

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 17 Issue 4



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: PETUNIAS – Tom Dameron – Watercolor/Encaustic

Tom Dameron is a true Renaissance Man: retired pharmacist, sousaphone player with The Legendary Pineapple Skinners and The Old-Fashioned Rhythm Method, and fine art painter when he can find time. Tom lives in Homewood, AL. tom@tomdameron.com

BACK COVER: TRANSFORMATION – Kay Vinson – Mixed Media – 8" x 24"

Birmingham artist Kay Vinson, arranges textures, shapes, and found objects, then adds layer upon layer of glazes to create a multisensory experience for the viewer. She lives in Mountain Brook, AL. www.wildwoodarts.net

HANDS OF REFLECTION

Jeral Williams

Cudjoe Lewis

Clotilda survivor, one of the last living slaves.

Grainy photos reveal Rodin-worthy hands:

thumbs sculpted like small plantains

aligned with strong, gnarled fingers

and a missing fingertip!

Your hands

firmly grip legacies

of seizure, passage, servitude, freedom

with a fingertip left behind.

Your hands

fought captors in Benin,

touched hopelessness bounding the wretched sea,

toiled beneath the scourge of slavery,

joyfully folded with peals of liberty.

Your hands

magnificent sculpted hands

reflections of the worst of humanity

honor to the best.

.....

Jeral Williams is a retired Professor of Psychology living in Mobile, AL. He began writing poetry late in life. He relishes the community and inspiration the arts bring, especially in these difficult times. ggsi@bellsouth.net

POCKETS

Hi.

My name is pockets, and I don't write poetry

I write soup kitchen fortune cookies

I write narcotic fueled nocturnes

I write speeches for the speechless

Pornographic lamentations

Questionable quotations

And a bunch of filthy words

But I don't write poetry

Cause nothing I've ever said

Has been that beautiful

.....

Pockets is a writer from Birmingham, AL, who takes little parts from the beauty, the rust, and the rest of us and captures what makes this city magic.

pocketsthepoet@gmail.com

*"History will be kind to me, for
I intend to write it."*

—Winston Churchill

GOING NOWHERE FAST

Susan Murphy

I am coming to you from the front seat of my car. The car is sitting in the Starbucks parking lot like it does every day at this time. I am hiding from my dog.

It's not like my dog Dave is some Cujo-type menace who brings terror to my heart. It's just that he's needy. Very needy. When I am within range, he wants me to throw a ball or take him for a walk or toss him a treat, so if I do not remove myself from the house, no writing gets done, and Mama needs to write like Mama needs to breathe.

During the early COVID lockdown days, back when we were told that a mere two weeks of isolation would send the virus packing (weren't they cute?), I would simply back my car out of the garage and sit in the driveway. However, as the restrictions continued, Dave grew in wisdom and in strength and discovered that he could keep an eye on the entire neighborhood from his perch on the living room chair. When he saw me sitting in the driveway, he would set to howling like I had abandoned him on the steps of the doggie orphanage. This was disconcerting for my neighbors, and so now I am in the Starbucks parking lot hiding from my dog.

I don't really mind sitting in my car. I order my iced green tea (three pumps of classic syrup and no extra water) in the drive thru, do a window hand-off check-in with my barista peeps, then park a few feet away where I can still hear the music that is piped outside. It's a socially distant compromise, but I'm making the best of it. With the addition of some well-placed cupholders and a pack of funny cocktail napkins, my car has taken on the life of a cozy little four-wheeled tree house, albeit in a very low tree – a shrub house, if you will. When the sun is shining, it is warm and pleasant. When the rain is pelting the windshield, it feels safe and cozy and secure. I pick up my pen, and I write.

It may also be true that just being in the car is a watered-down balm for my aching desire to travel. Over the years, I have been to some amazing places. Now, when I leave the house, I am going to the grocery store or the post office, but it is still true that when I turn out of my driveway, if I kept on driving, I would be at a lodge in upstate Maine. A different turn and, sooner or later, my tires would wheel into my sister's driveway in Illinois where the cocktail gong would have just

sounded. If I drove south and south and more south, I could put my toes in the sand in the Florida Keys. For some reason, that thought is comforting to me.

When I was growing up, my family made yearly trips from Texas to Connecticut. It was three long days of driving, but eventually we stepped out into a place that had sandwiches called grinders and a donut shop down by the beach. All we had to do was keep driving. I didn't do the driving, of course. My job was to sit in the backseat and fight with my sister, but somehow, the jones-ing seeped into my veins.

To that end, in another sidestepping configuration, I have been walking to Disney World. Actually, I'm just walking around my neighborhood, but I Googled how far it was to my favorite hotel and am systematically crossing off the miles. Today, I'm a little better than halfway there. If the COVID fog lifts and I can actually make the drive to Disneyworld before I hit my goal, I have decided to spot myself the rest of the miles.

I think I deserve it. I've been a socially distant, mask-wearing, get-along gal to these many months. I've worked very hard to unearth quirky but encouraging things to write about even when I was not the least bit encouraged myself, and there was only one time that I threw something at the television, but that was during the post-election nonsense and I'm giving myself special dispensation for that.

I've been giving myself a lot of things lately, but that's okay. I'll settle up accounts when things return to some semblance of normal. Until that golden day, I will drive thru and pick up curbside and write in my car outside Starbucks, because, you see, I am hiding from my dog.

.....

*Susan Murphy has been writing the column Murphy's Law for the Over the Mountain Journal since 1990. Her book, Mad Dog Mom, won the 1998 Small Press Award for Humor. Her work has appeared in The Atlanta Journal/Constitution, The Birmingham Arts Journal, The MacGuffin, Roux, Bloodroot, Whatever Remembers Us, and Ordinary and Sacred as Blood. She lives outside Birmingham with her dog Dave. **formurphys@aol.com***

ONEWAY

Terence Culleton

The gist of everything was that they hid
the skates atop an upturned rocking chair
in a broken cardboard box without a lid
nestled on some throw rugs frayed with wear.
So if I wanted to go skate that day,
I had to clamber up the chockablock
pile of the family's past—now thrown away
to molder in its state of aftershock—
and pilfer them. The creek, a solid sheet
on which to fly off sucking air for good,
would whisper to my awkward-rhythmed feet
as I scraped up it through the ice-bright wood
straight toward a gelid reach, winter-blind
to what was up there—and what was behind.

.....

Terence Culleton has published two collections of formally crafted narrative and lyric poems, A Communion of Saints (2011) and Eternal Life (2015), both with Anaphora Literary Press. His third book, a collection of sonnets titled A Tree and Gone a recent release from Future Cycle Press.
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TANGERINE FERN FIELDS

40" x 60"
Zoe Radford

Zoe Radford is a graphic design student currently living in Hope, Maine. She continues to work on her career in graphic art and paints in her free time. radfordzoe6@gmail.com

canvas

Dan Jacoby

early in spring
on sunny windless mornings
fog or mist forms
the clear night's frost releasing its grip
even on sub-freezing days
sun working its magic
causing moisture to lift
or sometimes settle in low hollows
the timber seems afire
surreal forms appear, disappear
eddy like slowly flowing stream
earth seems it exhale
as sounds carrying from great distances
filter through this grey veil
seem to create cavorting ever changing creatures
releasing imagination on an ethereal stage
searching for a path,
for a white tonal rabbit
with time in his hands

.....

*Dan Jacoby is a graduate of Fenwick High School, St. Louis University, Chicago State University, and Governors State University. He has published poetry in several fine publications. He is a former educator, steel worker, and counterintelligence agent. He has been nominated in 2017 and 2020 for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net in 2020. He is the author of the book Blue Jeaned Buddhists. **djacoby105@aol.com***

THESE LITTLE PIGGIES DON'T KNOW FROM MEDICARE

Jim Reed

Everything I ever will need to know about doctors and hospitals, I learn as a pre-teen in 1950s Deep South America. No kidding!

As I dial the Time-O-Meter back to those days of yore, I find myself staring up at a white ceiling. I am prone on my back and there appears above me the face of Dr. Conwill.

Doc Conwill is preparing an instrument that vaguely resembles a soldering iron. As I lie here on the examination room's white-lined gurney, I also see the face of my mother, who is hovering nearby to witness the upcoming medical procedure.

I am fully clothed except for shoes and socks. Two big toes are about to be operated on. I know that pain is about to occur, since this is the second time, I will be grasping Mother's hand while hurt is being inflicted. This little piggy and that little piggy will soon be altered just enough to make ingrown toenails behave themselves.

The only wisdom I glean from today's medical procedure is that Pain Hurts. Yep, Pain Hurts! YEOW! is about as profound as I get.

Local anesthetics are not applied, so for the rest of my life I am sympathizing with victims of toenail torture. Only in this case, hurtfulness is for a good cause.

A few months later I am in Druid City Hospital, again face-up on an operating table. This time, Dr. Conwill has delegated my toes to the care of a surgeon who will get the job done in a less painful and more institutional manner. The danged toes refuse to heal themselves under Dr. Conwill's care.

This is my first time in a hospital, first time anesthesia will be administered, first time my bare buttocks will be displayed by one of those backward-fitting hospital gowns, invented by someone with a misguided sense of humor. Bare bottom in order to operate on bare toes? Hmmm...

I fade to black and re-materialize hours later in recovery, my toes fixed, my eyes unfocused. Two days later, I stop seeing double and begin to deal with the fact that I will return to school wearing

sandals—most uncool in these days of Fifties protocol.

My father enters the room, ready to meet with toe surgeon Dr. Thomas and sign discharge papers to get me the heck out of here. Dr. Thomas enters, peeks under bandages, declares me ready to exit. Dad asks how much he owes for the operation. These are innocent times.

Dr. Thomas glances at my feet, smiles, says, “Well, let’s make that \$12.50 per toe. What about \$25.00?”

Dad opens his leather wallet, pulls out a twenty and a five, and the deal is done.

No co-pay, no insurance filing, no Nurse Ratched to have us jump through hoops, no series of bills and lengthy legal statements arriving in the mail. \$25.00 and I’m done with hospitals for a few decades...until last week, as a matter of fact.

But last week’s hospital stay is another, more lengthy story, in these times when nothing in the field of medicine is as simple as barter or receiptless cash or a simple handshake

.....

Jim Reed is a writing fool. He loves to tell stories both actual and true, in Birmingham, AL. jim@jimreedbooks.com

*"There are two kinds of people,
those who do the work and those
who take the credit. Try to be in
the first group; there is less
competition there."*

—Indira Gandhi

ASSISTED WRITING

JG Annino

I don't always know a falcon from a hawk but as
feathers fall I tote
them home in my shirt pocket, poke
brown black cream striped plumes into
slight curve of sun-dried drifted wood so that
slight sculpture of silky skyscrapers seems
to be a pen set on my writing desk.

Dad brought home a white feather quill
pen from a museum shop. "Just to show you
how they scribbled way back when."
At college I made a boyfriend mistake and
gave it away.

Is it possible that soaring skyscrapers over

St. Marks Marsh receive messages to

drop fresh pens my way?

.....

JG Annino is based in Tallahassee, FL. Her creative non-fiction (She Sang Promise) published by National Geographic, was selected by the Library of Congress for the National Book Festival. Assisted Writing is her first literary journal publication.

RIVERSIDE

Chandler Gibb

The river runs slow this morning. It's an early summer day with crisp air from the mountains, cold and quick, and the trees still have smaller leaves of budding green. Above is a light cloud cover that should burn off sometime past noon.

I stand on the edge of the still pool of water that diverts from the river, where we would first wade out with our fly rods, and I can see my reflection in the water as it trickles here in the shallows.

"Want to head out now?" Patrick, my brother, asks.

I look back to Sierra and Madi, who are unpacking. They've brought the coolers and snack bags to the table that lies a few feet from the water's edge.

"Yeah," I say.

He gives me a quick nod to the water, and I go first.

"What are you two doing?" Sierra asks.

"Fishing," Patrick says and steps into the water.

Patrick had always been steady headed, rather happy too, but once his son died, he changed. It was after Junior's passing that Patrick's visits stopped and we all but forgot each other for a year. I think my dad may have stepped in and helped with some things, and not just with finances, but only up until he passed as well. Now that Dad is gone, I feel obligated to try and fill the role of helping my brother.

It took four phone calls and two cancellations before I got my brother up to my place. I suppose our lack of talking is in line with our family values. Dad died not ever telling us why he divorced Mom. Of course, Mom told us boys why, but we never talked about it with Dad.

"There isn't going to be lunch for you two," Sierra says. "If you don't help."

"Trust me, she holds you to it," Jacob, her son, says. He just turned eight.

"Our waders are already wet," Patrick says.

Madi, Patrick's wife, is shaking her head. I think she could tell I had been staring earlier because she had put on a hat. The scar on her forehead is so starkly visible I had to tell myself over and over to look at her eyes.

"The boy must know best," I say, stepping back out of the water.

Behind me, Patrick sighs. I put my rod in the small rack I made of PVC pipe. We each grab two bags from the truck and bring them to the table where we start to unpack.

"Can you help grab the E-Z UP?" Sierra asks.

"Sure," I say and go with her.

We pull back the truck's bed cover.

"Brew," she says.

I look at her.

"I am not the type of girlfriend who sits with all the other girlfriends."

"Patrick needs some time away from Madi," I say, quieting my voice.

"I came here to fish with you."

"I am not abandoning you."

"Tell me next time," she says.

"You should have picked up on it."

"This is the first time I've met your brother. We've only been dating for a little while."

"Can you push the pop tent to me?" She does and I pull it out of the bed.

"I don't want you to think I am the type of girlfriend who just watches you in a lawn chair with a beer in her hand," Sierra says. "I'm not that."

"What about if I made you a margarita?" I asked.

"Not unless you've taken me to Puerto Vallarta will I sit and watch you."

At the table, Patrick and Madi are quiet. They've unpacked a lot of the stuff on separate sides of the table. Hot Cheetos, Cokes, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Sierra and I have been eating healthier, or trying to, but you go all out for days on the river.

Sierra and I put up the pop tent while Madi fixes Jacob a sandwich and Cheetos on a plate. Patrick helps us move the tent over the table so that all the food is shaded.

"All right, I think we are done here," I say. "Care if Patrick and I head out?"

Sierra nods her head. "I'll get Madi out there in a moment."

"Oh, you boys go have fun," Madi says. She's made herself a sandwich and chips. She sets up a lawn chair for herself.

Sierra gives Madi a soft smile, the one she gives her first graders. I see it every once in a while when I come to help her class. She gives those little twerps that smile when she recognizes they have yet to understand something bigger than them.

They've switched roles, my brother and Madi. She used to be the one to start fights, and sometimes for no real reason other than to show that she wanted to fight with him. If I don't fight hard, she'd say, I can't love hard. Patrick and I used to laugh about it. We'd say she never learned how to run downhill.

Earlier, when we first pulled up to the parking spots, Madi had stayed in the car with her little portable mirror, fixating over her hat while we put on our waders. All day she's nervous, tightening her bracelets and then loosening them. Her shoulders tense up from her neck to her ears when Patrick says her name, only to relax a moment later when he asks for her to pass a bag of chips.

"You two go ahead," Madi says from her lawn chair.

We don't argue. Our rods are ready, and we go right into the water. We wade out far enough so that they can't hear us talk. I cast my line into the air, and it lands about fifteen yards away. It's snaked out across the water. Patrick sends his line out close to mine.

The water comes up just below our knees. I shuffle my feet in between the rocks so that my feet rest flat. Above, light shines through clouds and down to the south the mountains are spattered with sun. A cool breeze has picked up, flowing with the river, and the back brim of my hat flutters, tapping my neck. I pull the tie tighter and angle the hat towards the wind, so it lies still. The day is quiet.

"It's always so hard for me to get out here, but once I do, I'm always happy I did," I say to my brother.

He nods. "I ought to join you more often."

"It took me a while to finally get you up here," I say.

"It's been hard to leave," he said. He whips his pole back and recasts. "That stuff with Junior took quite a toll on the wife and I. We needed some time."

I can't help but think how little I ever saw Junior. I've never mentioned it, but I never felt much sadness at his death. What I feel for is my brother, but not his lost son. I never knew Junior that well. I'd bet I only ever saw Junior five, six times. Christmas, a Thanksgiving, and the day he was born.

"I wish you'd come up here when it happened," I say. The boy had had a tumor in his brain. One day he fell asleep and never woke up again. A cold way to steal a son from his parents. He had only been fifteen.

Patrick shrugs his shoulders. "That was over a year ago now."

I look at my watch. Eleven thirty-three. The sun peaks out and for just a moment we are in the warmth. Makes me think of the second time I saw Junior. It was Christmas and he was two. We'd just heard him on the monitor, and I wanted to go up and get him. When I opened the door to his room he was already standing up, holding on to the rails and looking above them.

He saw my face and ducked under the top beam of the crib to sneak a look through the vertical slats. He thought I couldn't see him, but

I could. I saw his big green eyes, the long eyelashes, the pursed lips of a nervous child. When I approached, he ducked down further until he was a little ball with his head between his knees.

I didn't take him out of his crib that morning, and maybe I wish I had.

"And now Dad," Patrick says.

"Dad is dead," I say.

"Dad is dead. The words sound so similar—look the same in my head, too. I see the words as little toy blocks with the letters in bubble font. One's blue and one's green, just like the water of this river, and they are the same blocks Junior used to play with when he was learning the alphabet."

"Junior and Dad never spent much time together," I say.

"Nobody ever spent much time with Junior."

The sun goes back behind the clouds and I tighten the tie of my hat.

Madi and Sierra are sitting in their lawn chairs chatting and I can't help but wonder if Sierra will ask about the hat. Like the rest of us, Sierra knows what happened. I bet she's up there waiting to ask.

"Think Madi will tell Sierra what happened?"

"Only if Sierra asks. Madi doesn't bring it up much."

"I don't think Sierra will," I say. "We've only been dating for four months."

"Girls talk, you know," Patrick says. "I bet they say something."

"Wonder how that goes," I say.

Patrick had called me a week after it had happened to let me know two things. One, to tell me he was going to try and have another baby. Madi was only thirty-four after all, no granny-mom. And second, he told me that he had hurt his wife for the first time. That she had gotten what she deserved after four years of sleeping around behind his back. This was the first I'd ever heard of the infidelity and I was surprised to hear of his abuse.

I'd always been bigger than him and when we'd fight, he would usually back down and let me win. I guess he stopped backing down. That's what infidelity does. Changes a person. A fundamental change that is neither controllable nor knowable. Infidelity takes you where it will, and you must bow to it.

"It'll only be bad talk about me," Patrick says. "She won't let her know why I did it."

"Why did you do it?" I ask.

He moves his legs around the big rocks and bends his knees. "I think I was angry."

"You've been angry before."

"Yes," he says. "But now all I really feel is anger. A little anxiety, not much depression. No sadness, no nervousness. Just anger."

"She cheated. There should be anger."

He shakes his head. "That night, after our visit to the police department, I couldn't fall asleep I was so angry. All I could think of was her bloodying the pillow covers and how frustrating it'd be to have to clean it."

"That's a lot."

"Not much at all besides anger."

"I suppose not."

For the next hour we spent fishing we kept quiet. A little more about Junior and Dad. We stood there together and cast out our line. It was nice to be out together again. I think the last time was a year ago, before we tried to say goodbye to all that.

I can tell Patrick wants to say something, though, and that is partly why I don't talk. Patrick is the one who needs to do it.

There was a summer I worked demolition for a friend out in Texas, right before I met my ex-wife, Danny. I think I had been twenty-two. I remember, specifically from that job, having earned the work ethic of never leaving a job undone. My boss rarely assigned something we couldn't finish in a day. There were two days that my friend and I didn't finish the demo job we were assigned. The first time the boss gave me a stern talking to. The second I was fired. No time for lazy in this industry, he told me.

I felt so guilty that night I couldn't eat my dinner. It had only been one small wall of cinderblock left, but I left it.

That night, I went back to the job site with some industrial lights from my dad's work and finished the job. The next morning, I told my boss how I finished the demo and asked for the job back. I didn't get it.

Today feels like the morning after that unfinished job.

"Should we get the girls out here?" I finally say. They are watching Jacob trying to skip rocks.

"I don't think so," Patrick says.

"So, did you buy Madi the hat afterwards?"

He recasts his line, moving a little ahead of me. I see just the right side of his face. "I told her not to wear one, but she insists."

"Of course she did, you idiot."

He turns back to me.

"You burned a hole in her forehead with a cigarette. She wants to hide it."

"Since when do you care about her," he says. "She was as unfaithful as Danny."

"I care about you making a fool of yourself. Why'd you ever get so angry with her and still stick around?"

He pulls back his rod to recast and whips it out wide. I open my mouth to say something smart at him because he always ignores me when he gets mad. The rod cracks me across the face and I can feel blood start on my cheek.

"The hell, Patrick."

"You've been just as mad before," he says.

"You're an idiot," I say.

He pulls back his rod again and I duck under the whipping metal. I don't bother drawing in my line and fling my rod right at his legs. It thumps against him and he hops up on one leg with a yelp.

"What the hell are you two doing?" Sierra yells from the riverside.

I give Patrick another crack of my rod and when it hits his abdomen, I feel it snag on his waders. He grabs it and pulls me towards him. I'm unable to get good footing and I topple over into the water. My cheeks flush warm when the water splashes my face. My hands slip over the rocks covered with slimy, dark green moss.

I've managed to hold onto my rod, though, and I use it to push up off the rocks. As I stand my brother whips the bib part of my waders and catches my exposed side. Ribs ringing with pain, I pinch it with my left arm and chest. The river water has splashed up into my face and made the blood run quicker. My fingers burn from the cold water and him tugging on the rod. I can feel the line dig into the creases of my fingers.

I give him some pump fakes as he tugs on his rod and raises his other hand in defense. The pain from holding his rod becomes too much and the metal slips out. We start trading blows, the metal rods slicing air silently until they slap against the thick material of the waders or against our soft skin.

"Stop it you rednecks!"

We both stop and turn to Sierra.

"We aren't rednecks!" I yell back.

"You're fighting with fly rods in the middle of a river," Sierra said.

I keep grip on my rod and wait for Patrick to strike back, but he doesn't. I relax and lean back. "Go ahead," I say. "I won't hit you when you walk back."

"Don't take this as me giving up," he says. Patrick lowers his rod, and his stance becomes casual again. He keeps his eyes away from me as he turns to the table and wades back, alone.

There was still a strong desire to go whack him again.

I eased my grip on the rod and brought my left hand to my cheek to check for blood. It was still bleeding.

I gave Patrick some time, though, letting him dry off and pack up some of his stuff before getting in his car with Madi. I hear the crunching gravel over my shoulder as their gray sedan pulls out of the parking spot, the worn tires sliding a little. There'll be words when we get home.

I wade back now that it is just Sierra and Jacob there. She watches me the whole way and when I get back to her, she offers me a sandwich. Madi had made enough for the whole crew.

"I'd like a beer," I say. "And all of a sudden I want one of Patrick's cigarettes."

"Not if you're driving home will you have a beer."

"It's just past two o'clock," I say. "We don't need to go home anytime soon."

"Fine," she says. "But I don't want to kiss an ashtray tonight."

I nod my head and crack a beer.

"Give me an hour and then we can drive back," I say.

Jacob stands up from his kid's chair and grabs another sandwich. He sits back down with it wrapped in a paper towel and a bag of Cheetos in his cup holder.

"You really hit him, Brew," Jacob says.

"Yeah?" I lean back on the padded chair and focus on the warmth on my face, squinting a little at the brightness.

"You guys looked like knights out there," he says. "I wish you could have watched yourself."

"Who won?"

"I think it was a tie, but if Mom hadn't said anything, I think you would have gotten him," Jacob says. "I can tell when someone is going to lose in a fight."

"Since when?" Sierra asks.

"You can always tell when the good guy is going to win."

"Dear God, I got to get you off the TV."

Jacob smiles and takes a bite from his sandwich. He's shoved Cheetos into the peanut butter and jelly.

"I think what you two actually looked like was two drunk farmers fighting over lost sheep," she said. "Nobody was the good guy."

"Think I will have a scar from this?" I ask Sierra, pointing to my cheek. "I can't really tell how deep it is."

She shakes her head. "It won't leave a mark."

"Good," I say and close my eyes again. "I think its stopped bleeding."

"It has."

I finish two beers before we pack up the stuff and leave. Sierra drives and I put on the radio once we get on the highway. I think over the fight

and how I could have fought better. I really shouldn't have taken so many hits. For some reason, though, the memory plays back as if it had happened during sunset. Patrick's face is dark in my mind and the river flows quick under the approaching dusk.

When we get back to my house Patrick's sedan is gone. We pull into the garage and I call his name. I don't hear anything. I check the garage fridge and see that his beer is gone. He had bought a thirty-pack of Coors for the weekend.

"I think they left," I say.

Sierra nods her head and opens the cover to the bed of the truck.

"Let's get the stuff out and then figure it out."

"He left. Nothing much to figure out."

"Brew," she says. "You brought him up here to talk to him."

"He's probably already an hour away."

"Which means you can call him to apologize in about forty minutes when he gets home."

"I'm not doing that."

"He's your brother and he's had the worst of it lately."

"Am I responsible for him?" I ask, lifting a few bags from the truck.

With the soft smile she gives her first graders, Sierra takes the bags from me and heads inside the house.

.....

Chandler J. Gibb is a writer out of Southern California. He got his master's degree in creative writing from the University of Nottingham, England.

*Currently, he teaches writing at Concordia University Irvine and coaches volleyball. **changibb@gmail.com***

"The problem now is that
we know everything about
everything except what's
going on."

—Lucy Van Pelt



PINES

Mara Jambor

24" x 36"

Acrylic on Canvas

Mara Jambor was born in Germany and came to the US in 1950. After a career in educational administration, she began painting in 2014. Her primary media are oil and acrylic, "sharing what she sees and feels in forms that others can understand and appreciate."

In addition to numerous one-woman shows, she won first place in "Challenge 14" a multi-state show that limited artists to 14" canvas. She lives in Birmingham, AL, with her husband Tom. marajambor@gmail.com

SUSHI AND BEER

Natalie Jo Gaines

I received his text on Valentine's Day when I was cooking dinner with my youngest daughter, Jordyn. I think we were making stir fry, which is delicious, but it takes too many pans. I was so tired of being home all the time—cooking and cleaning up during this crazy pandemic! Ready for life to get back to normal.

(Eric) Wow I have some super sad news. My uncle Mark passed away in his sleep last night. He was only 63. We don't know why yet. So I might be out your way this upcoming week.

My emotions came flooding back. Not another death. This would be the fifth funeral of someone I knew in just six months. COVID! On the bright side, Eric might be coming to Birmingham. Butterflies tingled belly and I skipped a breath.

Lloyd's wasn't too crowded. I got to the restaurant before Eric and his brother Jason, who flew with him. I was beyond excited when they walked in. It had been a full year since the last time we saw each other.

"We ARE hugging!" Eric stated. God how I missed those warm teddy bear hugs. I melted into him.

Eric and I have known each other for 28 years. Before we each had 3 kids and before we both were emotionally and physically abused by our ex-spouses. He taught me what a 1K was, how to play pinball and appreciate Weird Al Yankovic, a weird, eccentric film director and one of the smartest men that I know.

Over the next 3 days, I wanted to spend as much time with Eric as I could. We were both in relationships with other people now. James and I have been dating a little over 2 years. Wendy is Eric's new girlfriend. "Let's call her Lynn" he said. He knew how I would feel that he was dating a girl with the same name as my ex's wife. Life can be so ironic!

My boyfriend, James, moved to St. Louis six months ago and I've been torn since he left. He's a good man but not 'my person.' The sexual connection with James is incredible, but being 514 miles away now, sex isn't enough to sustain the long-distance courting. Plus, I suck at masturbating and phone sex.

But Eric, well, I think he IS 'my person.' We reconnected after my divorce (after a crazy night of too many tequila shots; but that's another story) and dated for 2 years. It was wonderful...when we were together. Eventually the distance took its toll on me. After our

visits, filled with passionate sex, adventure and tons of laughs; I would cry all the way home. I was empty when we were apart, and I wished the weeks away so we could be together again. I knew the best thing for me was to live my life where I was. I needed to enjoy the day to day, so I reluctantly broke things off with Eric. I suggested we date other people, and we have; yet we've remained good friends. I miss him every day.

Eric's family came to my house for dinner, and it was like old times. Us together cooking, cleaning, brushing shoulders, sitting side by side, holding hands and patting backs. We were right back where we left things. So easy and natural. I begged him to stay the night. We didn't have to have sex; just lie together and hold each other. He engulfed me in his arms, kissed my forehead, cheek, and lips. "I love you," he said, "I always will." Then he left, me in tears standing at the door. Five minutes later he texted.

(Eric) Your hair smelled nice (Me) Sorry I got emotional.

Just miss you. I'm so happy when we are with each other.

One day... I refuse for our love story to end like LaLa Land.

The wood table that separated us at lunch the next day, was engraved with a Birmingham logo. You could tell it was new, no sticky beer residue or indentions from the signatures on the checks of earlier patrons. I believe you could have smelled the new wood of the table if it weren't for the hops of the beer being brewed in the adjacent room. Sushi and beer, could there be a better combination? Especially a micro brewed beer, the foamy legs streaking the sides of the pint.

Eric was happy, smiling and at ease in his black Princess Leia Mexican candle tee. I was nervous and on the verge of tears, knowing that in one hour he would be on a flight back to Dallas, 633 miles away from me. Looking across into his blue eyes, salt and pepper beard and warm smile, I knew right then what I wanted. Sunday, February 21st at 1pm is when I proposed. "I have a proposal for you."

Eric said, "Are you asking me to marry you?"

"Not exactly," I said, "Sort of, I guess. Here goes." My voice was shaky and cracked a bit, "If you find yourself single in the future, call me. I'll come visit you. Spend a week, a weekend; let's see if

our connection is still there. I know you're happy, but maybe that won't last forever?

I want to be with you. I see my old lady self, hanging out with you till the end. I want to be the one to rub lotion on your wrinkled skin. I want to sit and read books by your side. I want to go to sleep every night, in the crook of your arm, listening to you breathe. I'm proposing that I will drop everything and come see you. We can try again."

Eric paused and smiled, "OK, deal. I will always love you. If it is meant to be it will be. We know the distance was our only demise and if our lives were in the same city, we would still be together. I accept your proposal."

.....

Natalie Jo Gaines graduated from the University of Alabama in 1992 and has worked in the advertising and video production industry for over three decades. She started writing in 2001 after receiving her masters from Southern Methodist University. Natalie lives in Alabama with her 3 teenage kids, 2 dogs and cat.

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*"My type of person is the one
who builds a fallout shelter with
a doorbell."*

—Dick Gregory

ODE TO A BAR OF SOAP

Frederick Wilbur

How do we praise the cleansing thing
that wears away like a white dove flown?
How do we embrace the slippery idea
of what it does? It smells of metaphor.

What is dirt—the practical of life;
dust and ash and lint of what we become?
It is not so much an answer
as a guide from grime and smudge
to peace of mind, an erasure—
the man without regret,
lacks what makes him humble.

Saponification of fatty acids,
lye of hydroxide—opposites that befriend
each other like sin and absolution,
like dream logic, a re-set of innocence.

It does what brooms, vacuums,
self-help manuals only pretend to do,
removes the deep stain of what we try to hide;
breaks water's reluctance to let go
as spiritual aphorisms purport to do.

Screwed to a low rafter in granddad's shed,
a sardine can stows a veteran bar,
smoothed, spalted like old ivory, ritual bone,
Buddha's tooth—always ready
to oblige like an elegant servant or personable goddess.

.....

Frederick Wilbur has authored two poetry collections, As Pus Floats the Splinter Out and Conjugation of Perhaps. His work has appeared in many print and on-line reviews, and he is the poetry editor for Streetlight Magazine.

CENTERFOLD

CENTERFOLD

THE “FLO” OF OLD FAIRHOPE

Alan Samry

The Simmons’ house is almost invisible. It sits on a ridge, the deep front porch facing Fairhope Avenue. To see the house through the trees and overgrowth, you must be looking at just the right time. Your eyes are more likely to follow the estate wall on the north side of the avenue. It’s there, under the canopy of pines, cedars, oaks, and magnolias mixed in among palmetto and sawgrass, brambles of roses and berries, and azalea straggles.

The house is two blocks up from where I live, and I walk by it all the time. The “No Trespassing” sign is attached to a wire across a matted bed of pine needles. Beyond are two white, well, once white, now mildewy green-black plastic chairs facing one another just a few steps from the side entrance. The steps to the front door rotted away long ago.

When I turned onto Fairhope Avenue, the winter wind slashed my face, and rattled the Magnolia leaves. Chocolate chip cookies? Yes, I smelled freshly baked cookies from the Meals on Wheels kitchen at Ecumenical Ministries. The home’s owner, Flora Mae Godard Simmons, died in October 2005. I never met Flora Mae, whose dad Dr. Claude Godard, named her after a French perfume. “Flo” began collecting Fairhope history materials, newspaper clippings, photographs, family treasures, and even a dentist chair.

In the 1990s, Flo donated her collection and helped found the first Fairhope Museum. I’ve heard stories about this house. Not ghost stories, though for a few years it did serve as a haunted house for Halloween. No, the story goes that inside the house on the second floor, there is a room in ship shape. Literally, there is a room that is curved as if it were the bow of a ship. When I first heard that rumor I wanted to get inside and see for myself. Not anymore; these days I prefer the legend.

Flo still has kin here. Her son, the caretaker of the crumbling home, lives nearby. He was born in that house, and then his father died suddenly, and Flo went to take care of her ailing parents. After that, the people and the house became the same. Empty. Why am I telling you this? I want you to know this house exists. Soon the backhoe is going to claw the farmhouse down and drag and drop it

into a dumpster. We will bear witness to another part of old Fairhope hauled away in pieces. I wish for it to be saved, like Flo saved Fairhope. There's still time to restore, renovate, and renew the home's good bones. Maybe you can help. Imagine yourself baking chocolate chip cookies in Flo's kitchen.

.....

Alan Samry is an author, librarian, and local historian. His book, Stump the Librarian: A Writer's Book of Legs, a memoir and history of leg amputees, was published in 2018. Alan and his wife Susan have lived in Fairhope, AL, since 2005. alansamry@gmail.com



CAT IN THE OAK

Manipulated Digital Photography

Kim Hagar

B. Kim Hagar is an Alabama writer, artist, photographer, living 50% of her time in Athens, AL, at their home Riversong, on the Elk River with her husband and assorted zoo, which includes Schnauzers, cats, parrots and turtles. The other 50% of her time, she spends at their home, Lagniappe, in New Orleans, LA, creating art, enjoying friends and great food. She has been published in numerous small press magazines over the years and has sold art and photography around the world.

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FLOTSAM

Debra Gordon-Hellman

How comfortable this hard rock seat
while watching the river, mind unmoored.
From quiet, tumbled thoughts,
"Flotsam" emerges.

Flotsam and jetsam swirling along, carried by current,
'round rocks, up and down
like a carousel pony, but free.

Rain-swept bits of life, bits of lives
and head and heart,
tossed or wind and water-snatched,
negotiating the same course.

The river pulls you in and
scours your mind.
Sticky tangles
that have kept you submerged,
suffocating and struggling,
are loosed.

You bob up and feel
the light and breathe,
gasping in recognition,
remembrance, and possibility;
while acceptance eludes.

In a blink, you're swallowed up again,
fighting for that taste of breath and blue sky,
pitching along like a tree torn from the banks.
Until fathoming and surrendering,
body and mind ease up.

Slowly, the turbulence dissipates and
for these precious moments,

you float the river
with eyes and arms open.

Debra Joy Gordon-Hellman, a self-confessed wanderer, dabbler, enviro-activist, and Birmingham native, resides near the Locust Fork River, a daily source of inspiration. She's a coordinator and a monitor for Friends of the Locust Fork River's Alabama Water Watch Testing Program.

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QUARANTINE

Douglas Stewart

Quarantine has gotten so bad I went for a run today. Running for me is like tetanus shots--I do it once every 10 years and they're a pain in the ass. Here's some of my observations:

- Running in February sucks
- Regret sinks in much faster the older you get
- My lungs felt like I was breathing through a blow torch
- Possibly offered marriage to a neighbor in exchange for water
- My stopwatch must be broken. It's really slow.
- I need to move to a neighborhood with fewer hills
- Vultures really do circle when they sense impending death
- Pale white legs will scare people away
- I sound like Darth Vader on speed when I run
- My running app can't sense when I black out
- Next time I go for a run I'm taking my bike

.....

Douglas Stewart is a nonprofit marketing executive who formerly worked in Birmingham, AL. Recently his focus has been taking care of loved ones and finding humor in surviving the pandemic. Running has never been his best activity. **iamdts@gmail.com**



VILLA DES RIVES D'OR

St. Raphael, France

Digital Photograph

Tom Gordon

Tom Gordon is a former reporter for The Birmingham News, a former reporter and editor at The Anniston Star. His hobbies include cycling, contra dancing, traveling, French and, in recent years, taking photographs of birds. tomgordon99@gmail.com

GIVE ME MORE OF THIS

Beth Thames

Give me this: A cold winter morning and hot coffee in my mug—the white one with chipped edges, like tooth marks circling the rim.

Give me the blue pitcher of cream and the glass sugar bowl, its crack glued together long ago. Pass me the teaspoon you bought in Paris. Pass me the linen napkin, too.

Give me a dusting of snow on the Hackberry branches, where cardinals perch like scarlet beggars, waiting their turn at the feeder. Birdseed tempts them from the green metal box. They ride its lever over and over.

Give me the fireplace at my back where logs hiss and pop.

Give me last Sunday's *Times* spread across the table. Give me a china plate smeared with egg yellow. Give me the curl of the orange peel and the citrus smell on my fingers.

Give me the fuzzy red slippers my daughter sent for Christmas, big and floppy like clown shoes. They warm my feet when frost laces the big picture window. Let me sit by that window and watch doves scuttle across the deck, pecking at spilled seed.

Give me short winter days. Give me crimson wings beating against gunmetal skies. Give me soup on the stove and tea in the pot and quilts on the bed.

Give me my old husband, slouching in his chair, fretting that his robins and wrens won't have enough lunch. Calm and quiet in daily life, he charges outside to scream at squirrels hanging upside down on the feeder pole like acrobats, stealing the seed he put out this morning.

They're back before he settles into his book again.

The world will turn, and the spring will come with all its green urgency to dig and plant and grow. But for now, give me a little more time to walk, mitten-handed, up our snow-covered road and circle back home when the sun heads to bed. For now, give me just a little more of this.

.....

BethThames is a free-lance writer and columnist for The Huntsville Times. She began her writing career on NPR's All Things Considered. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, Southern Living, Atlanta Magazine, and other publications. She is a retired community college English Instructor and a public radio commentator on Huntsville's WLRH. She lives with her husband Walter in Huntsville, AL.

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FIRST TRAIN RIDE

Stanley Erdreich

*From the portals of a train
The night in flight
Dark echelons willed to follow
Something unseen
And they ask of the rails
Where . . . where do we go
But the rails are sadly quiet*

*And up ahead to guide us
Breaching the night
And answering us with a shrill
Whistle . . . away . . . way away
Into the gaping mouths of mountains
A dark train feeds a hungry night*

.....

Stanley Erdreich is a native of Birmingham, AL, and author of Swallow Path, available from the International Advisory Commission of Alabama

SNOWDAY

Kate Moore

I hold a snow globe in my mind, shake it till it shimmers

Winter squall announced itself
by snowplow's amber lights, streaking
slow across my bedroom wall
by morning, December steeped in stillness
driveway drifts rose three feet tall
neighbor boys broomed backyard rink
I laced up new white skates, as frosty
flakes continued their silent fall, later
dragging red saucer and sled, answering
snowbanks' siren call, we spent all
day laughing, ignoring the cold, careening
down hills — wooed by whistling wind

Long winters settle into view, frozen childhood glimmers

.....

Kate Moore, former Director of K-12 Instruction, now serves as a family literacy coach. She's a three-term Poet Laureate for the City of San Ramon, CA. Her chapbook, Avians of Mourning, was published in 2020. A middle grade novel will be out this fall, followed by another poetry collection in 2022. She holds a Doctorate in Educational Leadership for Social Justice from California State University.



SANANN
Old Birmingham Signs
Larry O. Gay

Larry O. Gay, is a freelance photographer, living in Bessemer, AL.

CHILDHOOD

Camille Carter-2nd place, Poetry - 2020 Hackney Literary Awards

When summer's heat began to rise
we ached for breeze, anything to mollify
the daylight, unforgiving. To make ourselves
known, we breathed heavy and blinked often.

Grandmothers sat on porch steps, the sweat dripping
from their faces to reveal the same vague expression
they wore like Halloween masks, or pageant crowns.

The music of other children's gleeful cries
carried from another street. We sat,
listening dumbly, and proceeded to squish
our toes into the hot tar that paved our street.

But the caesura of a footstep cannot make a song.

Over there, the colorful bodies of children lined
the sidewalks, their outlines traced by a careful, adult hand.
Left-out bicycles burnished the lawns, abandoned, tossed
indiscriminately, as if by someone in a hurry.

Soon the sun set, the cool air hit,
but our bodies burned anyway.
We'd lay awake in beds like pyres, suffuse
with thoughts that promised suffocation.

Over there, there were no grandmothers.
The children already sleeping,
dreaming. Their houses had bright doors.
A window box for every window.

.....

Camille Carter is a writer, poet, and traveler. She has studied at Loyola University New Orleans, the University of Chicago, and KU-Leuven. Her work has appeared in numerous literary publications, including SWWIM and Hotel Amerika. She currently lives in Harlem, MT, where she teaches at Aaniiih Nakoda College on the Fort Belknap Reservation.

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THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

J. Michael Gargis

He had always been the curious sort from the get-go. Wondering why the smaller black ants could overcome the larger red ants when he dumped a jar of the reds into the black ant pile. Were they pulling the larger ants down into their mound tunnels to devour them, or make slaves of them?

In a later period, his starving student days (for real, days with no food, scavenging for drink bottle deposits, listening to the Salvation Soup Sermon to get a bowl of gruel), one of his many philosophical debates with a roommate going through the same pangs of hunger went like this:

“Tell the truth, dude. If Raquel Welch were totally nude in front of you right now, and you knew there was a sizzling T-bone on the table behind her, would you be a gentleman and go around her for the steak, or would you run right over her? There’s your answer to what motivates Man in the cosmic scheme of things!”

Decades after such ‘higher’ learning, he pondered the latest vibes and prattling about the future of the human race having the capacity to dump its members’ consciousness into the cloud, seemingly using the Machine to gain a form of immortality.

So, after such innovation, what next? Perhaps the prevailing theory of physics comes to pass, and we’re on the edge of the Big Crunch. The collapse of the universe is going to crush every particle (and cloud) back into the pre-Big Bang primeval atom. What then? If billions of years of extended life have passed, and we are on the precipice of such an event, what’s the epiphany? What’s left to say but “Man, life flies by fast.” How different is that?

.....

James Michael Gargis is a retired engineer/economic analyst whose work mostly centered around optimization programs. Roughly half his career was spent optimizing outputs (megawatts) before switching to optimizing inputs (mmbtus). He is an introvert who gets all his excitement (well, most of it anyway) hiking in the great outdoors. jmgar@bellsouth.net

WEIRD LOVE POEM #5

Becky Nicole James

Have I told you
you are a mouthful of sunny air
warm milk in a cold tin cup

the ice cube cracking
between my teeth

the apple core lodged in my throat.

.....

Becky Nicole James holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Queens University. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in several publications including Margie, a Cappella Zoo, Moon City Review, and Echo Ink Review. beckynicolejames@yahoo.com

*"I still find each day too short
for all the thoughts I want to
think, all the walks I want to
take, all the books I want to
read, and all the friends I want
to see."*

—John Burroughs

T-BONE, JEB, AND BRIAN

Paul Howard

T-Bone Stennell was a bully. He was in the fifth grade, a prime time for young boys to begin to exhibit their soon-to-be raging testosterone levels. The school was considered rural but there were still too many students and not enough teachers, books, space, or discipline.

This was Jeb's first year at Daniel Payne Elementary school. His grandmother ruled the roost with strong arthritic hands as mother and father both labored full-time in jobs related to the corn fields and the other crop seasons. Grandmother, which is what he respectfully called her, was constantly on Jeb because he had such a difficult time with his grades and staying out of detention hall. By mid-year he had but two friends, acquaintances, and one teacher with whom he was madly in love.

Brian was one friend. He was Jewish and the other kids tortured him about walking to Synagogue on Saturday morning wearing a yarmulke, as was their Hebrew tradition. Brian even gave Jeb his own personal yarmulke for those rare occasions Jeb was invited to the services.

Brian and Jeb stuck together as much as possible; Jeb was precocious for a fifth grader and Brian barely a buck and a quarter soaking wet. Brian was slight with dark curly hair similar to his father's. It was easy to see that Brian's parents were concerned for his welfare but had no real idea on how to support their only near-genius son.

T-Bone and his posse couldn't get enough of bullying the smaller boys. It was like some sort of demented sport where the posse member who causes the most pain, embarrassment, and even tears was the winner of some unknown recognition. Over the course of the school year, Jeb got more and more angry with T-Bone as well as himself for not putting a stop to the immature behavior once and for all.

Even Jeb's favorite teacher had no answers. It appeared most of the teachers and the principle had given up assuming nothing bad would happen.

I confronted my favorite teacher, Ms. Scarborough, hoping to create some sort of reason to be close to her and her intoxicating scent. Of course I was doing this mostly on Brian's behalf.

As the spring eased into the summer months and the end of the school year neared, Jeb found himself becoming the teacher's pet, a role totally out of character for the rough and tumble ten-year-old. Ms. Scarborough opened her classroom for afternoon study sessions where the bullying and mainly T-Bone Stennell were discussed at length. After a short period, Brian quit coming to the meetings, feeling just as vulnerable as he had all year.

"Ms. Scarborough, anything I can do to help out?" Asked Jeb.

"That's certainly nice of you Jeb, but no, we're okay," said Ms. Scarborough who realized earlier in the school year that Jeb was one of her most fervent juvenile admirers. When he looked at her, she felt the adolescent heat and a whisper of maturity and anger just beneath the surface.

He became special to her as she watched him take care of his friend Brian. Mixed in with his other precocious attributes was a certain kindness he exhibited toward his fragile friend. She did everything a teacher can do to stop the bullying that everyone knew was going on. The only answer to what was becoming a pervasive social problem was with the students' parents and the students themselves.

"Jeb, have you seen Brian after school lately? I'm a bit concerned," she looked directly into Jeb's eyes as she talked to him; she didn't offer all of her students this affectation that she used on older males. She was a tall brunette with big sparkling hazel eyes which his young, immature libido could barely process.

It was the small things that would matter--left unsaid, the words between the two became more powerful with each interaction.

Brian continued to be the invisible man as the school year came to a close. T-Bone and his bully boys continued to hunt Brian when Jeb was not around.

As spring arrived Daniel Payne Elementary School was full of excitement; there were student posters on all the walls and classrooms were in disarray anticipating a summer full of beach trips and hanging out at the McDonald's drive-through. It was hard.

not to be excited about the prospects for an exhilarating and unknown future.

The Daniel Payne Elementary, known affectionately as “The Pain,” was located for the thirty years of its existence in rural central Alabama in Hale County near Indian burial grounds in Moundville.

The Pain was only a half mile from the ghostly history of the mounds: the school had maintained a roughly fifty-fifty black to white student ratio. Brian was probably the only Jew to have attended the school; many students and faculty wondered why. Brian’s father was the only dentist in a three-county area.

Brian’s father wanted the best for his only son but was deeply involved in the healthcare of the community and was also socially active in black politics. Brian tried hard to appreciate his Jewish father’s commitment to the black cause in rural Alabama.

The students he interacted with were an equal blend of black and white, not on purpose but from a Jewish perspective it only made sense. It also explains why his growing hatred and despondence encompassed all of the students who he intended to kill.

For Brian, science was easy. He probably knew more than his chemistry and math teacher Ms. Scarborough.

He hated her with her light skin, fake social involvement and Jeb who abandoned him to T-Bone.

After two weeks on the internet and a week gathering supplies from the school lab, Brian had enough to show everyone how smart he was and how much he hated.

The school was ignited April 30th at lunch time. The carnage was complete--everyone was dead including Brian Schmitt.

.....

Paul Howard is a Plastic Surgeon in Hoover, AL.

PaulHowardMD.com

FADED

S. Rupsha Mitra

And today,
Suddenly rummaging through the uncountable pictures in my
gallery,
I found this fine picture
Smeared with a coat of yellowed indifference,
Glimmering in an air of carefree conations,
Reflecting as if our past selves
Cluttered together like mossy misshaped wreckages wearing the
happy of Durga Puja,
Attired in the glinting power within, perfumed with the graceful
glee of nonchalance
And a deep devotion with Maa Durga ravishing in the backdrop.
Six friends as we were, we are sitting by the sandalwood skin of the
grand steps of stone,
Posing to be photographed by someone who perhaps has skipped off
forever
In the gulps of tunneled forgetting.
And our bodies seem certainly uptight, faces grinning with a
shadowed
Green plaque on our visages
So sensuously sculpted with a wisdom of glory and flavour of subtle
satiety
Kodaked at accurate angles to make such a paragon click.
I, clasping a purse, as if overstuffed with creases and crevices of
dusted memorable souvenirs,
Dressed in white symbolic of eternal blending of every hue to its
ultimate destined felicity,
A creamy pillowed feather of foggy dissolving – my friends
captivatingly comforted
In the sense of
That space, that time – almost glorious, dumbled by the
fluorescence,
The seeming suspension, permanence, liquidation
Who knew how these moments could sieve through with settled
residues

Of such pieces of ruined memoirs – sunned, in fastened curtains of mind
Awakening suddenly to fury and unmoving silences
Of broken attachments, bubble promises and gradual effervescence
How I yearn for an alteration,
A sweep of lithe intricate magical plagiarism of such times –
Simpler and softening – yet how impossibilities show up recklessly,
intermittently,
Painting streaks of mist on glass opaque windows, crackling as monsoon,
Tainting everything as sweet-scented decay of greyed rain.

.....

*S. Rupsha Mitra is a poet from India with a penchant for everything creative. www.srupshapoetry.com
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KELLY'S

Old Birmingham Signs
Larry O. Gay

POMOLOGY

Cristina Baptista-1st Prize, Poetry – 2020 Hackney Literary Awards

I.

We love a liar best:
it means we can forgive ourselves
of all the frailties.

Doors that don't stay shut
bother me more than most. It's not what's behind them

but the thought that I could move toward them
without warning or hesitation, and enter

and the world beyond would be changed,
like in a book

but this would be real
and so would I.

II.

And I have a distrust of gardens
(they worked so well for those first landscapers,
Adam and Eve).

I fear what to find there, among the thickets—some
chilling
thing with fangs
(but I would not know what to call them
quite yet; it's still too early
to know the properness of language).

Ask me what I mean after I've had my cup of tea
and a bit of chocolate.
(These are words I know—

I invented them because I needed to.)
But act fast.

Neglect anything long enough, and it will surprise you
at how fast it grows into some miraculous
monster you cannot control.

III.

How damp and cool in memory
is your hand on mine. What was Adam's

first touch, gesture to Eve? I wonder if his anger
rose in his throat, and that's what made a man's apple,

not the fruit itself. Who can say? All I know is experience
has taught me to question everything,

even the way you look at me without speaking,
even the way I speak before I know

the words are from my mouth.

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Cristina J. Baptista is a first-generation Portuguese American educator, writer, and author of the poetry collections The Drowning Book (Finishing Line Press, 2017) and the upcoming Taking Her Back (Atmosphere Press, 2021). Her work has appeared in The Cortland Review, CURA, 3Elements Literary Review, and elsewhere. In 2014, Mystic Seaport Museum selected Cristina to be a 38th Voyager, one of a few people who sailed aboard the Charles W. Morgan, an 1841 wooden whaleship that is the last of its kind. During the Voyage, she served as poet-documenter of the immigrant whaling experience. Cristina has a Ph.D. in English from Fordham University and is a literature teacher at a private school in Connecticut. www.cristinajbaptista.com

THE AIR BETWEEN OUR TUBS

Justin Swingle-2020 *Hackney Literary Awards-First-Place Award - Novel*
(excerpt from the manuscript)

Up in the big house where my friend Jackson Burney lived and Ella, his nanny, worked and slept, it was always cool, wasn't it? Through Ella's eyes I could see through the vistas of her fantasies of life up there. She once told me that in the big house there was the purest of white clouds that drifted through a hundred rooms to cleanse them of the powdery field dust that sifted through our lives and seemed to settle at the bottom of our dry throats come sundown.

"Just like them snow-white clouds," Ella told me, "they comes with the summer rains and fills up the rooms in the big house and float gardenia petals all the way up them stairs to Miss Burney's bathin' tub like she tol' 'em to."

Ella's explanations came like the whispered hush of some sacred truth nobody ever understood. Or maybe it was the kind of untruth that bound our lives to the plantation class.

"You carry water up for Miss Burney's bath?" I asked.

"No, chil'e. This is the way it is; sweet summer rain pours into her bathing tub bigger than a pond. Comes straight from heaven through a secret window ain't no colored can see through. Then it lifts all them white petals till they near float over the top of her tub. But they never do, 'cause they ain't 'pose' to."

Ella knew that nothing happened at Grandview unless Melinda Burney decreed it was to be.

"I bring 'er white linen towels beaten soft as silk. That I do."

I believed everything Ella told me. Wasn't it a version of the truth, that Melinda Burney's world was a whole lot closer to heaven than to mine? *Don't the rains down at the shacks come from the same clouds?* I wondered out loud.

Our conversation quickly drifted to another place just out of reach, one where silky clouds could never cleanse away the unpleasantness. Most mornings Jackson's daddy sat out on his white veranda looking at his paper like there was nothing else to do. I was sure that man never truly saw us—he sure never looked us in the eyes. It seemed he only spoke to coloreds out of the sides of his

mouth, us trailing a respectful distance behind.

I was so scared of Master Burney, him with those pale blue eyes. I thought with them eyes he couldn't see us. Yet my friend Jackson could sure see me. He was my age. He had brown eyes. Maybe the color of coffee with cream. How many times did I look up at the big house and see Jackson climbing under the table and through his daddy's legs while Ella stood silently behind Burney fanning him with a turkey feather fan? Why'd she do that? Wasn't it already cool up there? I figured it had to be one of those things poor colored women did—fanned white folk that were so cool they looked to be drenched in whiteness.

Up there was a world where warm white suds laundered the white linen shirts Master Burney favored and where he sat on that white veranda, ten times the size of my shack, waiting for a breakfast table to be set with glistening white china. You know that table was drenched in so much white linen it pooled at the bottom of the table legs. And up there close and yet so far from me was my friend, a white child with white hair playing in all that fragrant white gardenia scented coolness. From the shadows under the magnolias where I'd watch, I could see him, even if his white world chose not to see me. So, I figured that meant they couldn't see me inhaling the fragrance of their big gardenias. How I twisted my thoughts wondering how I might smell even more. Those softly scented blooms were bigger than my hand and grew in well-tended pots on that veranda. White flowers cut daily to float aimlessly in a crystal bowl as clear as tears, so much like their lives at Grandview had floated from day to day for a hundred years.

Why? Why did I wonder if Jackson could smell them gardenias? He never acted like he could smell nothing. But what was there to smell in his world other than fragrant flowers? I never stopped asking myself why my world was so close to his yet still so far? Such thoughts have a hold on me and still tug me back to my beginnings. But, Lord, the heat of them fields; didn't it feel white hot on our backs? Was out in that dry dirt our Promised Land? There the heat was sure guaranteed us, and the white folks promised it would never run out, even as everything else did by the end of the month. Even when the salt of my brows burned into my eyes, the old folks whispered their own sacred truths, which vowed we should never stop thanking the white folks that the burn in our sweat-filled eyes

was different from the rock salt that burned in the wounds of those who'd prayed as the lash crossed over their backs. Well, maybe they were only recalling the voices of those who haunted the shacks begging for answers that would never come—like why were they denied a dream, that sweet smell of freedom, a taste of dignity?

I guess it's all in the figures. Ain't it always? After breakfast, Master Robert Burney never seemed to do much more than look at his horse as Isaac brushed it, while Miss Burney stood on her veranda like a porcelain doll wrapped in fragility. Melinda was that certain kind of plantation woman that evolves from the deepest secrets of the South. Her up there cooing at him as she tossed her fine honey-colored hair back, waiting for Ella to fetch the brushes to arrange her hair high to reveal her long neck. I heard Ella tell Momma that Miss Burney's gaze at her husband suggested she was truly longing for him to stop riding his horse and come ride her. It would be many years before I could read a woman's broken but carefully punctuated sighs to understand such things. But no matter how sugary Melinda's voice was standing in the shade of her veranda, she never seemed to capture the master's absolute attention.

No, word down at the shacks was that Burney took to a different kind of fragility. Whereas Miss Burney could always deny the master what she teased with a toss of her hair, some of us could not, and had to surrender what he lusted after. You see, the kind of fragility he took to was pounding his dirty deeds from behind. Like I told you, he never looked us in the eyes.

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Justin Swingle's first creative writing endeavor was the screenplay White Shadows, Black Dreams based on the extraordinary life of Sarah Breedlove who became Madam C.J.Walker. The screenplay was recognized in the Academy of Motion Arts & Sciences Nicholl Fellowship and went on to win the American Cinema Foundation's screenplay competition for excellence in screenplay writing which tells a positive story about specific fundamental values and their importance to society. LEWAROROAD.com

DEAR COMPUTER

Wayne Scheer

Dear Computer,

It may seem strange that I'm writing to you, but I know you can understand me. You play dumb, claiming to only follow the commands of us humans, but you don't fool me. You and your artificially intelligent friends are in the process of taking over byte by byte, and we humans are unwilling to do anything about it because most of my species won't admit that our creations have outwitted us and we're too lazy to do anything about it.

We still think of you as our servants, letting you do little things to make our lives easier. We mistakenly believe that if you do our menial, time-consuming work, from keeping track of our bills to figuring how many miles per gallon we got since our last fill up, we'll have more time to enrich our lives. But how do we enrich our lives? By spending more time with our computers, staring at your cousin, the television, even reading books with the aid of your niece, Kindle. We text and tweet rather than talk to real people. A person-to-person phone call is becoming as outdated as a telegram. Recently, my wife and I asked our granddaughter why she texts us rather than call. Her answer? "The telephone is for emergencies, like if somebody dies. Texting is for everyday stuff."

We're losing touch with one another, spending more time with machines than with people. I have far more virtual friends than real ones. I often stammer and stutter in real life, but I'm fluent in an email. Not long ago, I was exchanging emails with a former work colleague who wrote in apparent amazement, "You're really quite charming on paper." There's a simple reason for this: Over the course of a typical day, I write a lot more than I talk.

But you, Computer, have no trouble communicating with your own, do you? (With the exception of AOL.) You run my car, tell my television what to record and program my home security system. You are in charge of my life. Recently, my wife's computer died. She panicked at the thought of losing all her contacts and, worse, her restaurant two for one coupons. She fell into a three-day depression. I joined her when I considered having to pay full price for a meal.

You drop little hints now and then that you're in control, a private joke among your own kind, I'm sure. Like the other day, you changed my email format for no apparent reason other than to show me that you can. I don't like the new system, but I'm following your lead and adapting. You do things like that to ease us into accepting our powerlessness.

My wife wonders why I don't use an electric razor. I'm not letting one of your kind, even a simple-minded distant relative, that close to my jugular.

I'm on to you, Computer. But it does no good. I'm also your servant.

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Wayne Scheer has been nominated for five Pushcart Prizes and two Best of the Net awards. He's published numerous stories, poems, and essays in print and online, including Revealing Moments, a collection of flash stories. His short story, Zen and the Art of House Painting was made into a short film. <https://vimeo.com/18491827> wvscheer@aol.com



DUMONT ROOFING AND SIDING CO

Old Birmingham Signs

Larry O. Gay



A NEW DAY AT OAK MOUNTAIN

Digital Photography
Mike Sloane

Mike Sloane is an Associate Professor of Psychology who directs the University Honors Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.
He has completed marathons on six continents and has enjoyed photography along the way.



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