

# Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 17 Issue 3



# Birmingham Arts Journal

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## FRONT COVER: THE ENDANGERED HONEY BEE AND ITS SPOKESPERSON APRIL

Maralyn Wilson – “18”h x 14”d x 14”w – handbuilt clay, encaustic wax finish, mixed media. *Maralyn Wilson is a studio artist in Birmingham, AL, who works with and teaches classes in wax painting and encaustic process.* **wax painting@gmail.com**

**BACK COVER: MARDI GRAS** –12” X 18” Acrylic on Board. Betsy Ashe is a self-taught artist who grew up in Sheffield, AL, and now plies her trade in Birmingham. Her primary focus is abstract painting focused on color and texture. **betsyashe@gmail.com**

THE 5<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL  
ANDREW GLAZE PRIZE FOR POETRY  
“Today's Is A Strange Day”

Linda-Raven Woods

Birmingham Arts Journal established the Andrew Glaze Poetry Prize in honor of Andrew Glaze (April 21, 1920-February 7, 2016), our friend and author who served as Alabama Poet Laureate 2012-2016. Mr. Glaze was inducted into the inaugural (2015) Alabama Writers' Hall of Fame.

This annual award in the amount of \$200 is presented to the poet whose work is deemed most distinguished of the poems published in the Journal the previous year. Each year BAJ Editors select an out-of-state juror who receives an honorarium in the amount of \$100. Juror and winner are announced on the Journal website in the first issue of the Journal each year,  
**[www.birminghamartsjournal.com](http://www.birminghamartsjournal.com)**

Of the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Poem, “Today is a Strange Day,” Juror Lesléa Newman writes: *I love the relationship between the narrator and the “you” of the poem. The narrator’s compassion touched me deeply and the narrator’s keen observations made me feel as though I was right there in the room where the poem is taking place. I love how the title works as the first line of the poem and then is repeated at the end of the poem as a single-line stanza, bringing everything full circle. I was surprised by the lines, “I’m happy I caught you/in a lucid moment” which implies there are many moments when the “you” in the poem is not lucid. It was interesting to learn this so late in the poem; my emotional experience of the poem changed as I learned that the situation is more challenging than I was first led to believe. “I see your eyes follow/too closely the rolling march of the clouds outside your window.” The “you” of the poem is being pulled away, and yet looks forward to a “powwow/still two months off.” Will he get there? I fervently hope so.*

*Lesléa Newman is the author of 75 books for readers of all ages including the paired memoirs-in-verse, I CARRY MY MOTHER and I WISH MY FATHER; the novel-in-verse, OCTOBER MOURNING: A SONG FOR MATTHEW SHEPARD and the children’s books, GITTEL’S JOURNEY: AN ELLIS ISLAND STORY and KETZEL: THE CAT WHO COMPOSED. Her literary awards include poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Massachusetts Artists Foundation. From 2008 - 2010, she served as the poet laureate of Northampton, MA. Currently she teaches at Spalding University’s School of Creative and Professional Writing.*

## TODAY IS A STRANGE DAY

Linda-Raven Woods

2018 Hackney Literary Awards - 2nd Place - National Poetry Award

2020 Andrew Glaze Prize for Poetry – Birmingham Arts Journal

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

.....

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

## A SIMPLE TALE

Charles Entrekin

“Description is revelation.”

*Wallace Stevens*

Annie raised nine children in a time before the streets were paved. Her kin came from England like the city’s namesake, Birmingham. Hardscrabble, self-reliant, responsible folks working for the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company.

Jones Valley is the only place on Earth with large deposits of coal, iron ore, and limestone in one place, the natural components to make steel. When it rained the streets ran red with iron ore from the mines.

In 1871 Birmingham is the Magic City: raw materials, cheap black Reconstruction labor, convicts working the mines, immigrant managers from the greatest industrial cities. But Pittsburg has the Carnegie Steel patents that remove phosphorous, so the Southern mines produce pig iron. Northern U.S. Steel buys TCI, but Carnegie’s “Pittsburg Plus” railway fee eliminates any competitive price advantage.

Now the Depression furnaces are quiet. Roosevelt is newly elected. In the precarity of the times, jobs are scarce.

Curtis is mostly away, a Railway Master Mechanic. The boys work on the family farm. One hundred acres to grow the food for the 11 mouths they have to feed.

A simpler time, people traverse through backyards. One never knows who could come through the back gate: a neighbor, a hobo. If you could help somebody out, you would. Annie trades biscuits, churns butter, barter eggs for material to make the children’s clothes. Comity is a necessity.

Annie’s and Curtis’s city house is a white clapboard affair with a big flowering fig tree, a detached garage, a large gate that swings wide to the alley for cars to drive into the dusty backyard.

On this occasion, Annie sits in a garden chair on the small porch at the back of the house, brushing her waist-length brown hair, drying it in the sun, humming to herself. Chickens peck and cluck nearby. Incipient moisture is in the air, the ozone scent of a coming sudden summer storm.

In the distance, a cloud of red dust draws closer. Four of her girls scramble up the road from the drugstore in town, half-running, a cacophony of wild voices yelling over one another.

Annie purses her lips, lays her brush aside. *When you are out in public, she thinks, You represent not only yourself, but the whole family.*

Then she hears her eldest command clearly. “Keep away,” Sister orders. “Mad dog!”

“Hurry,” Annie commands, alert and all-business. “Close all the side gates! How far away?”

“The dog is following us,” Sister huffs, lanky and tomboyish, palms on her knees.

The little sisters are girlish, dainty, their going-to-town dresses stained with red dust. Annie, in sturdy walking shoes, guides them toward the house.

“What was the dog doing?” she asks the twins.

“He was slobbering,” Ethyl answers, wide-eyed.

“Rubbing his face in the dirt,” adds Ruthie.

Last into the house, Cootsie, the youngest, cries softly. Annie leads the three littlest girls inside and returns with the shotgun that hangs by the coal-fired heater. Chickens scatter. Annie loads the shotgun with double aught shells.

“Sister,” she commands, “Stand behind the gate, pull it open to the alley.”

Just then, the yellow dog appears from around a corner, stumbling from one side of the street to the other, snapping at the air, an invisible enemy. It spots Sister as she scampers to safety behind the gate and lurches down the alley toward her.

“When he comes in the yard, shut the gate behind him,” Annie orders. “Run around to the front.” The dog notices the spooked and scrambling chickens and staggers into the yard. Sister slams shut the gate.

Annie steps closer to the foaming dog, shooing chickens from around her feet. “Poor beast,” she mutters.

She aims the shotgun, thinking *Don’t miss*. Through the sight, she looks into the dog’s runny eyes, considers his matted fur, and pulls the trigger. The echo of the explosion rings down the suburban streets, the flapping chickens quiet, all is suddenly still.

When asked why she took matters into her own hands, trapped a rabid dog in with her children, didn’t call the police or the dogcatcher, Annie answers, “That dog was a danger to anyone it ran into. Nothing left to do but put him down.”

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*Charles Entrekin’s works include What Remains, Art of Healing, and others. He is editor of Sisyphus and managing editor of Hip Pocket Press. **Hip Pocket Press@sisyphusmag***

## CAMPING

Matthew Tyson

It was the last week of October and the cooler weather had finally settled in, pushing out the remnants of a late and brutal summer. Jake, Doug, and I had decided to go camping for Jake's 18th birthday at a spot up near High Falls. He was the first of us to turn 18, and he wanted to make it into something.

We filled the truck up with supplies, mostly my dad's stuff: a tent, sleeping bags, matches, a few fold-out chairs, a cooler full of cheap hotdogs and burgers that we'd picked up from the dollar store, Dad's axe, a few feet of rope, a metal grate, my rod, bait, and bug spray.

Jake had about a half case of warm beer hidden under his bed, so we took that. Doug's sister was old enough to get liquor and she bribed easy, so that got us some vodka. We had to pick it up from Doug's house, which was out of the way, but I didn't mind because we didn't have any other options.

They lived in a trailer at the end of a gravel path off County Line near the Kentucky trailhead. We pulled up at about 3pm. Doug was outside smoking, standing next to his own pile of camping gear.

"Throw everything in the bed," Jake yelled from the truck.

"Y'all gonna help?" Doug snapped back as he walked to the tailgate.

We loaded the truck while Doug went back inside. He returned with a handle of vodka, a carton of cigarettes, and a 30x30 bolt action rifle.

"You planning on killing dinner?" I asked.

"Rather have it and not need it than the other way around," Doug said.

Halfway up the mountain, we had to stop. A tree had fallen over and was sprawled across the road in pieces. We took the axe and cleared it.

"Now we got firewood," someone said.

We kept on and got to High Falls just as the sun was starting to set. The dim light of autumn bounced off the trees and turned everything orange. I thought it was beautiful, but I didn't say it.

We parked on the side of the road and hiked a trail to our spot. It was a small, circular opening. People had camped there before. There were crushed beer cans scattered about and a big, black spot in the middle with a bunch of misshapen rocks stacked around it. Across the opening was the head of another trail that split in two directions. One way went up to the falls, the other to the creek bank. You could hear the water.

It didn't take long to set up the tent. Jake cracked a few beers and handed them out, and I felt my stomach flutter as the extent of our isolation became clear. I lit a cigarette and grabbed the rod, bait, and beers.

"Doug, get the gun and a few rounds. Let's go down to the creek and fish."

I didn't catch anything. We sat on the creek side and drank. Doug laid out on a large rock in the middle of the stream and talked about cars or something while Jake walked up and down the bank.

I got through my second beer and started to feel a warm buzz. I took my shirt off, rolled up my pants, and hopped in the water. It was about knee high. Crouching I pulled over rocks and watched carefully as the dust settled.

"The hell are you doing?" Jake shouted.

"Crawfish!" I hollered back.

"Ain't the season," Doug said from his rock.

"Might be a couple."

"There ain't."

Back at the campsite we got the fire going. Doug took a few rocks and built a smaller fire so we could lay the grate over it and cook the burgers and hotdogs. They ended up a little burnt and tasted more like smoke and old wood than meat. The vodka came next. We passed the bottle around and told dirty jokes and all lied about girls we'd slept with. We chain-smoked and drank more vodka and then Jake said he felt like a fight.

"Let's shoot instead," I suggested.

"Shoot what?" Jake asked.

"I don't care. Let's set these empty beer cans up."

"You know how to shoot?" Doug asked me. I did. I wasn't very good.

"Okay, dammit. Let's shoot," he said.

Jake set some beer cans up on the other side of the circle. The light from the fire sparkled off the cans, but barely. Other than that, we couldn't see a thing. Doug handed me the rifle. It was old and heavy but in great condition.

"I love bolt action," I said.

"One in the chamber, three in the magazine. It's ready to go."

I hoisted the gun up and looked through the scope. I could barely see the cans. It was too dark, and I couldn't get my balance. I let out a slow breath and squeezed the trigger.

It was louder than I'd expected and kicked even harder. I missed the cans, but my blood was moving now, and I let out a loud holler, loaded another into the chamber and fired off again, then two more times.



"I think I got one. Hard to see. Good gun though. You're next, birthday boy."

Jake took it and loaded it and shot. He hit two of the cans. Doug shot next and didn't hit anything.

"Sure would be cool if a coyote came out," I said. "I'd take it down."

"Ain't no coyotes gonna come near us," Doug said.

"If they did, I'd kill 'em," I said.

Back around the fire, we drank more and smoked more and told more stories. A little while later, Jake stood up quick and pointed off behind me. I turned fast. We saw lights coming up the trail from where we'd parked the truck.

"Dammit, hide the gun," I said.

Doug grabbed it and the ammo and ran off to the edge of the woods. He laid them down and covered it up with some brush and leaves. I kicked the beer cans into the fire and tossed the vodka bottle out of sight. The lights got closer and we could hear two men talking. As they breached the circle, the fire gave us enough light to see the glint of badges and guns. I stood up.

"Evening, officers," I said. They stopped just short of the fire and put a hand on their holsters.

"Don't approach," one of them said firmly. "IDs out."

"Yessir," I said. We took out our wallets and handed them over. The officers carefully browsed all three.

"Okay, Mr. Reaves," one said to me as he handed my wallet back.

"Fellas, what are we up to tonight?" said the other as he wandered around the campsite with a flashlight. He surveyed our setup and took a peek inside the tents.

Jake spoke up first.

"We're just camping, sir."

"Yeah. We all came up here for a night," I added.

"Got some calls about some gunshots," said one of the officers. "You know some folks got some houses just a few miles from here. Lots of other campers out here this time of year, too. Y'all ain't shooting up here are you?"

"No sir," I lied. "We heard 'em though. We were just talking about that actually. Had us a little nervous."

The officer with the flashlight put his beam on the glittering beer cans in the fire.

"Doing a little drinkin'?" he asked.

"Yeah, a little," I admitted.

"And you boys know you're all underage? If y'all are up here drinking and shooting, that'd be pretty bad. We'd have to do something about that."

Jake spoke up again.

"Just a few beers, officer. And we're not going anywhere. But we weren't shooting, I swear."

The officers were quiet for a moment. My stomach hurt and I could feel my heart trying to break through my chest. Finally one of them spoke up.

"We ain't too far from here. Another call and you're all going in, heard?"

"Yessir," we all said.

"Try to drive tonight, and we'll take you down."

"Yessir," we said again.

"Alright."

They turned and left. We were all quiet for a minute, but relieved. Doug went and got his rifle, cleaned it off, and put it in the tent. I got the vodka, but I didn't want anymore. I opened a beer instead. It was too warm.

We stayed up for a few more hours talking, quieter now. We all got tired eventually and decided to turn in. We hopped in our sleeping bags and got into the tent. I laid on my back and stared up at the sky through the mesh flap in the top. The ground was cold and uncomfortable. I could hear the fire crackle and the wind blow through the trees. I couldn't sleep.

At one point, I thought I heard something rustle outside. I hoped to God it wasn't a coyote.

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

*"What good is happiness if you  
can't buy money with it?"*

—Dean Martin

## THE END

Steve Poer

It's a quiet room, 200-3 CICU. Take the elevator to the second floor, left turn, go to the end of the long hall, another left turn, then past the Chapel, and into the stuffy, little waiting room with the antiseptic smell in the air, that sits adjacent to the cardiac intensive care unit. His room is just inside the large, double swinging doors with the sign with large black block letters banning entry when the doors are closed.

Cheap but sturdy office-quality chairs line the walls of the waiting room, occupied by huddled groups of family members waiting on the 30-minute visitation every 3 hours. Nobody really speaks up, just muffled voices kept low, private, discussing painful details with Fox News droning on in the background about this life-shattering event or another, from a conservative point of view, of course. Outside it's a gorgeous day, mid 70s but with a little fall nip occasionally when the wind kicks up. The bright October sunshine lights up the oranges and reds in the turning trees, vibrant, colorful and such a contrast with the drab pale yellow and moss green painting the scene inside those hospital walls just steps away.

I walk away from the main entrance to the building with my hands in my pockets, just wandering, no destination, nowhere particular to go, just searching for a breath of fresh air. Horns go by attached to unseen cars on the highway. I don't even glance their way, immune to the noise, listening only to the thoughts in my head. Trying to wrap my mind around sickness and death is a hard thing to do for the inexperienced like me, especially hitting so close to home: Dad. He always seemed so invincible, so tough, almost intimidating at times when I was young. Not so much anymore but still seemingly immune to pain, if not totally bullet proof. Timex man, they call him. Takes a lickin' and keeps on ticking. He always bounces back. But maybe not this time. He looks tired. And old. And yes, frail. In my mind, I'm standing there next to his bed and he looks at me to help him, but my hands are empty and I'm no help. It makes me sad.

I understand an 85-year-old heart, the number of beats, the highs and lows of 85 years of life. From looking up at your mother's face at birth to the fascination of being 13, then 18, then 21. Adulthood. Women. Mom. Marriage. Children. Jobs. Retirement. Grandchildren. Highs and lows. Goods and bads along the road of life. We aren't meant to be here forever. But it sure is hard to leave.

Next thing I know, I'm in my car and driving. Going through familiar motions. Stopping at the red lights like I'm trained to do. I think about him teaching me to drive.

The family car was a Ford Galaxy 500 with a straight shift on the column. The way he taught me to use the clutch was to make me drive up a small hill near our house on Avenue T and stop at the stop sign at the top. When a car pulled up behind us, he got out of the passenger seat and walked home. I was scared and mad and frustrated and came close to rolling back into the car behind me, but I didn't, and I never had a problem with a clutch again. Driving could never get any worse than it was to me right then. But I made it. He made me make it.

We had some rough times then, he and I, during those turbulent late 60's and early 70's. I had a serious disrespect for authority, and we clashed frequently. It was one of those "He liked country; I liked rock and roll" kind of relationships. But we got through it. He didn't give up on me like he probably could have, probably should have; but he didn't. I'm sure that was a hard thing for him to do, love me when I was so hard to love.

Now, here we are 40 years later. So much history between us. He's helped make me who I am. He is part of my identity and I filter everything through what he taught me. Because of him, I understand better how to try to deal with sickness and pain. And now death. It's a process and one more step on the journey.

I lose track of time and notice from the clock on the dash of the car that I've been gone almost an hour and I'm about to miss visitation. I head back and search the crowded parking lot for a spot which I guess is a sign the hospital business is good. I find one at the end of the lot and hike back. I enter the front door to the hospital and nod to the familiar security guard at the desk as I walk by. It's become a routine. I'm like a fixture, a part of the place.

I follow my trail back to CICU and arrive just as the doors open for visitation. Mom's there along with the rest of the family. I'm the last to arrive. A lady I don't recognize sits in the corner trying not to intrude but obviously with a job to do. She clears her throat and I look at her. She is very thin with a narrow face and pale skin. She looks like the nervous type but doesn't appear nervous, at least, not now.

"I'm Jennifer with hospice and I've been assigned your husband's case," she says to a grieving wife like my mother by rote for probably the millionth time. "We have some decisions to make and, if everyone is here, we'll get started," she stated very businesslike. She pulled her chair forward in front of my mom and jumped right in.

"Does he have a medical directive or living will? I don't see one in his file. Has he executed a non-resuscitate form? We really need to get all of his paperwork together and in the file." She stopped her inquiry and looked at us to gauge our comprehension.

I could feel my face begin to flush as my blood pressure began to rise. All my anger at the situation, not just her but the entire ordeal, was about to surface directed at this callous woman who lacked the tact of a drunken sailor. "I think this can wait until another time," I said, barely controlling my anger. "This is a little sudden and we need time to talk with Dad and among ourselves. Thank you for understanding," I continued, as I rose, indicating the meeting was over for now. But she wasn't ready to leave that soon.

"It's time for your husband to go home," she stated again directed to my mother, ignoring me. "We can't offer him anything further here he couldn't get there, and he'd be more comfortable there. Is that agreeable to the family?" Jennifer asked again directed at Mom. Mom looked around at the three of us siblings, clearly at a loss. Dad was resting with his eyes closed but he was listening, an interested bystander, not consulted for his opinion. I could tell by his breathing he was taking it all in.

He opened his eyes and looked directly at me and said, "What do you think I should do? Non-resuscitate? Give up and go home? Tell me what you'd do." I blink hard, tears welling in my eyes, and I heard the words I was saying, "You don't want to live like this hooked up to a machine breathing for you. You've fought hard. Go home and be comfortable with your old cat. Ringo misses you," and I began to cry. He sighed and closed his eyes again and nodded and it was done.

Jennifer rose and said she'd make the arrangements for his transfer home by ambulance and then left. It was quiet and no one spoke. When visitation was over, we left and went home to move furniture to make room for his hospital bed in the den with the big screen TV.

When he got home about two hours later everything was ready for him and he seemed in good spirits and genuinely glad to be home. His old cat, Ringo, climbed up on his bed and made himself comfortable like everything was the same as always. But it wasn't and we knew it. We all gathered around the bed talking in low voices and he closed his eyes and appeared to drift to sleep. He had a smile on his face, and he seemed at ease. About an hour later, he exhaled hard and stiffened, then relaxed. He was at peace. He had left us, and this was the end of his story, the end of his first-person account.

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*Steve Poer is a semi-retired attorney from Birmingham, AL, who with his wife, Nita, left Vestavia Hills for the woods of Blount County following the graduation of their two sons from college. He now occasionally tries lawsuits, travels when he can in his motor home, and dabbles with his long running passion for writing short stories and poems about memories both old and new.*

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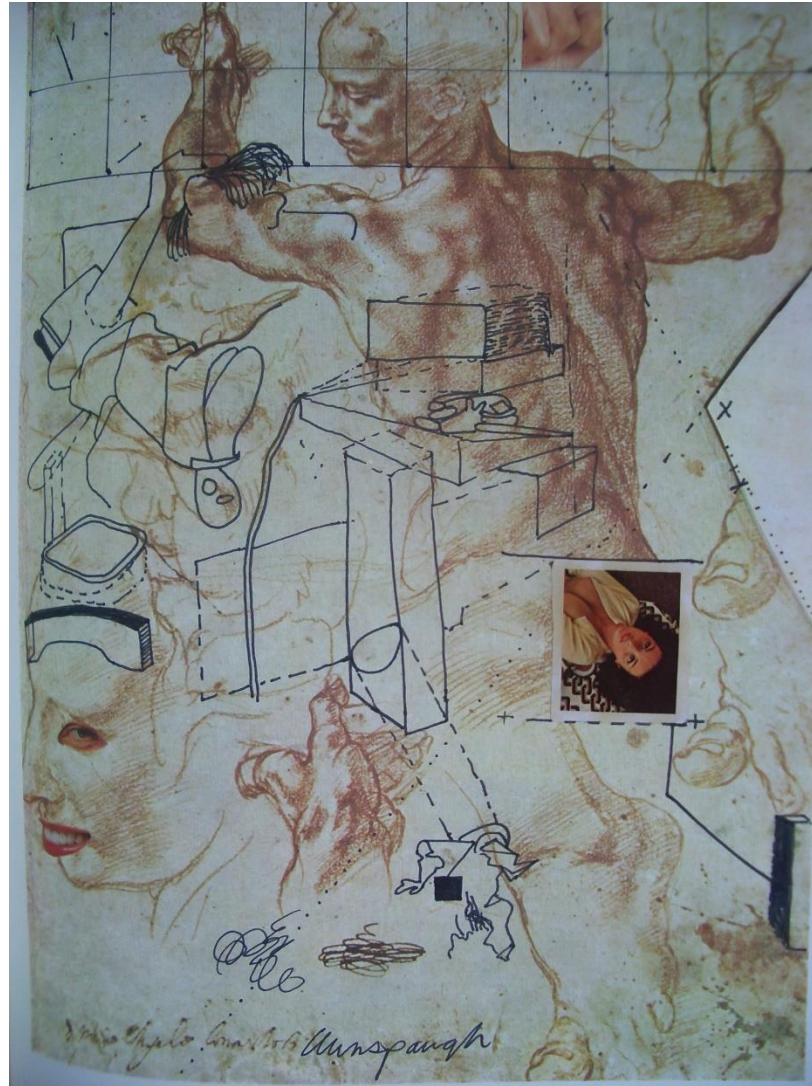
## JAZZERCIDE

Jim Reed

Dancing in  
my head,  
my feet  
tapping, my  
body unmoved  
except inside  
my gut, my  
gut feeling,  
close to  
my heart.  
Within the  
music,  
wondering  
what the  
Void would  
feel like,  
if bereft  
of the  
*beat*, the  
*sound*, the  
*ecstasy*  
of the  
musicians  
and their  
extensions—  
their cyborg  
instruments—  
so much a part  
of themselves  
they don't know where  
*they* begin and the  
instruments end

*Jim Reed is the proprietor of Reed Books, the Museum of Fond Memories, in Birmingham, AL. In his spare time, he writes stories and edits Birmingham Arts Journal.*

**[jim@jimreedbooks.com](mailto:jim@jimreedbooks.com)**



MICHAELANGELO AND ME

Mixed Media

8" x 10"

Dick Aunspaugh

*Dick Aunspaugh, a native of Dunedin, FL, retired from his passion, teaching art at Young Harris College in Young Harris, GA. When not making art, his other passion is kayaking.*

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Birmingham Arts Journal

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Volume 17 Issue 3

## THE BEGINNING OF AN END

Max Johansson-Pugh

After returning the pamphlet to where it had lain, Johan shouldered on his jacket, slumped down onto the porch, and pulled on his leather shoes – tying the final knot, muddled water wrung out onto the tongue. ‘What does it mean by ‘verdant’?’ He thought.

Johan looked out onto his land, where his red, rotten wheat stood, spoiled by the year’s heavy rains. The low light picked up this red hue and painted the rest of the homestead a similarly dismal colour. He hated this shade of red.

Johan grabbed his digging pole and stepped off the porch. In all directions mounds of stone stuck out of the land; the soil, too, was riddled with stones. Walking through the spoiled wheat, onto the rest of his acreage, he thrust the pole into the ground with each third or fourth step. The sound of iron striking rock rang out – four steps later, ringing out again. The land was poor for growing crops. It seemed as if every season Johan tilled the land more rocks would avail themselves—this hard truth in constant reminder by the harsh din of iron meeting stone.

A woman’s voice filled his mind: ‘You know we can’t, Johan. We just cannot afford another one, we can’t risk it.’

Johan turned, facing the sun. In the pale light the bags beneath Johan’s eyes could be seen, each bag indicative of mortgage repayments he’d been late paying. He continued lifting and striking, walking several paces, lifting and striking, steam now rising off his shoulders like cold water on hot stone. “Verdant fields,” he said. “...an ocean passage away.”

Johan pulled up the heavy pole and walked a few paces, slower than he had initially. He thrust the pole into the dirt and it abruptly stopped. He had struck a large immovable rock; a reverberating shock jolted through his arm and a piercing crack rang in his ears—the pole fell heavily to the ground.

“Does God have no mercy for us who till stone country!” He squatted, holding his hand which throbbed with a smarting pain, waiting for composure. It took a while before he continued.

After the ringing receded, his father’s voice entered his mind: ‘Son, we must have faith that God will raise crops as they once were, and even greater. We must believe.’

‘Believe! If belief is all it takes, we should have crops from the door to the horizon. Faith,’—this word he remembered with disdain—‘faith is not the issue here.’



His father had picked up their strewn copy of *A Prayer for the Fruit of the Earth* and placed it back on the table. “Do not lose sight, son, the Lord is almighty, we shall harvest and sow and till as He pleases. No man, however cocksure he may be, will challenge that.”

The wind changed direction and the musty smell of the farm passed over Johan. Again, he raised the pole and struck the ground. “Maybe it means fruitful,” the motion of lifting and striking straining his thoughts as it would were he speaking aloud. He walked past the byre, considered selling his remaining cattle and, as he always did, reserved the decision until tomorrow.

Johan turned around, back toward the homestead, for the final round of striking.

Parallel to his line were his potato crops. Rot had blighted the patch—every second potato had to be tossed—it was hardly good enough for animal fodder. Johan bent down to pick out a rancid stalk; the black stalk was slimy to the touch, lingering on his fingers. He returned his shocked, sticky hand to the digging pole and finished the round. ‘Acres of verdant fields, just an ocean passage away.’

Johan walked back onto the porch, relieving himself of his digging pole and draggled shoes. Beyond the acreage he turned his back on, knolls of tussock reached for the heavens and low, mossy swamp lands brought them down; swathes of sandy soil, strewn with juniper and pine root, stretched across the land and spruce woods and maple trees dotted it—the rest was cursed with stone. Johan took off his jacket and didn’t look back, his day was done.

Inside, the fireplace sent billows of smoke up the chimney—embers crackled on the hearth. Kids’ laughter could be heard from the other room.

In front of him lay a worn pamphlet underneath the prayer book; his wife stood by the table, her hand pulling away furtively from the literature, her winsome face smiling at him. Johan kissed her full, childlike cheeks and they held one another. His wife could not help noticing Johan’s strong body and the effect it had on her.

Johan’s eyes were fixed, burning a hole into the worn pamphlet that lay on the table.

.....

*Max was born in London and raised in New Zealand. He earned an English scholarship out of school, attended the University of Auckland, and has since worked many jobs. His work has appeared in Adelaid, Hypophora, and Backchannels, among others.*

**maxjohanssonz@gmail.com**

## THE NEWSSTAND

Andrew Plattner

May 17, 1944

The man stood at a newsstand inside Grand Central Station. He had a long train ride ahead. He picked up several magazines and newspapers, including a *Daily Racing Form* and *Plain Clothes Detective*. The small, somewhat tattered-looking man who ran the newsstand seemed to be watching him. The newsstand man wore a hat, even though they were indoors. "Where're you headed, buddy?" he said.

The man had a cardboard suitcase at his side.

The newsstand man said, "Leaving New York for good? Think you got something better waiting for you? Come on, forget about this other stuff. I just got this one paper in today. New publication. It's good, everything you need, I promise." He held over a folded newspaper. "Twenty bucks."

"Forget it."

"For you, ten."

"Ten bucks for a newspaper? That doesn't make any sense."

"You don't know what cheap is. You just got to trust me. Because I'm here to help."

The man wanted the magazines and papers he already had under his arm. Now, he wasn't sure what he was looking for. The man believed in chances, that was always his problem. The newsstand man could see he was interested in the racing papers. "All right, here," the man said. He took the last ten-dollar bill from his pocket. "Take this other stuff back. I'm not from here but I've lived in this city for a while now. Just don't think you're conning me."

"Never." The newsstand man took the ten and handed him the newspaper. The man walked away a few steps, and when he glanced back, he could see the newsstand man was putting the detective magazine back in its place. The man took a few more steps, and when he again looked back at the somewhat tattered man at the newsstand, the newsstand man was chatting with another customer, a woman who looked like Olivia de Havilland.

The man opened the newspaper, saw that the masthead said, *Racing Times*. Its motto said, "We Bring You Every Race, Right on Time."

He scanned headlines, stories about races that had been run last week or even two weeks before. One preview was of a race that had been run two years ago! He started to turn the pages, saw they were thin, and the edges were already flaking. He found the entries were from races run last spring. But then when he got to the results page,

he eyes began to blink. The results were from races being run this afternoon! He looked in the direction of the newsstand, where the newsstand man was laughing at what the woman who looked like Olivia de Havilland had to say.

Outside, the man waved for a taxi and one immediately pulled to the curb. "Take me to Jamaica Racetrack!" When the cab was heading up Park Avenue, the man remembered he had no money left. He said to the driver, "You play the races, right?"

"Who doesn't?"

"I can give you a tip today . . . instead of a fare."

"Hey!"

"Listen, I work . . . I know horses! Smoke Ring's gonna win the first race. You have to believe me. I'm skipping my train home to play this horse! We have to hurry because we're gonna miss the double."

The cabbie's eyes went to the rear view, then to the street, then back to the rear view. The man swallowed and said, "When we get to Jamaica, take me to the stable gate."

The cabbie sped through the streets. The cabbie said, "Of all the godforsaken things." But he was under his own spell now.

The man realized he needed money in order to bet. He could borrow something from the grooms he knew. To start, they'd probably laugh at him. The King of the Sure Thing. But they'd scrape together two bucks for him. He'd be able to pay them back before sundown. He'd treat them to a case of whiskey.

The cabbie was already thinking of where he could buy a dozen red roses for his girl. They'd stay up all night.

The taxi sped through the sunlight-filled streets.

.....

*Andrew Plattner's latest story collection, Dixie Luck, was published by Mercer University Press. He writes in Atlanta, GA. [aplattne@kennesaw.edu](mailto:aplattne@kennesaw.edu)*

## JUST THE WRONG WORD AT JUST THE RIGHT TIME

Jim Reed

I am idly scrawling, penknife-sharpened number two pencil tightly clutched.

Even at this early age—a few generations back in time—I am an aimless writer of words. I note things I notice in this long-ago childhood southern village.

Even though my home back then is a modest bungalow, my parents tightly budgeted and careful about things like providing ample food and shelter for us kids, I am never in need of paper and pencil.

My masterly thoughts pour forth onto the backs of discarded family utility bills, advertising flyers, cancelled household checks, envelopes, whatever is handy. I live in a home where filling time with doodling and drawing and composing and reading is approved behavior.

Words and phrases are appearing on the page beneath my hunched-over frame. “I declare.” “I swan!” “I swanee.” “Sho’nuff.”

I like these words because they explain themselves, no dictionary needed. When Aunt Ann laughingly says, “I declare!” it is clear that she is expressing amazement at something she just heard. Amazement and maybe a bit of disapproval.

When Uncle Brandon says, “I swanee!” I know he’s basically substituting a phrase for something more colorful. Because he is around us little ones, his generation does not allow him to use profanity. He saves that for hunting trips with his buddies.

Every time Uncle Pat shouts, “Sho’nuff!” I suppose that he is stifling a more dramatic phrase.

I make notes to verify all this someday when I become a full-grown scholar.

When someone says, “Yikes!” it is immediately clear that amazement and humor are being conjoined.

When Mother says, “This ain’t the way you do that!” with a smile on her face, she is purposely using slang to make a point. She corrects us when we say ain’t, because she wants us to understand that her hero, Will Rogers, only used this word to elicit chuckles. In his newspaper columns, he employed both correct and incorrect expressions to make a point...and to let us know he knew better.

So, just sitting here bent over scraps of paper, getting ready to re-sharpen a number two pencil, I have already, this early in the day, learned a few things:

Different expressions, different dialects, can be tailored for appropriate audiences.

Surprisingly, ungrammatical words become grammatical for a moment, mainly for effect.

A sense of humor can be used to teach harmless lessons, to gain attention, to force an unexpected laugh.

Some decades upon decades later, when I am setting down these thoughts for you, I smile at myself and realize that the world is still open for examination and subject to kindly criticisms and gentle corrections.

I may not be a world-famous writer, but my satisfaction comes from the momentary break in the day I bring to readers who could certainly use it in times like these.

I declare, it ain't so bad, is it

.....

Jim Reed has written too many stories or not enough stories—depends on who you ask—about his life in the Deep South. He curates a rare bookstore in Alabama and helps edit Birmingham Arts Journal. [www.redclaydiary.com](http://www.redclaydiary.com)

*"Never am I less alone than when I  
am by myself, never am I more active  
than when I do nothing."*

—Cato

## THE MOMENT

Jessica Robinson

10. The moment, this moment; the moment that every person must eventually come to terms with, the moment that haunts many until they take their last breath; but not me, I do not dread this moment, I do not fear this moment; There is nothing to fear, nothing to regret.

9. I have done all that I need and all that I can possibly do on this earth; but was it enough, have I done enough, have I lived enough, have I loved enough-- Who have I truly loved, Who has truly loved me; I was in love once; I don't know why I said was;

8. I love her still now, My forbidden love, the one that got away but then found me again, My long-lost love; I have lost so much, No-- I don't want to think of those I've lost I want this moment to be happy,

7. Or at least, peaceful; peace, To finally know peace, To finally feel at peace with myself and the life I am leaving behind; Life, death, beginnings, endings, Is there ever really an ending, or do things just continue in a loop over and over and over again, new people, old ideas continuing repeating, until time itself ceases to exist and the only thing left is the loop;

6. Peace, make peace, who do I make peace with, God; If he even exists, The gods; If they even exist; I shall make peace with myself, I exist; Even if only for a little while longer;

5. Longing, What do I long for—Peace, I long for peace;

4. I wonder what it will feel like, I wonder if I will know what it feels like, or if I'll even feel at all; I don't want to think of the other side-- The other side; The door with the threshold you only cross once; Once, Open the door, cross the threshold go inside; once; One time, one step that is all it takes; Take-- What can I take; Memories, Probably not; I hope so, I would like to take some memories, What memories;

3. Not enough time to conjure the memories, I should have started sooner; Mom, Dad, Alyssa, my love, Love; Those I have loved, One good memory, What memory; The last memory, Am I their last memory—Last -- Nothing lasts,

2. I'm too late, I have no memory; What will I remember-- Remember me – Me;  
Who was I; who am I now, in this final moment; This moment, The Moment,

1. I am at peace. I did fear, but there was nothing to fear. Darkness, but warm;  
Warmth. I can feel, I can feel warm; memories, I still have my memories, peace in my  
memories-- Peace. I close my eyes and feel at peace with my memories in the warmth  
I feel in the darkness that holds; I am at peace.

.....

Jessica Robinson is a senior English Literature major at Oakwood University in  
Huntsville, AL. [jessica.robinson@oakwood.edu](mailto:jessica.robinson@oakwood.edu)

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## AN ACCIDENT

Norbert Kovacs

The machine had caught his hand. We'd seen him hammer in the shop. He had strong,  
wonderful hands.

"I might amputate to save you," the doctor said.

"Not my hand!" the man cried.

"Then where would be the mercy?" the doctor asked.

Where would it be for the cripple? we thought.

.....

*Norbert Kovacs lives and writes in Hartford, CT. He has published stories in Westview, Thin  
Air, Headway, Corvus Review, and The Write Launch. [www.norbertkovacs.net](http://www.norbertkovacs.net).*

## WATCHING, WAITING

Doug Bolling

Afternoons on the street.  
A comforting of shadows  
As I miss the bus to  
183rd.

The pencil seller gives me  
The eye, holds out a fist  
Full of bright yellow #2s.

I have borrowed an apple  
From the fruit stand  
Without feeling those  
Little bangs of guilt.

I watch the lovers feed the  
Pigeons before catching  
The Orange Line to  
Perhaps paradise.

Nighttime will arrive  
As I stand here in wait  
Always hoping for the  
Ride of my life,

The ending that isn't.

.....

*Doug Bolling is a graduate of William & Mary and holds the MA and PhD from Iowa. A native of Kentucky, he currently resides in the Greater Chicago area. His poetry has appeared in Kestrel, Poem, Water-Stone Review, Connecticut River Review, Slant and previously, in Birmingham Arts Journal, among others. He has received Best of the Net and Pushcart nominations and several awards. **dougbolling@comcast.net***



## SHE WAS NOT AND NEVER WOULD BE

Adam Hofbauer

It was Christmas, and I was traveling alone by bus, east from St. Louis to Cincinnati. I had been reading a paperback book loaned to me by a young woman, with whom I had decided to be in love. This book had been assigned to this young woman for one of her intro level English courses, both of us having just then completed our first semester of college. She had read this book, liked it, and loaned it to me, thinking I might like it too. I read it on the bus both as a way to pass the time, and as a way to remain connected to her. I think I finished the book in that trip, eight hours or so through late December highways, with nothing else to do but play CDs filled with songs I had downloaded off Kazaa. At some point, maybe somewhere around Louisville, I looked up from the book and stared out the window. Something I had read had affected me, somehow. I had needed to look out the window and think about it. And I had needed to think about the young woman and feel love for her. I knew, but could not accept at the time, that she was somewhere else and not thinking of me.

I don't think I've never mentioned this young woman to my wife. Not because doing so would be too personal, but because the time I spent thinking of her had so long ago stopped mattering. I rarely thought about her, though I did experience flashes of anger, now and then, at the thing as I remembered it. But I much preferred, now, to remember that old loves are like enduring windows in dead factories. They overlook vast, dark spaces where no one ever goes. We pass them sometimes, on our way to the places we would rather be. We may be tempted, by their endurance, and the proximity of stones, to make target practice of their windows. But there's no point in throwing stones at them.

.....

*Adam Hofbauer's fiction has appeared in Eastern Iowa Review, Emerson Review, Gold Dust Magazine and The Atlantic. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. He lives in Philadelphia, PA. [awhofbauer@gmail.com](mailto:awhofbauer@gmail.com)*



## **HORIZON**

18" x 24"

Watercolor on Watercolor Paper

Carrie Enstiel

*Carrie Enstiel is an oil and watercolor artist residing in Vestavia Hills, AL, with her husband and two children. She received her BFA from Auburn University. **carriensteinart@gmail.com***

## STATUS UPDATE

Robert Boucheron

Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. They stitched me up at the emergency room and gave me some pills. For pain, not recreational use. They recommended physical therapy three times a week. They said scarring will be minimal. I should eventually regain the full range of muscle movement.

I told them it was an accident, so don't worry. I didn't give them your name as the person to notify in an emergency. I didn't mention you at all, at least not that I know of. I blacked out in the rescue vehicle from hypothermia and loss of blood, so I can't be sure.

I don't remember anything from the time they slid me into the back and slammed the door to when the doctor woke me up. They say I moaned and mumbled incoherently. They don't take notes on what a patient says while unconscious. Even if they did, it would have sounded like nonsense. Chemicals in the bloodstream, on top of a natural tendency to babble.

The way I see it, neither of us was to blame, or we both were. Except all I did was point out a few things you took exception to, as we left the club and walked in the deserted street. That led to the altercation, which resulted in a collision with a granite bollard. You ran off, apparently, because when they found me, no one else was in sight.

Maybe you were scared. I don't know, and it doesn't really matter, because I'll be fine. They say I won't suffer permanent damage in the arm and shoulder. I asked about the blurred vision, headache, and unsteadiness. They said symptoms might persist for a while, but they didn't officially diagnose a concussion. Maybe a loose screw. Maybe they thought I had it coming to me, because who goes for a walk after midnight in that part of town? Dressed like that?

I won't call or text you, because the police can trace it, so don't worry. They were not entirely convinced I was alone, so they checked at the club. Someone there gave a description of you, which sounded accurate when they read it to me in the hospital bed. I said I forgot, but maybe another patron accompanied me as I departed the premises.

So, heads up—Officer Truncheon may request an interview at the station. He's a bulldog, and he's been around the block. He didn't lay a hand on me, but he got in my face. If he gets hold of you, he won't be gentle.

I'm posting this online in case you visit the message board out of curiosity. I don't expect you to reply or get in touch. If you do, the police can trace it.

Things are pretty messed up right now, that's for sure, but I'll be fine. As good as new, if not better. Isn't that what they say? Don't worry about me. I worry about you.

.....

*Robert Boucheron is an architect in Charlottesville, VA. His short stories and essays appear in Bellingham Review, Fiction International, Louisville Review, New Haven Review, Saturday Evening Post, and other magazines. [rboucheron@gmail.com](mailto:rboucheron@gmail.com)*

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## SELF-ISOLATING

Thomas Neil Dennis

*Ekantvasa*, in Sanskrit: seclusion from society.

Almost 5, I self-isolated from the very first crackling autumn day when the bus came, and my mother cried, and my cousin cried, and I cried but still got on the bus that took us all to the field-rock structure that was Thompson's elementary school: wide tall wooden steps up to noisy halls redolent of ancient Alabama dust, spilt chocolate milk, kid-sweat (not unlike damp squirrels) and kid-puke, hallways of running kids and queued kids and packed lunchrooms where we ate like ravenous puppies. I continued to self-isolate until I met someone who helped me break out of it for a few years, around 1965 or so, but that's not this history.

Later, I returned to this old way of self-isolation. It goes without saying, right, that this is not a very mentally healthy way to waste one's youth. Yet if you never feel comfortable in a group, how else can you behave? There was rebellion, but that way led to jail, didn't it? Delinquency. If the groups to which you are supposed to belong — school, church, community-at-large — do not jive with what you feel and think, don't wait — self-isolate!

There were times I thought I *might* become part of some larger-than-two group or other, and there were pharomic concerts, it is true, where I almost had what the anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl termed a *participation mystique* experience, which could come close to breaking down one's self-isolation. I suspect that those who feel patriotism are able to feel part of a larger group, almost a creature, and to identify as

“Armenian” or “Canadian,” rolling out genuine tears when one’s flag is displayed. *Pas moi.*

*[Often enough, I have wished this were not true. Before you condemn me as too heartless, I do feel a certain love of the land itself when I visit, say, Mount Mitchell in North Carolina. That’s as close to fatherland adoration as I can come — and it’s directed at blue spruce trees, mostly, acres and acres of them.]*

Yet I was always a part apart, discrete, observing in order to write it down later in perhaps a distorted or fictionalized fashion. I am sometimes seen at public places talking to folks, being as amiable as the next person, but when you turn around — I’m gone. I leave wine-and-cheese events early and quickly, without apology nor words of farewell. Rude? Perhaps.

In order to write and edit work into a perhaps publishable form, one needs time alone. Lots of it. There’s no way out of it, and every serious writer knows this. It’s the answer to about half of the questions people ask writers: “You sit down in a chair in a room by yourself and get to work.”

May I bid you welcome to my personal default mode of being, those of you new to self-isolation. Extroverts, I know you are struggling; you will be OK.

It has its perks. For me, it has always been thus. May I digress? A room in my house was once fitted out for writing and became my de facto office, termed “the futility room.” The loud electric typewriter kept family members up at night. It was a place to self-isolate, warm, redolent of fabric softener and the consolatory rolling thumps of the dryer. I did much of my best work there. Point being, find yourself a comfortable place to exclude all the world.

Lonesome traveler at the back of the train, reading Duras? That’s me. Guy sitting by himself in the corner of the bustling coffeeshop, that eminently forgettable person at the crowded bar who is momentarily invisible to the bartendress, so self-isolated is he? *C’est moi.* He won’t say a single word until/unless you speak to him first.

.....

*Neil Dennis lives east of Birmingham, AL, where, among other activities, he hikes, practices yoga, and annoys others with his guitar: open C tuning improvisations. He often affects a British accent among those who do not know him. "Exit Music," a sort of memoir, is one of his current projects.*

**thomas.neil.dennis@gmail.com**

## SISYPHUS

Andrew Hanson

The lily pad palms  
the lotus of its cargo  
over endless waves

.....

*Andrew Hanson is a freelance writer and poet living in Miami, FL and has recently been accepted by Thirty West Publishing House, The Bookend Review, twice by **The Ekphrastic Review** and twice by Ariel Chart. **arhanson305@gmail.com***

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## ARS POETICA

Franchot Ballenger

This poem does not wish to be more.  
This poem does not wish to be a prayer.  
This poem does not wish to be alms for the birds.  
This poem does not want to  
throw its body across the barbed wire.  
This poem does not wish to be a fly  
bumping against the window.  
This poem does not wish to be a river of stars.  
This poem does not want to be a door.  
This poem does not want to be glad tidings.  
This poem is definitely not a pilgrimage.  
It does not want to be your mirror or your reading glasses.  
This poem does not wish to be a lamp unto your feet.  
This poem does not wish to be your cat curling in your lap  
or your Fido panting in your face for a head pat.  
This poem, self-respecting poem that it is,  
simply wishes to be  
itself.

.....

*Franchot Ballinger taught English at the University of Cincinnati for 37 years. He now volunteers with the Cincinnati Nature Center and as a spiritual care volunteer with Hospice of Cincinnati. **hanshan12@gmail.com***

## THE BULLY

Tom Gordon

You're poised to take your first bite  
from the suet slab when he glides in  
like a slow-moving arrow,  
and you flee.

Not for the first time,  
the mockingbird  
has just told you  
to stay the hell away.

Later, he will idle near your nest,  
open his beak and bellow  
the song he stole from your cardinal pal  
or mimic the alarm from the car owned  
by the man who put the suet  
in the crepe myrtle  
to which he claims a miser's rights.

He and his ilk are a Magic City menace,  
nasal sandpaper noisemakers,  
possessive power line perchers,  
playground punks keen  
on taking your stuff,  
the feathered Klansmen in the kudzu  
your babies learned to fear  
before they left the nest. It's not enough  
that best-selling books bear his name,  
that states have named him their official bird.  
It will never be enough  
so long as birds like you  
are around to breed,  
feed and assert your right to be.  
When I see him, I palm a rock.

.....

*Tom Gordon received his undergraduate degree in political science from the University of Alabama and a master's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri. He has reported from Iraq and West Africa, and his poetry has also appeared in Aura. He lives in Birmingham, AL. [tomgordon99@gmail.com](mailto:tomgordon99@gmail.com)*



Drawing courtesy of Wikipedia



## ALAS, POOR DANNY, I KNEW HIM WELL

Jesse Bates

in fond memory of a childhood friend

His death scene was like his life—scattered.  
Bones were detritus casually strewn across two states' border, spotted by road  
workers.  
Living or dead Danny had no use for borders.  
At that final moment, which way was he traveling?  
East? West? In that moment,  
Could he remember?  
In a life defined by wandering, did it matter?  
His mind so quick, so impromptu, so fast,  
Was it too fast, too impromptu, too quick  
For his diminutive body?  
The fingers so fast, so firm upon piano keys,  
Found haphazardly among the weeds  
Carried east and west by diminutive carnivores.  
The old body, finally stilled in death,  
Lay near the road, hidden just beyond sight.  
Bits traveling east and west.  
Was it a crime scene? What happened?  
Five or more years ago, what happened?  
An overtired trucker swerved, hit an old  
backpacker, launching  
The body into the brush?  
A joy-rider texting too long  
Struck some useless hobo,  
Then roared away hoping no one would know  
Or was there no crime at all?  
Did he just wander off the road?  
His mind—his precious, lightning quick mind—  
Grasping fleeting sights and sounds, now

Mozart, now Klee, now some old friend,  
    now some old joke—  
Too tired, too confused.  
Should he go East? Go West?  
Years of trekking from one town to another.  
Years on one friend's couch. Or another.  
Months in one place, days in another.  
Never settled anywhere, in body or mind.  
Wandering to other places even while  
    sitting still.  
His thoughts so full. Peace always just beyond grasp.  
Move on. Move East. Move West.  
A lonely skull of a lonely man by a lonely highway.  
Now, now like Yorick,  
A fellow of most fine jest,  
“Where your jives now, your gambols?  
Your songs? Your flashes of merriment?”  
East? West? No use for borders.

.....

*Jesse Bates is a Birmingham native, born, raised, fed, and educated. He bamboozled the State of Alabama into paying him for performing, designing, and teaching theatre for 40 years. He has no other handiwork for you to search except through his students in local community theaters, TV, and Disney films. And his grandkids- but don't get him started. [dramajesse@gmail.com](mailto:dramajesse@gmail.com)*

“Assume a virtue, if you have it not.”

—Hamlet

## ODE TO POETRY

Ruth Hersey

You have words to say it all,  
Poetry,  
even what can't ever be said.

I read you or write you  
when I'm happy,  
or when I can't bear it anymore.  
Sometimes I send you to others,  
and sometimes I clutch you close,  
keep you all to myself.

You're filled with nouns:  
flowers and dust,  
onions and garlic,  
American redstarts  
and emptiness.

You're filled with verbs:  
snack and giggle and rest,  
yearn and caress and lose,  
blurt,  
dream and wake and  
love.

You're filled with moments:  
an afternoon in Paris,  
feeding pieces of schwarma to the pigeons;  
a morning in Port-au-Prince,  
watching tires burn;  
bath time,  
soothing a baby in warm sudsy water.

You are deep and wide,  
like a steamer trunk I'm packing for an ocean voyage,  
or like the ocean itself,  
stretching endlessly into the horizon,  
with room for complications.  
With room for all of it.

.....

*Ruth Bowen Hersey is an American who grew up in Kenya. She lives in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where she's been teaching, parenting, and writing for 24 years. Lately, she's added birding to that list of favorite activities. [chelangat@gmail.com](mailto:chelangat@gmail.com)*



## GROWTH

Digital Painting  
Amanda Denham

*Amanda Denham lives in Pinson, AL with her husband and two rabbits. She is currently publishing a novel and making as much art as she can. [mandsdenham7@gmail.com](mailto:mandsdenham7@gmail.com)*

## UNTITLED

Simon Perchik

\*

Burning to the ground, this candle  
makes from its light a raft  
holds it together with string

rotting the way this table  
is charred from a spark  
that arrived late then stayed

warmed by moons  
one by one come here  
as this wooden chair left bare

where shoulders should be  
taking you in, alone  
covered with salt and melting.

\*

As if the exact dates mattered  
have something to do with afternoons  
though when you drop a small stone

you hear in the blast a tailwind  
draining this field by counting backwards  
till it flattens beneath her grave as smoke

you build a chimney, comfort her  
with hours left standing, reaching out  
for one another, heating the sky

for clouds and arms that cover the Earth  
the way you place something down  
that has her breath and side by side.

\*

You darken each slice as if it is the flour  
that has forgotten where in the oven  
you learned to first go mad, alone  
the way each moon before breaking open  
lets you have one last look  
mixed with smoke to make amber

then harden in the—you eat  
crust that's been reheated, bite  
into the night sky where your teeth

come back to life, catch fire  
stripping your lips to the bone  
no longer soft, swollen from kisses

burnt bread—you feed on stone  
while it's coming apart from the silence inside  
by the mouthful, what once was a love song.

\*

To hold on you make a boy from paper  
pin the snapshot up so its dampness  
keeps its eyes from closing—reach around

and though this gesture stops mid-air  
it presses against his chest till the wall  
spreads over the Earth as an early map

where every stream becomes your fingertip  
comes to an end in a dried riverbed  
whose bottom stones are sentences, talk

tell you why they too no longer move  
are hiding from something still reaching out  
that is not your arm waiting to be bandaged.

\*

This time the moon is brought in  
faces you, still tied , struggling  
as the light being taken away

wave after wave what you hear  
is the splash that began its life  
in a valley with nothing left

lowered for the first tide  
the way you dead still remember  
its shoreline being carried back

stretching out on its own  
letting your graves take hold  
as the longing to open and fill.

.....

*Simon Perchik's work has appeared in Partisan Review, The Nation, The New Yorker and elsewhere. **simon@hamptons.com***

*"If you start to think about your moral  
and physical condition, you usually  
find that you are sick."*

—Goethe

## MAMA

Rachel McKenzie

Mama died on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999. That night we were all together in her hospital room, but her soul was somewhere else. She was on a riverbank with her feet in the water, and a cane pole in her hand, working very hard at relaxing. She sat on a blanket damp from the ground, under a big old shade tree. There was a slight breeze rustling through the leaves, and a little babbling brook nearby.

As Mama did some fishing in her world, we tried to make her happy in ours. We talked and soothed and held her hands and started singing. After “You are my Sunshine,” and a couple of lullabies, we resorted to Christmas songs. Some of the old favorites sounded pretty, despite our cracking voices – and Mom would murmur, “Applause, Applause!”

At the river, a small boat slowly ambled past. The little fisherman waved and docked his boat on the other side. Mama watched from the bank, enjoying the light glittering off the water, and feeling cool earth between her toes. She set the cane pole against the tree, and lay back on the blanket to rest, letting the sun warm her face, and the wind dry off the perspiration. She closed her eyes and listened to our music.

Back at the bedside, we exhausted all the songs we knew. We realized the battle for life was being lost in her frail body. Mama’s eyes looked around, but didn’t see us, and I prayed for some comforting angels. Then we waited in silence until hospital staff brought us back to reality.

We grieve deeply of course and will miss her dearly. But I believe that little fisherman was the great Fisher King, and Mama was crossing that river into heaven. Even as we were singing Christmas carols on Halloween.

.....

*Rachel Dyar McKenzie has long been a writer in secret only. Her first published poems appeared last year in Blue Lake Review, Charleston Anvil, Loch Raven Review, Ariel Chart and others. She lives in her 1911 home in Birmingham, AL with her husband, Mike.*

**lostmymarbles50@gmail.com**



## ROADKILL

Jamie Elliott Keith

She lies across the vivid yellow line  
as if taking a quiet nap.

Air gusts from passing tires and ruffles  
the thick fur, and though her face is turned,

I recognize the gray curl of her back,  
that black-ringed brush of tail.

I imagine those dark-mittened hands, once so nimble,  
washing themselves in our cat's water bowl,  
now clutched stiff in prayer, bright eyes dimmed  
behind a tragic mask, nose growing cold.

I imagine scooping her up, my arms a cradle  
for her still, warm body, those delicate bones.

I imagine fur lifting, light as feathers,  
and her rising up, up into the autumn-crisp air.

.....

*Jamie Elliott Keith lives in Knoxville, TN, and works as a community volunteer. Her work has appeared in such journals as The Cape Rock, San Pedro River Review, Third Wednesday, Soundings East, and Common Ground Review. Her first chapbook, Past the Edge of Blue (2017), was published by Iris Press. [kjkjz@comcast](mailto:kjkjz@comcast).*

## THURSDAY AFTERNOON

T. J. Hunter

Low on gas, I stopped at a Chevron on Highway 31 and squeezed a stained pump. The hum of traffic was steady like the chilly breeze whipping under an overcast sky. A woman with frizzy black hair and a swollen plastic bag paced near the pumps. She seemed lost and pleaded with her phone. She paced to the highway then back to the storefront. She was almost in tears. Her watery eyes met mine and she approached, sweating and desperate. She held her phone away from her mouth and asked for a ride. I could only nod.

“Oh, thank you... Thank you, Jesus! Lemme run inside real quick.”

The pump clicked, I pressed *No* for receipt, then started my car. I hid my wallet and phone, then idled. The woman walked back briskly, her mind looked miles away. She sat in the passenger seat with a smell of stale tobacco.

“Where to?” I asked while shifting into Drive.

She asked if I could drive her downtown to her apartment. “Or I can walk from the BJCC if dat don’ work. Don’ wanna be any mo’ trouble,” she said sniffing.

While I drove us through Red Mountain, she unloaded a story about her daughter who had a mental breakdown and was being kept in the Cooper Green psych ward. The woman had taken in her two grandkids and was trying to keep them out of foster care. She sobbed, wiping her nose on her sleeve. If she could show cause, she could keep custody of her grandkids. Meaning, as she understood it, having an apartment and a job. She worked three jobs. The state representative to approve or deny whether she could keep her grandkids would be at her apartment in 30 minutes, hence her panic. Her normal ride, the MAX bus, was late. And when she called the MAX Operator, she was told it would be an hour before a bus arrived. The panicked, hopeless version of her who paced the gas station seemed like an appropriate response.

She talked frantically about her grandkids. “If ‘dey get up in ‘dat system, we’ll never see ‘em again,” she said breathing heavily.

“You’re right,” I said. “Or it’ll be a lot harder to get ‘em out.”

I drove by the BJCC then behind Arthur Shores Park to a part of town I’ve never been. It looked run-down, beaten, weathered, forgotten. She

navigated me to an unmarked, broken building with rusty rails, a busted sidewalk, and overgrown brush. Across the street were abandoned houses stripped of character and memories that now looked like a stereotypical set for squatters

and junkies. The woman had only \$12 and offered it to me for driving her. I told her to keep it. She sobbed something about needing to buy food for her grandkids. She kept sobbing as she left my car, looked to the sky, and started toward the broken building.

Across town, at my original destination, I pulled into recycAL, the recycling center in Avondale. I felt moved and humbled as I emptied aluminum cans into greasy bins. An old man in a *Friends of the Birmingham Public Library* t-shirt argued with a graying thirty-something, the thirty-something's kids looking on from the car. The old man yelled something about #2 plastic being placed in the #1 plastic bin. The thirty-something, far removed from the certainty of knowing that his kids have a home, flipped off the old man's car as it rolled away. Tensions were high. A woman in a blue Prius inched up and dropped her head with a heavy sigh, then jerked up motioning for me to hurry. A worker handed me a pamphlet, a kind of *Sorry, We're Closing* pamphlet. People were now inconvenienced; their routines would be interrupted.

I drove back to the suburbs via Highway 31 in light traffic. I passed the Chevron where I gassed up, and a MAX bus crawled by. I thought of the woman downtown and wondered if she was able to keep her grandkids.

.....

*T.J. Hunter has written for Birmingham Arts Journal, Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, New Southern Fugitives, and others. He is a 2020 Best of the Net Nominee, and his poetry is forthcoming in Stillwater Review. Hunter studied at the University of Montevallo, and lives in Birmingham, AL. [timjhunter@msn.com](mailto:timjhunter@msn.com)*

*"Blessed are the cracked; for it is  
they who let in the light."*

—Groucho Marx



## WALLFLOWER

Erin Hardin

42 ' X 72"

Oil on Birchwood Panel

*Erin Hardin is a psychotherapist turned oil painter residing in Birmingham, AL. Her work focuses on the connection between the physical and emotional self as well as the extraordinary beauty of things and moments often taken for granted.*

**[www.ErinHardinArt.com](http://www.ErinHardinArt.com) [Erin@ErinHardinArt.com](mailto:Erin@ErinHardinArt.com)**

## SUPPER

Danny Barbare

The sausage and sauerkraut  
Wanted to be a poem.  
So I made it sizzle  
    Word for word  
I could smell the sentences  
In the air  
Taste them upon my tongue.  
I swallowed the metaphor  
    And simile  
Till my belly was nearly a  
Skillet full  
Of experimental free verse  
    Served with a ladle  
That satisfied me like a song.

.....

*Danny P. Barbare has recently been published in North Dakota Quarterly and Columbia College Literary Review. He resides in the Upstate of the Carolinas with his wife, family, and small dog Miley. **barbaredaniel@yahoo.com***

## HOW YOU GO

Frank Dawson

Yesterday as I reached down to tie my high-top work shoes, I could see a friend from years ago smile and even giggle at the prospect of my wearing such clogs. It was Don. His passing fills my waking hours with moments of sadness and joy. He died too soon. And his wife Mary, a couple of years earlier. In love since kindergarten, with photos to prove it.

I'm constantly thinking of my bud, his wife and lots of others, not victims of the COVID plague, leaving a big hole in our lives. The obits are essential now. Who today? Last week a dear sister-in-law. Tomorrow a professional mate, a confidant, or the relative of a close friend.

Confinement leads to probing mementos. Just before Thanksgiving I spent a week plowing through my high school yearbook, finding dozens of faces and names I'd long forgotten. So many I had to call an old classmate and suggest he grab his yearbook and do the same. There's Don, leaning on the railing near the high school entrance, posing for a group picture. No doubt something to do with music. He loved to sing. Some of those very faces and names have met me again recently in the obits.

Thanksgiving season. No big family feast. Low key, as the Fourth and Halloween. Christmas came and went without much notice. So much death overcame the moment, clouding the most important birth. The seasons and the big days fly by, and we try to think of how to dash out for supplies or finish neglected home chores. Keep on the go.

But it all comes back. Don comes back. I hope his grown children know how hilarious he was. His cackle of a laugh, his sly word play. Our comic communication with mispronunciations and goofy cartoons still break me up. I had more stories and jokes to share and kept expecting him to drop by and leave a crazy note on the door.

How to figure it all? Pandemic thoughts pervade daily schedules, future hopes and dreams. One shot now. Maybe another soon. Then what? Some other medical adjustment, maybe.

Help me, Don. Keep up my spirits. Stop me from thinking every day how tragic it is that you had to leave so soon. You and who else? Yes, who else? And when? Thanks for the memories, Don, Mary!

What would we do without the good thoughts? How will we manage fleeting life away from friends and family? Recently I asked a neighbor about another neighbor who walks the street daily but had not been seen lately. I wanted to know if our friend is ok. He's fine, thanks, and I'm better for asking. You, too. Go inquire. Remind the postal carrier to take care. Give the trash collector an encouraging wave. And as the Brits sometimes say, "Mind how you go."

.....

*Frank Dawson, artist and writer, creator of karmic cartoon characters, serious poetry and creative cuisine, lives and muses on the Cahaba River near Birmingham, AL.*

**frankdawson82@gmail.com**

*"Thus through half-belief, we are often  
doomed to repeat that very past we  
should have learned from."*

—Ray Bradbury

## IZZIE

John Dorroh

My dog ignores the honks  
of flying geese, of creatures  
burnt up from too much moon.  
She rests. It is a good time  
to be old with rusted hips  
and saran-wrapped dreams.

She coasts.

My dog likes treks  
into the deep bowels  
of the backyard. Her salad bar  
of summer greens, of sweet grasses.  
She knows which ones will make  
her sick.

She takes morning sun  
on weathered deck,  
her square jaw covered  
with delicate gray fur,  
thinning, hanging on  
to pink flesh.

She assumes swimming position,  
silky paws outstretched  
on dry water, her lane clear.  
Silver eyelashes like movie star  
highlights. Five shades of brown,  
and perfect tufts of white.

She knows so much,  
the important stuff,  
and doesn't worry  
about the end.

.....

*Whether John Dorroh taught any secondary science is still being discussed. His poetry has appeared in about 75 journals, including Dime Show Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Os Pressan, Feral, Selcouth Station, and Red Dirt Forum/Press. He also writes short fiction and the occasional rant. [travelerjd59@gmail.com](mailto:travelerjd59@gmail.com)*



## AUTUMN

Despy Boutris

There's so much left unsaid.  
Raking maple leaves, I remember  
how we stood in the orchard—  
the peach you picked bruising  
in your sudden clench of fist,  
how your freckling face fell,  
our love collapsed. My love,  
if I could have kept us  
from unraveling, I would have—  
memories unstitching, lips  
unmouthing the heat of a neck.  
Once, you were my making  
and unmaking. And now,  
my sweet, my bittersweet,  
I'm still unloving you. I'm still  
unkissing your lips, still daydreaming  
of you as I stand in our hometown,  
in a pile of crunching leaves.  
I'm still unleaving.

.....

*Despy Boutris's work has been published or is forthcoming in American Poetry Review, American Literary Review, Southern Indiana Review, Copper Nickel, Colorado Review, The Adroit Journal, Prairie Schooner, and elsewhere. Currently, she teaches at the University of Houston, works as Assistant Poetry Editor for Gulf Coast, and serves as Editor-in-Chief of The West Review. **dboutris14@gmail.com***



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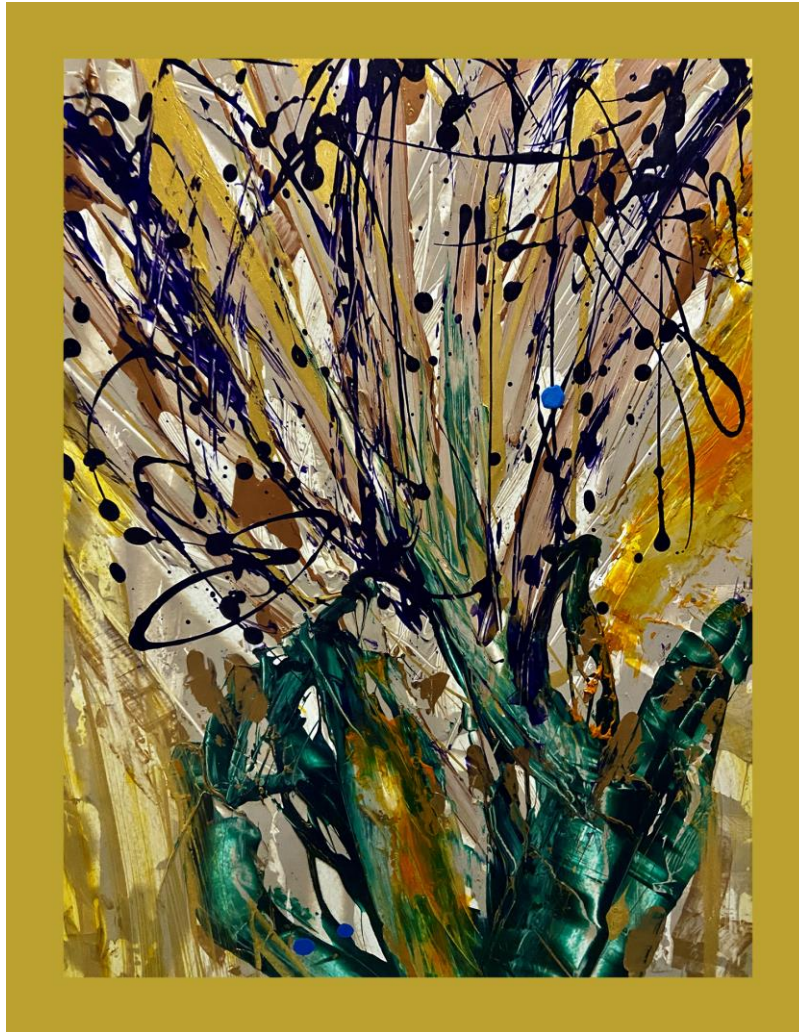
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