her, and he only made one appearance during the six months I was tutoring her, and that was via telephone. She had two children under the age of ten. Both were boys and thoroughly out of control, and she had no hope of being able to reign them in because of her condition.

Magdalena's English seemed permanently stuck at the intermediate level, and I think she just wanted someone to talk to for a couple of hours per week. Because she was older, she had interests that were wider than the other students. We often sat in her living room and talked about politics, society, and culture; whatever she wanted. Sometimes, when she couldn't produce the English word she needed, she would fall back on her German, and we could piece things together from there.

Part of visiting a place instead of living there is to be blissfully ignorant of its problems. I have always tended to feel far safer in European cities than in American ones. The truth is that—to some degree—crime is everywhere. One afternoon Magdalena told me a story about her sister, who had emigrated to Germany. She told me she was murdered.

"No, you mean she died," I said. I was trying to be the good teacher and thought she had used the wrong word.

Magdalena replied, "No, Chrees. Murder. Man come into her house, and, um, how you say, dragged her down to basement, and cut off hlava, um, head."

Oh, drat. I looked at Magdalena in complete shock and, after taking a sip of coffee, said, "Yes, murder is the correct word."

Slovakian Food

At least in terms of the Americans I met who were teaching in Slovakia, Southerners were in the minority. There was constant talk among the Americans about how horrible the food was in Slovakia. They were particularly bothered by the scarcity and lack of diversity of vegetables. They also did not like that frequently the only way restaurants seemed to prepare meat was by frying it. These were some salad loving people. I had always leaned too much toward meat and potatoes when it came to my culinary yearnings. Plus, frying is not likely to offend anyone from the great state of Alabama.

"How do these people live past 40?" a person asked during one of our weekly gatherings at the Gastro Centrum.

"I don't know," said another. "Everything they eat is fried meat or fried cheese. And the only things they eat with that stuff are potatoes."

"I know," I replied. "Isn't it great?"

Just for clarity, the Slovaks did have vegetables. However, they tended to have only what was in season and readily available in their stores. Under Communism, trade was generally allowed only with like-minded nations. If you stop and think about it, almost all of the former Warsaw Pact nations were in cold climates, which is going to lead to a lot of root vegetables. The Slovaks historically were a rural and farming people. The word city does not exist in Slovak. There are towns (mesto). There are a few big towns, such as Bratislava, Kosice, and Banska Bystrica, but mostly there are villages. The diet we were living on in Slovakia was very much in line with the history and culture of our new settings. Rural farmers rarely come in from the fields hoping their wives have prepared them a good salad.

One word a traveler quickly learns when he goes into a Slovak restaurant is vyprazanie (fried). Besides the fried cheese (vyprazanie syr), which to me was a wonderful concept, there were also fried mushrooms (vyprazanie sampiony). Both of these were frequently considered an entrée on a pub menu. And they always came with the optional, but strongly encouraged tartarsku sauce, which is apparently Slovakia's primary contribution to world culture in the minds of many of its citizens.

"Chrees, do you know about tartarsku, er tartar sauce?" a colleague asked me while we were waiting on an order of fried mushrooms and drinking a beer.

"I believe I do," I replied.

"It was invented in the Slovakia," the person replied. "The only real tartar sauce is here."

To this day, I don't completely understand the tartar sauce phenomenon. Really, no matter how you try to explain it, everybody was a little too orgasmic over what was, in my opinion, a rather run of the mill condiment. However, it is again good to take a step back and look at the Slovak mindset. Historically, they had been peasant farmers. A variety of other nations had dominated them over the course of their history. The Slovaks were a good people who had been dealt a lot of bad hands of cards over the past 1,000 years. They did have, though, their tartar sauce. Within this context, the best thing to do is dunk that mushroom in the tartar sauce and chase it with a healthy swig of Slovak beer. There are far worse fates to have to endure.

I was not living entirely on Slovak Crowns; I also brought about 500USD. It is amazing how far that small amount of money went in 1993 Slovakia. As a result, I frequently ate at restaurants, rather than cook at home. Besides, there are only so many things you can make in a stock pot. There were several restaurant options even in 1993 in Banska Bystrica. After my morning classes, I would usually walk to the historic town square and find a place to eat that was always good with shockingly reasonable prices by Western standards.

The name Banska refers to mining. Banska Bystrica was a copper mining town that was controlled by the Fugger family of Germany during the 1300s. As a result of the success of their mining ventures, Banska Bystrica became a bit of a boom town and a large square was established with buildings designed with gothic architecture that were often quite ornate. By the time I arrived, many of the buildings were not in terrific shape, but the facades were well maintained. If you didn't look too closely, everything looked to be in remarkably good repair, and it was easy to imagine what it might have been like to live there during the latter part of the Middle Ages.

Along the way to the square was the Pizzeria Alba, which was a frequent stop for both Merrill and me. Pizza in Slovakia was different from anywhere else I have ever been. Tomato sauce does not exist. No one (and this became something that almost every American seemed to investigate at one point or another) even understood what it was. I went to the store that sold Western products, and the only response I got to my queries were confused looks. Instead of tomato sauce, customers could order (for three crowns extra) a small serving of ketchup. I never was able to come to terms with ketchup on a pizza, but this dry version of a pizza did not particularly bother me, and with time I came to like it. Toppings were quite varied, although I tended to prefer the slanina (ham) pizza. One of the odder options was the pizza with ovum. It came with a big sunny side up egg in the center of it.

Tschibo, one of my favorite coffee brands had opened a café on the main square in Banska Bystrica, and in the process remodeled one of the many 14th century buildings. In addition to a great cup of coffee, there were several cases of pastries. A morning pastry with a café au lait would set me back a whopping equivalent of 50 cents. Particularly during the cold months, Tschibo would frequently be a twice a day visit.

For street food, nothing could beat a langos. There was a stand near one of the roads that shot off from the square. Langos is really nothing more than deep fried dough. There were also a variety of toppings you could choose to add to it. Now that I am in my 50s, and know that I have the thrill of an EKG annually, it seems like a strange thing to eat, but few foods taste better than fried dough, and in a nation of heavy drinkers, it certainly went well with large quantities of beer.

On the other side of the square from Tschibo, Samuel renovated a building and opened a restaurant he named Fontina, for the square's fountain, that could be seen prominently from the restaurant's windows. He managed to raise a lot of capital for the remodel work, and also bought Italian china and flatware. My guess is that there had never been such a nice restaurant in town before. The menu was extensive as well. I was never clear what his business model was. Austrian tourists would frequently visit in tour buses, so he may have been hoping the drivers would steer their clients toward Fontina. Merrill's consistent comment was that he would like to be in a position to buy him out when he failed. My understanding was that over a quarter of a million dollars had been invested in renovating the building, which dated from the mid-1300s. Meals though, had to be priced so that locals could afford them, or no one would ever come and patronize the business. Ultimately, a three course meal cost about the equivalent of 5USD, which to the Slovaks at the time was remarkably expensive. That may seem silly, but remembering their salaries were set at about 100USD per month, consider how many people anywhere in the world would spend 5% of their income on one meal? The restaurant closed several months after it opened.

Some beliefs from the Middle Ages were held over into modern day Slovak food and drink culture. There was a pervasive belief that cold liquids were unhealthy and could make you sick. A guest came over to our apartment in February. Perhaps the only American thing that we tried to always have in our apartment was a bottle of Coca Cola, which we kept cold on our balcony. I asked the guest if she would like some and she said yes, only to recoil in mild horror when I pulled it off of the snow-covered balcony.

"Chrees, you are very brave boy," she said.

Absolutely and thoroughly lost, I inquired as to why.

"Drinking cold drinks make you sick."

This leads us to the exception to the cold rule. Zmrzlina (ice cream) is a Slovak obsession. It can be 10 degrees below zero (and it sometimes was), and they would be walking around the square with an ice cream cone. No one was ever able to explain why a sip of a cold Coke (American champagne as it was referred to by someone I met in Rome once) would kill a person on the spot, but somehow the human body could withstand this sometimes two hits a day of ice-cold dairy.

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Christopher Shaffer spent his first year after college teaching English in Slovakia. The above is part of his book-in-progress, Moon Over Sasova. Dr. Shaffer is the Dean of Library Services at Troy University. **shafferc@troy.edu**

"Every one of us is an artist by default, reinventing the world each time we remember something."

—Ben Brantley

THE WORDS THAT LIE BETWEEN THE WORDS

John Tustin

The words that lie between the words
I think of saying but never speak
Are such lovely blue blades of grass
Coming up through the sidewalk cracks
Upside down
Upon the ceiling
When I wake up
And open my eyes

I imagine.

John Tustin edits nothing, graduated from nowhere and has no awards.
fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry *contains links to his published poetry online.*

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KNITTING SENSE

John Zedolik

The kinship of words
hides in plain view,

a small effort to discover
if one yearns for what's true.

Pouch and pocket—"ch"
and "ck" show their ancient link—

which will open the lineage,
no reason to stoneface and slink

like relatives long separated
and grown up unaware and apart,

with a little grit and eye, you can be
mediator, master of the reuniting art.

.....

John Zedolik's iPhone continues to be his primary poetry notebook. Several of his poems have been published in journals in the US and abroad. A full-length collection Salient Points and Sharp Angles (*CW Books), is available through Amazon.*
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FIELD OF DREAMS

Jim Reed

Across the street from our house, when I was a small boy, there was an enormous vacant lot. On the lot sprang up golden grass, as high as the waist of a small boy. The soft grass was thick, so that if you lay down, no one could see you from the road or from the houses across the street.

It was a wonderful playground, a battlefield, a guerilla warfare heaven. We boys and girls of the neighborhood could spend hours crawling on our bellies, hidden from the world and often from each other. Somewhere along the way, we got the idea that battlegrounds such as ours should look like those battlefields in John Wayne and James Whitmore war movies, complete with foxholes and two-way communications. So we dug holes here and there and staffed our outposts with the equipment of childhood.

One main foxhole, the headquarters, even had a makeshift roof. But only imaginary rains could stay away from us while we hid and met and planned there. Between the foxholes across the golden field we laid old remnants of hosepipes. Through these, we communicated in muffled faraway tones translatable only to us.

We were the Tab Nam Club (no parent could ever have guessed that Tab Nam spelled backwards was Bat Man, defender of good and fighter of evil men and wicked but sexy women), and we had leaders and followers.

Since I was the oldest boy, I was the pretend leader, and because my younger brother Ronny was the youngest kid in the group, he was usually the bad guy. He would always have to get killed first, or go to jail first or be punished first, just because he was too small to defend himself and because he wanted to be part of the group too much to mind the abuse.

When my tomboy sister, Barbara, came out to play with us, she was the leader and I was relegated to invisible follower. She was tougher and older than us, and no one dared challenge her authority in

the field. Because I was no longer the leader at these times, I could only choose to be a rebel and a loner. That was more heroic to me than being a follower. Once you've tasted leadership, there is nothing satisfying about following and being ordered about.

There were various objects strewn across the field, and I'll never forget them. One particularly fascinating one was a Z-shaped iron bar about eight inches long. A number of them were used to terrorize the enemy. Two could be put together to form a swastika, the ultimate symbol of badness in those late 1940's days. The bad guys had to carry these. Or, the Z's could be thrown dangerously close to the enemy foxhole to keep them in their place.

There were long flexible sticks that became deadly bows for our even more deadly and unreliable homemade arrows. There were trees to climb and fall from, and we frequently did both. There were small pebbles to use in case of attack. And there were the wonderful long golden weeds. The weeds could be hidden behind, carefully parted to spy on the enemy or the parents (somewhat interchangeable roles), pulled and gnawed on like the cowboys did in Saturday matinees, used as pitchforks, switches, wands, and the like. Very few real toys made it across the street into our field. There was no room for reality there.

Toys were left inside the home and on the front yard, symbols of parents' desire to give us something joyful to play with, something they didn't have when they were kids. But our toys were: the field itself and its natural components.

One day, the field disappeared.

We learned that a house was going to be built on our battleground. In place of our military movements a wooden skeleton emerged and our troops retreated across the street into their front yards, and our world got smaller.

The backyard became our field. But the backyard was different. Short grass took the place of golden grain. No foxholes could be dug except to plant Mother's bushes and flowers. Our dogs could no longer bury their bones in wide open spaces and had to resort to corners of the yard where grass was higher or where people seldom stood.

The backyard had some advantages the field did not. Advantages, that is, for Mother. She could keep her eye on us better, and we couldn't hide because the back windows were high up. The only hiding places we had were behind a few bushes and under the house. Under the house was forbidden to us, so we went there a lot, crawling through spider webs and getting smelly with dust, cut with rusted nails, and generally excited by our newfound hiding place.

But ever so often, we would play in the front yard and start across the street at a crisis point in our games, only to look up at the completed house and be reminded that our field was forever gone. Developers had not asked us kids permission to take away our childhood fields. They hadn't thought to inquire.

Many decades later, when I am re-visiting home sitting in the swing of my parents' front porch, I look across the street at what was once the Livingston family's home and the Crutchfields' home and see what was once there: a wide, long field salted with little human critters and one overgrown tomboy laughing and getting dirty and rolling in redbugs and passing secret messages to one another in the hosepipe trenches.

And I imagine one retired developer sitting in his Woodland Hills air-conditioned home and living off the interest generated by selling little kids' hearts to families who had every right to want a piece of land, but who had no right at all to take over our particular golden-grained field of dreamy dreams

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Jim Reed is the Editor of Birmingham Arts Journal while he's not minding the store at Reed Books and the Museum of Fond Memories in Downtown Birmingham. **jimreedbooks.com**

DARK INTERSECTION

Margaret B. Ingraham

for Holly (1957-1978)

You were watching the moon
when you left the road
to take the ravine
where the soft red Georgia mud
whispered to you
as Chickasaw songs
the ancient names
of these hills, that place,
and called your crimson shadow
to mark a richer spot
in the dim half-light
where it fell
like you casually.

Winter comes always
winding its own path
bringing to evergreen shrubs
slick bright berries
that stir your name.
We call into the wind
follow the veil of breath
the lengthening days
as far as we can
but May always edges us
off the trail, stops us
at the place we find
the moon is holding you
in its new arms

.....

Margaret Ingraham, a poet and photographer, was born in Atlanta, GA, and grew up exploring the woods behind her childhood home. Ingraham is the recipient of an Academy of American Poets Award, a Sam Ragan Prize and numerous residential Fellowships at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Ingraham lives in Alexandria, VA.

THAT SEASON

John Tustin

As the summer sun beat brutally and almost eternally upon my back
I looked forward to that season when everything would be red and orange
And yellow
In the sky
And thick as a carpet on the receding grass, the hardening soil
And now that season is here
And all I see is shades of gray.
We were supposed to walk together through the colors
Holding our cups of coffee that would smolder
In the crisp dry morning
After a night of gentle rain
As we held hands and moved about
So slowly and certainly,
Knowing that the twilight may be somber
But every bit as beautiful,
As satisfying.

But here I am alone
Walking through this film noir,
Searching for the technicolor
Toward a sunset the color
Of dust.

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John Tustin edits nothing, graduated from nowhere and has no awards. **fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry** *contains links to his published poetry online.*

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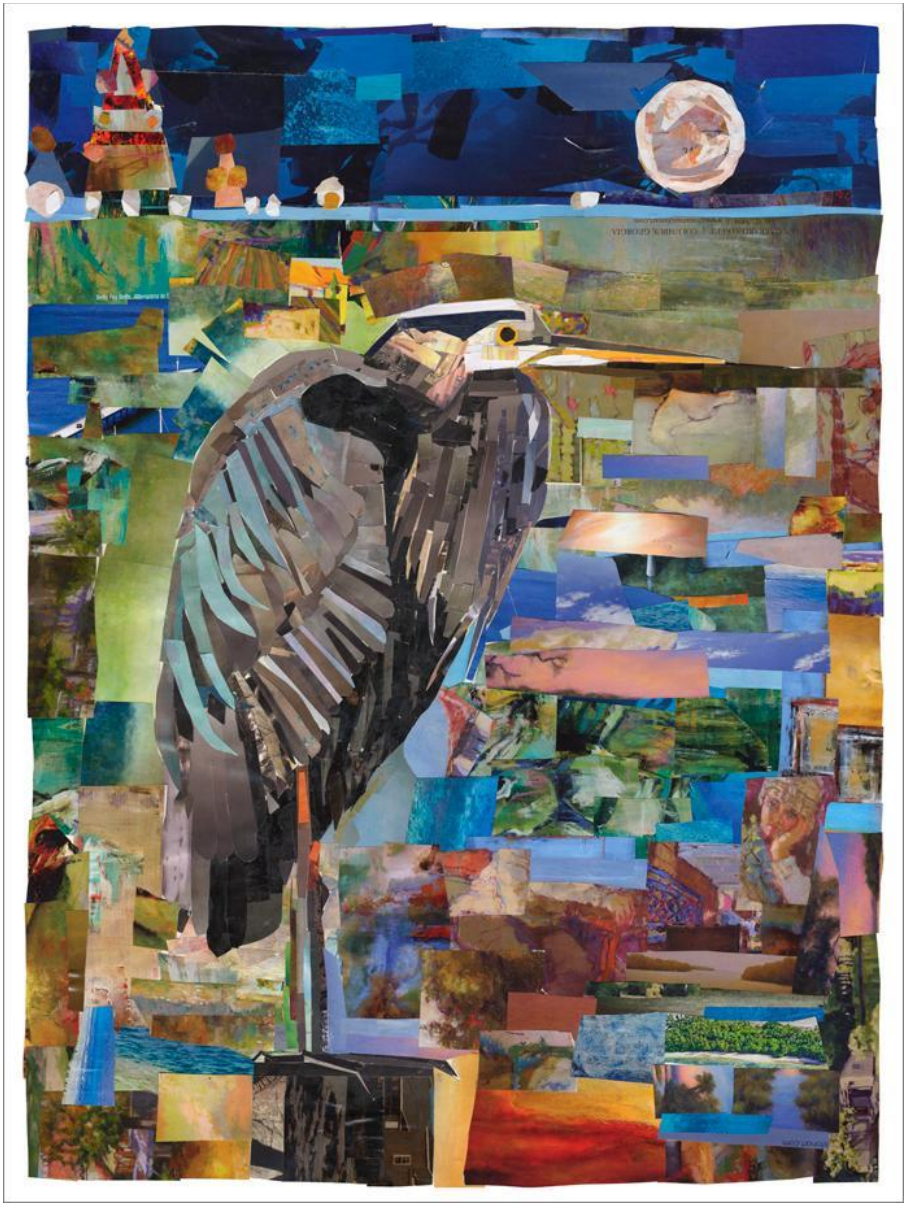

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