

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume18 Issue3



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famous deserve to be published side by side in a beautiful and creative setting.

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Birmingham Arts Journal

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FRONT & BACK COVERS - MYSTICAL TEAPOT WITH LID

/CACHE POT Margaret Barber is Southern by birth and by choice. Native of Mississippi and resident of Montgomery, she is a gifted potter who produces a variety of stoneware objects (see also back cover). Barber uses natural Alabama clay as well as commercial white clay. Colored and natural terra sigillatas, glazes, and underglazes are applied at different times throughout her process to add texture and color. **mbpottery64@gmail.com**

LUCKY

Sophia Quinto

Mama named me Lucky because she was tired of bad things happening to her. I needed some luck in my life, she says, and along you came.

Daddy never really loved me, but he swore that he tried. I want the world for you, sweetheart, he said, but I can't give it to you. Then he walked out the door and we never saw him again.

Daddy was one of the bad things that happened to Mama before I came along.

You're made of luck, Mama says.

I'm made of skin and bones and muscles, silly, I say.

Mama doesn't know about things like what humans are made of because she doesn't believe in science. Luck is all Mama needs, and she says that luck and science go together like a cat and a hot bath.

I want to be a scientist.

Mama doesn't come to the science competition. She doesn't see my project win first place.

You know how I feel about your 'facts,' Mama says.

My 'facts' won me first place, I say. I hold up my shiny blue ribbon, but Mama won't even look at it.

You won first place because you got lucky.

I slam my door with such velocity that the walls shake. Mama doesn't know about things like velocity.

Daddy ends up famous after all. He gets second place on a TV show competition for singers, and now he's touring around the country.

Lucky bastard, Mama hisses at the TV.

There was nothing lucky about Daddy's success. Mama wouldn't let me watch the show, but I remember his voice from the lullabies he used to sing me. He was good. He was real good, and that's a fact.

Mr. Bell picks me for the summer science camp offered at the community college. Eight weeks in a real laboratory. Eight weeks of real science. Eight weeks where Lucky is just my name and not what I am. There is no place for luck in a laboratory.

No.

Mama, please, I say, this is my dream.

What about my dream? Mama says.

And what's that?

You, Lucky. My little Lucky Charm.

I'm not made of luck, Mama.

Of course you are.

I'm made of skin and bones and muscles.

Oh, hush.

I'm made of facts.

Stop this!

I'm made of Daddy as much as I'm made of you. It's called genetics.

Mama shuts her mouth.

She doesn't see me off.

I pack my bags and eat my breakfast and walk to the bus stop by myself. In the bus, I watch the world rush by through the smeared window. I watch the sunlight hit the leaves and I wonder how much energy those leaves are creating right now. I watch the river rush by, and I wonder how many of those water drops have been on top of mountains and under the earth and

up in the sky. I watch a baby deer stumble after a mama deer. Her legs are thin and shaky, but I know from biology that it won't be long before they grow thick and strong and are able to carry her wherever she wants to go.

And then: a billboard for a concert in a casino an hour away.

Daddy's got on a fancy tuxedo and a gold watch that's probably real, and he's holding a real microphone instead of the hairbrush he used when he performed for Mama and me in the living room. On the billboard, he looks real happy. Happier than I ever saw him.

We pass the billboard and continue on to the laboratory —the real-life, no-luck-needed laboratory where I am made of skins and bones and muscles just like everyone else—and I am happier than I have ever been.

I want the world for you, Mama, but I can't give it to you.

.....

Sophia Quinto is a writing and literature student at UC Santa Barbara's College of Creative Studies. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Revolution Publication, The Bayou Review, The Bitchin' Kitsch, and Make Noise Today's "Letters To..." Exhibition. pintoquinto26@gmail.com

A WRITER'S PRAYER

Irene Latham

O Light, awaken my Imagination
O Courage, deliver these Words from shadow
O Fire, warm me when Night goes cold
O stairway of Hope, lead on!

A WRITER'S JOURNEY

Irene Latham

I went in search of words
and found a field of flowers
I went in search of fame
and found no place for love
I went in search of forever
and got lost in silver shadows
Now I search for nothing and sunbeams
shoot from my fingers

UNTITLED HAIKU

Irene Latham

pond shrinks to puddle
mud cracks—still
five frogs sing

STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES

Terry Sanville

Two gray-bearded men wearing down jackets sat at an outdoor table, their thinning hair whipped by a winter wind off the Pacific. Retired, tired, and partially broken, they clasped their hands around warm coffee mugs and leaned forward so that each could hear the other speak.

The morning waitress pushed outside the café with a coffee pot in hand and refilled their mugs. “You gentlemen want anything else?”

“No thanks, Emma,” Roger said. “Just do something about that wind.”

“I’ll get right on it.” She rolled her eyes and grinned.

“She’s not bad,” Roger said, watching her disappear through the door.

Peter smiled wryly. “Yeah, I’d give her a second look.”

“I’d do more than that.”

“In your dreams.”

They took sips of their coffee and settled into staring at their hands.

“You ever tell yourself a story?” Peter began.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, a daydream . . . about yourself . . . living some other life.”

“Yeah, sure. They’re called delusions. I dreamed I was handsome once and married a high school cheerleader, the one at the top of the pyramid. She had nice pipes.”

“Everybody does it. But sometimes delusions come to life, and you can’t tell if the memory is real or not.” Roger smiled.

“Hell, Pete, after nearly eighty years all memories, real or imagined, get mashed together.”

“I suppose. But this one sticks with me.”

“How come?”

“Just shut up and listen. You’ll see. When I was twenty and a sophomore in college, I dated this blonde with humongous—”

“Is this part of your delusion?” Roger chuckled.

“Just keep quiet. I was dating this blonde, way out of my league. We weren’t going steady or anything. And her other boyfriends were jocks or brainiacs, ya know, football heroes or on the Dean’s List every semester . . . sometimes both.”

"Yeah, and you were neither," Roger cracked.

"That's right. So, I . . . I made up a story to impress Linda."

"Oh boy, this gotta be good." Roger scooted forward in his chair and leaned in close.

"I told her I used to race British sports cars, in particular a '62 TR-4 and—"

"So this story was before you—"

"Yes, yes. Quit interrupting. Anyway, they used to hold sports car races at the Santa Barbara Airport in the early '60s, ran all classes, A through H. I told Linda that I raced my TR for a couple of years, did well in D class."

"Did Linda do well in D cup?" Roger said and smirked.

"Shut up. Anyway, I really laid on the details, how I'd outfitted my Triumph with a roll bar, pasted numbers on the doors, bought a helmet and driver's suit, and went racing. In those days they mixed the classes together. So I would run against MGs, Sunbeams, Sprites, Porsches, and the bigger Healey's. It was a wild scramble."

"So in this story, how'd you do?" Roger asked. He sat on the edge of his seat, his good ear turned toward Peter to catch every word.

"Let me finish. I passed the Sprites and MGs without too much trouble. I could outrun them on the straights; the airport course had two long ones where I could wind the TR up to redline and hold it there. The Triumphs' engines were strong, originally designed for British tractors. Mine was stock, with the two Stromberg carburetors. But the car's rear suspension was terrible; the thing rode like a donkey cart."

"Forget the gearhead stuff. Tell me about the race," Roger prompted.

"Well, I was doing great until two laps to go. I entered a turn on the inside, with a Sunbeam crowding me on the outside. I had almost managed to get clear when the TR's rear end came around. Those Michelin tires used hard rubber and I really smoked 'em. I tapped the Sunbeam, sent it spinning into the marbles, and me with it.

"While this was going on, a Porsche, Healey and a Lotus passed us. It musta been fun for the crowd to watch. I kept the car running, slammed it into first and tore out, hitting top speed on the straight. I remember feeling so damn energized and pressed hard, the Porsche within reach. But I ran out of laps, finished third in my class. My Pop took a picture of me in that TR – going down the back straight at full song. I looked like a stiff sitting up in a black coffin."

"That's a pretty good story," Roger said. "Was Linda impressed?"

"I guess so. She agreed to ride with me into the country, with me packing Trojans and a bottle of Red Mountain wine. We drove my TR out to—"

"Wait, wait. Is this still the story or did you actually own a TR-4?"

"Yeah. Mine was British racing green with wire wheels. Anyway, we drove out to the coast and were tooling along this two-lane twister. The faster I went, the more Linda seemed to like it – her hair blowing back like a blonde flag. She began to whoop and holler. I don't think I had ever felt more alive before that moment."

Peter looked down into the dregs of his coffee, signaling the end of storytelling.

"But what happened between you and Linda?" Roger asked.

"I took a turn too fast. We slid off the road and tumbled down a steep bank. I woke in the hospital."

"And Linda?"

"Didn't make it."

Roger sat back and stared at the roiling Pacific. Without looking at his friend he asked,

"So . . . is that how you really ended up in your wheelchair?"

"No . . . well . . ."

"Jesus, Pete. You've been living with that all these years?"

"Yeah. But I kinda like the delusion, even though it's not real . . . well, most of it isn't. I really did own a TR . . . I think."

.....

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, CA, with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, and novels. His work has been published in The American Writers Review, The Bryant Literary Review, and Shenandoah. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist – who once played with a symphony orchestra backing-up jazz legend George Shearing. tsanville@sbcglobal.net

"Memory is the diary that
we all carry about with us."

—Oscar Wilde

NOTE TO SELF

Lindsay Rockwell

I love how branch whittles blue
and everything that splays has roots
and before that, nebulae, and muons
How snow holds leopard's trace
and day darkens after undressing sun
That arrows don't fly backward and wind has no home
How memories glide winged and kites rely on sky
I love the sound of the word horse
the animal she is
How she scares me, and I feel small
makes me remember, I am

.....
Lindsay Rockwell won first prize in the October Project Poetry Contest in April 2020 and the 81st Moon Prize from Writing in a Woman's Voice, August 2021. She has been published in: Writing in a Woman's Voice, Perceptions Magazine, The Center for New Americans Poetry Anthology and The Courtship of Winds. Her poetry is forthcoming in Iron Horse Literary

imagination
traversing life's turbulence
a wish bridge to peace

*Eric Peterson is an award-winning artist and an aspiring children's book and poetry writer from Southern California. **eric@petersonfineart.com***
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UP BEFORE DAYLIGHT

Jim Reed

Believe it or not, I was once an Alabama young'un. In those days my young'unhood attitudes change frequently, as un-young'unhood approaches ever so slowly but ever so surely.

Sweet remembrance: I'm back in time. Today, as a kid, I can't wait to rise with the Sun. The first ray of daylight empowers me. I am ready to embrace the day. My Dad arises at five a.m. and is off to work. Mom is puttering about in the kitchen, preparing a second breakfast, this one for herself and us kids. I pull on pants and shirt, run barefoot to the open screened window, check to confirm the day. I can see sparkled dew on morning leaves, errant butterflies plying their trade, chattering birds scanning the dew for clueless worms.

Another day begins in the paradise of young'unhood. Being young means my mind is lighter, not yet burdened with responsibilities beyond a few daily chores. Village elders and dedicated parents carry the load, so that I can experience a few years of carefree wonder.

As teenagedom slowly approaches, I begin to feel the weight of life's possibilities, life's confusions, life's upcoming pleasures.

A few doubts and fears creep about. I have to start the process of taking on the world as it is slowly handed off to me by aging adults.

I experiment with the idea of Denial. Just pretending everything is fine often makes everything fine.

As a teenager I am not as anxious to get up in the morning. Why does anyone want to rise at 6 a.m.? Getting up means facing teachers and bullies and acne and more chores.

I pretty much dance around these adolescent attitudes until one summer when I go to work as a laborer on a housing construction project.

This means getting up earlier than ever on Monday morning, riding in a pickup truck with other workers for two hours, then spending the week away from home sloughing about in blazing heat. I learn to take orders, do heavy lifting, navigate my way through the startling pathways of rough-and-tumble tough-guy culture.

For a wimpy kid like me, all filled with writing and literature and scholarly intake and storytelling, this is quite a challenge. But, true to my nature, I absorb this educative experience and turn it all into stories. I hone my observation skills without even knowing it at the time.

I survive the labor world and, just one year later, find the job I really want, far away from strain and heat stroke. I become a seventeen-year-old on-air radio personality. Imagine that.

Within a few months, I turn into a semi-adult. Like my father, I rise before daylight—this time willingly, with enthusiasm—and rush to my job as sign-on announcer at a radio station, then later as television host. I suddenly begin transitioning into the role of village elder. Does the heft of responsibility wear me down? Sometimes yes. But, like the kid I once was, I still check the morning dew, scope out the early birds, feel sorry for the early worms, embrace the beckoning sunshine.

All this happens a long, long time ago. Many adventures and misadventures occur since then. A sign of encroaching maturity on my part is the fact that I won't bore you with all those intervening stories. Not quite yet, anyhow. I was once an Alabama young'un. Maybe you, too, were once an Alabama young'un.

Try to remember

.....

Jim Reed writes stories both true and actual. He resides in Birmingham AL.

www.jimreedbooks.com

“I think that the singular evil of our time is prejudice. It is from this evil that all other evils grow and multiply. In almost everything I have written there is a thread of this: a man’s seemingly palpable need to dislike someone other than himself.”

—Rod Serling

IN DEGREES

Adam Day

A window is not
a wall, but both

are empty. It's just
this, as it is. Slow

rain in alders. Hard
to tell if the tree

is holding up
the house or

the house, the tree.

.....

Adam Day is the author of Left-Handed Wolf (LSU Press, 2020), and Model of a City in Civil War (Sarabande Books), and the recipient of a Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship for Badger, Apocrypha, and of a PEN Award.

“Virtue is its own punishment.”

—Nick Wilann Powers



PURPLE & GOLD

2"x 2"

Oil Pastel

Liz Reed

Liz Reed is the art and layout editor for Birmingham Arts Journal. Her artwork is primarily focused on bright swashes of color, sometimes reminiscent of quilts. She stays busy being married to Jim Reed, editor of Birmingham Arts Journal and keeping up with three children, five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.
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BRIDE

Dannye Romine Powell - 1st Place – Poetry - 2022 Hackney Literary Awards

Driving the stretch
of curved road along the bay,
I slowed as I passed
the coral rock bluff
and the steep rise of lawn
with its ancient house
of bird calls
and wrought iron balconies.
I saw myself there –
my young, brunette self --
in an upstairs window,
above the palms and ghostly trellises,
enjoying the play of sunlight
on the blue-grey waters below.
I wanted to wave and call out
but did not – allowing her
free passage into all
the airy, white-curtained rooms
and time
to light the candles
and turn back the quilt
which I had lately mended
and gently packed away.

.....

Dannye Romine Powell's fifth collection, "In the Sunroom with Raymond Carver," won North Carolina's 2020 Roanoke Chowan Award. She has won fellowships in poetry from the NEA, the NC Arts Council and Yaddo. Her poems have appeared recently in Cave Wall, Baltimore Review and Southern Review.

LUNCH AT CLASSIC ON NOBLE

Christopher Jay Jones – 2021 Hackney Literary Awards – 2nd Place
National Story

Jenna Mae McAvoy had found out late in life that having a secret could be fun. It was even more fun if you could give people clues to your secret but not let them know that you had a secret. That way, even the clues became secrets—mini-secrets that would lead someone to the big secret, if they only knew there were any secrets at all. Foolish? Maybe. Unnecessarily complicated? Perhaps. Fun? Definitely!

Jenna Mae's big secret was that she was well into a project to reinvent herself. Today's mini-secret clue was the dressy scarf she wore when she met her daughter Carol for lunch at Classic on Noble in Anniston, Alabama. An observant daughter might have seen the unusually fashionable scarf and thought, "Something's up with Mom." But Carol was not that kind of observant. Carol was more observant of who was coming and going from Classic, and whether they were in turn observing her. Jenna Mae always said that Carol was a bigwig at the county chamber of commerce, which was not only true, but which also meant she didn't have to keep track of Carol's ever-changing job title on her inexorable climb to the top spot.

Carol's impossible job was to elevate this largely rural county, caught in Atlanta's shadow at sunrise and in Birmingham's at sunset, into something like relevance. That was hard when the chief features of the county were a defunct military base, several industrial brownfields, and the interstate highway that passed through it with signs posted every few miles to remind travelers that those bracketing big cities were just an hour or so away. Carol seemed to think that her patronizing the more expensive restaurants that were at least five miles from the interstate would counteract the forces that caused people push the pedal ever closer to the metal out on that highway.

When it was her turn to buy lunch, Jenna Mae would always choose one of the low-price buffets down in Oxford. There you could gorge until your stomach hurt without emptying your wallet. Quantity aside, at those restaurants you could combine institutional-quality spaghetti, fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and any number of desserts without sending any Michelin-aspiring chefs running for their smelling salts.

Carol would shrink visibly upon entering those places within earshot of I-20, where she would only be seen by locals on a budget, hungry

travelers, and busloads of oldsters who stormed the Western Sizzlin' at H-Hour of D-Day for the senior discount. Cheap buffets were commerce, to be sure, but not of the kind that implied an upscale and prosperous future for the county. On this Tuesday, Carol had it her way as they sat at the table in the front window of the Classic within full view and easy hailing distance of the entrance so that Carol could see and converse with whomever was seeing her as other patrons arrived and departed.

Jenna Mae was so used to her daughter's habits that she had come fully expecting to be ignored by her for at least the first fifteen minutes of their lunch. That was fine by her because it gave her some time to enjoy her salad while contemplating her own scarf and the self-reinvention at which it hinted. Jenna Mae grinned at the thought of how this morning she had purposely tied this scarf in a tight knot of the kind she had used to secure her Girl Scout kerchief so many years ago—a practical knot that could survive the wind of her passage on a bicycle or even the blast of a hurricane. A tornado was much more likely than a hurricane here in the north-central part of Alabama, but the unfashionable knot in the current scarf was not intended as proof against weather. It was intended to frustrate and delight the other ladies of the Scarf Club in the movie viewing room at the public library.

Now sixty-three, Jenna Mae recalled how nervous she had felt three years before, on the first day of her self-reinvention project. At that time she had not known how to properly arrange a fashion scarf, so the tight knot and flat presentation had simply been the best she could do. Back then, just two years into widowhood and a few days into retirement, Jenna Mae had only worn a scarf at all on a whim. She had checked herself in the mirror before heading out and, for the first time in nearly forty years, she had not liked the fact that her appearance announced clearly, "I am a teacher."

True, she had been a teacher but now, suddenly, she wasn't. But how would anyone else know that if she looked so...so teacherish? On that first weekday of her life in retirement she had wanted her appearance to say something else. Keenly aware of the limited time and the limited options there in her walk-in closet, her eyes had settled on the old scarf that Mack had bought for her some twenty years before. She had quickly tied it around her neck and while she knew it didn't look quite right, she at least got a different, less teacherly vibe from looking at herself. The English teacher was still visible, but the scarf

announced “Hey y’all, it’s me, Jenna Mae, kind of the same but hopefully a little bit different?” As self-reinventions go, it was a start.

Jenna Mae had been spotted by the members of The Scarf Club immediately upon stepping into the movie viewing room. Then numbering three, the Club wasn’t an actual club but was simply a group of friends who had bonded over their shared love for dressing up for otherwise ordinary outings. While they hadn’t known Jenna Mae and thus would not interpret anything about her as a mini-secret hinting at a big secret, her woefully tied scarf had been received by them as another sort of signal: this woman was potential Club material, but she needed help. They had summoned her to their table and into their tribe with loud familiar cries and had told her that her seat was waiting for her. And she had been in that Club, and that had been her seat at the weekly movie ever since. It had quickly become apparent that Jenna Mae was not cut from the same fashion forward cloth as the other members of the club. This fact was most plainly broadcast by the way her scarf was cinched around her neck, but there were other signs.

While overwhelming her at that first encounter with introductions and a quick summary of their ten years’ worth of gossip, the girls had busied themselves with untying her scarf, fluffing and arranging it properly, and doing something with every bit of her outfit and hair and even taking small liberties with deft sketches of makeup, until she felt like the Cowardly Lion in the Emerald City Beauty Parlor, with hands beautifying her everywhere at once, swiftly making her one of them.

Had she not been primed for reinvention she might have resisted this unbidden sartorial pit stop, but she had relaxed into it, and it had resulted in her feeling stylish, resplendent, ready to lean out over the waves like a ship’s figurehead. Astonishing, given how quick the treatment had been, and how the girls had mostly just rearranged what was already there. They had all then talked and laughed loudly all the way through the movie, which was not even a comedy. Jenna Mae had been helpless to resist joining in even though she felt like they were all making a spectacle. She wasn’t that kind of person at all, but then, wasn’t that the point of reinventing oneself—to do away with, or at least modify, the old self?

Now, three years on, Jenna Mae could in fact arrange her scarf quite nicely on her own. But she owed it to the girls to show up every week with at least that part of her outfit in need of their ministrations. It was a victory for her and for them if something on her person should cause

one or more of them to utter any of the words farmer's daughter, rodeo, county fair, Laura Ingalls Wilder, or Ma Kettle as they fussed over her during the minutes before the movie started. It gave the girls something to lament and try to fix, and it pleased Jenna Mae to know that she was still, even under their influence and in spite of other more definite signs of self-reinvention, just a small-town girl.

Jenna Mae's reveries about her path to self-reinvention usually followed a very orderly agenda, but today's was cut short when Carol committed two unnatural acts: she dropped her silenced phone into her purse, then slid her chair around so that her back was to the dining room, shutting out her public. She was suddenly right there, leaning close to Jenna Mae. She might do that at Western Sizzlin', but never at Classic on Noble! Jenna Mae, who had been communing with her wedge salad while Carol engaged with passersby and her phone, looked into Carol's face, now just a foot away. Going from supernumerary to main character so abruptly was a shock.

She said, "Well hello, Carol. Fancy meeting you here."

Carol said, "Ha ha, Mom, I get it. But look, no phone. I'm all yours now."

Jenna Mae said, "Well goody for me. How's your salad?"

Carol said, "Oh, I've been chatting away. Let me try it."

She had the Noble Salad, which was something of a production with three kinds of fruit, and nuts, plus cheese and dressing.

"Mmm. Good, it's fine."

Jenna Mae said, "This wedge thing is good, too. I sometimes think of making one at home, but I always tear my lettuce up and wash it and spin it, especially since all the E. coli scares, so I never really have a big dense head to carve out a big hunk like this. It probably wouldn't seem so special at home. If I did make my own, you know I would just love to pick up that big honking wedge in my hand and dip it in dressing and chomp on it directly, instead of having to cut off little bites of it like this.

Do you ever want to do that?"

Carol said, "Um, sure, Mom. I dream of it often. But listen, the salads are great and all, but let's talk about something else."

Jenna Mae said, "Okay, dear. What's on your mind?" Carol took a deep breath, blew it out, and said, "Mom, like I've told you before, I hate to see you sitting alone in that big old house."

[continued on page 26]

BOOKS

Duarte Nobrega

Overwhelmed by well written minds,
Romantic sentences,
Outrageous statements
And quotes of freedom
That invade minds
With overwhelming authority.
Dictatorship in the form of paragraphs,
Dictating know-hows;
How to live,
How to think,
How to love,
And how to forget.
Words that turn contemporary lives
Into romantic lives
With modern literature kind of thinking,
Roaring at our minds,
Illuminating brains
Of renaissance hearts.
Artificial hearts created by books,
Angry minds come to the surface
Because of authors,
Making them shout and scream for freedom.
Bite and chew those books,
And spit them at ignorant minds.
Love literature,
But love it well.

.....

Duarte N. Nobrega was born in Madeira, Portugal in 1996. He earned a BA in Languages and Business studies from University of Madeira. He is a screenwriter (in English), a novelist (in Portuguese) and a poet (in English). Duarte's fiction has been published in Twenty-Two Twenty-Eight Literary Magazine and in Teach Write by Katie Winkler. duartenbr96@gmail.com



SWANN BRIDGE

Digital Photograph

Eric Peterson

The bridge, tunneled by green, is located just north of Birmingham, AL. Eric Peterson is an award-winning artist and an aspiring children's book and poetry writer from Southern California. eric@petersonfineart.com www.petersonfineart.com

A PUPPY NAMED EMA RUBY

Carolyn Rhodes

Year after year, I meet up with my childhood besties for a reunion, often at one another's residence. Last year we returned to the Owl House in Stuart, Florida for the second year in a row. It was July 2022. Our host's son owns the property and once again he invited us to gather there free of charge. The House offers exclusivity with its floor to ceiling windows boasting views of sky, bridges, and a Boardwalk on the St. Lucie River. The inside bedrooms, bathrooms and interior are newly renovated. Outside, a few tall old Palms and an Oak tree canopy shade the front lawn, picnic table, and chairs. Mother nature can be seen from all sides of the house built in 1923. While the house got a makeover, I had a much bigger life event which changed me forever. I took the trip to the Owl House because old friends are the best medicine.

Eight months earlier my son, Casey Julian, passed away overnight unexpectedly, a week before Christmas and two days after his 43rd birthday. He came home that night after celebrating with friends, cards and gifts in hand. Briefly we discussed our traditional birthday plans for the next day, a Marvel movie and Sushi. I hugged him before going to bed,

"Happy Birthday, Casey. I love you. See you for breakfast."

He answered back, "Love you too, Mom."

Those would be the last words I would ever hear. The last hug. The last kiss. I no longer knew who I was without my son.

Bands of angels answered the call to be present for me, long before our reunion, and after many sessions with my grief counselor. Divine intervention took me in a new direction, one which none of us could have predicted. The second day in Stuart we all split up. Two of us decided to laze around the Owl House. I walked on the Boardwalk to meditate, enjoy the breezes and the heat from a full sun. It was a hot summer day. I met a woman along the way who was with her well-behaved English Cocker Spaniel. When the girls returned for afternoon wine and cheese, we gathered in the sunroom. I told them about the encounter with the Spaniel and how I felt calm as she lay across my lap on the lawn after petting her. Each of them agreed and simultaneously, they said, "Carolyn, you need a dog!"

One of us attending the reunion, Syd, is a dog show executive who naturally has connections in her community. She called a breeder who had a four-month-old Pumi puppy (a Hungarian herding dog) ready for adoption to the right person. On the website, we got excited when we saw a photo of her. She has an unusually thick cream color spiral-like curly fur coat and the profile of a lamb. Her dark eyes and big floppy ears are as notable as her tail which curls upward into the letter “C”. She would grow up to be a medium size dog, smart and easy to train. We all fell in love with Ema. “She is a perfect fit,” our host gleefully blurted out. Everyone agreed.

That night, I studied her photos and the breed before I fell asleep well past midnight. I made my decision. First thing in the morning I ran downstairs and asked,

“Syd, is the puppy still available? I think we do need each other.”

The wheels were set in motion and plans were made from the Owl House during our reunion that very next morning. Two months later, I returned to Sarasota, Florida to pick up Ema. I would re-name her Ruby. Syd arranged to meet me at the parking lot of a local diner. We placed Ruby into the crate inside my car, along with a toy and a bag of food for the trip home. She was quiet all the way home. This adorable fluff puff, with a bloodline going back a couple of hundred years, now lives with me in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She is one year old.

In the morning, Ruby comes into my bedroom, stands tall on her two hind legs, places her paw on my arm, and wags her tail. Time to wake up, Mom! I show her Casey Julian’s photo above the mantel and tell her something special about him daily. She must feel his presence as much as I do. They say you die twice. Once when you stop breathing and a second time when someone says your name for the last time.

(Anonymous)

.....

*Carolyn Rhodes earned her B.A. in Drama and Dance from the College of Staten Island. She is author of “Library Girls of New York,” (Second printing 2023, also Kindle). She serves on the OLLI Advisory Council and is a member of AWF and TWIG. She can be reached at **writegems@gmail.com***

WONDER FOR A CARROT BUTTON

P.A Farrell

In the pile of cast-off buttons, among the off-white and tan and all the other singularly alone buttons, lay one that caught my eye. It was a bright orange carrot, with a green sprig at the top, tiny yet unmistakable. But why would anyone need such a button? Was it meant to be a flash of fashion on a tiny jacket or shirt?

It must have travelled from the world of formal dinners, where men and women don their finest attire and wait to be served by subservient women in black dresses, white aprons, and a fringe of white on their heads. A world that seems distant and strange.

But what about that singular button, seemingly out of place among the other donated items? Did it once adorn a small, perhaps child-sized, garment, now long forgotten? Or does it serve as a reminder of some long-forgotten aspect of life, held dear by its owner? We can only guess, as this curious oddity remains in the pile, shrouded in mystery forever.

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*P. A. Farrell is a psychologist and published author. She writes for Medium.com and is a board member of Clinics4Life. She lives on the East Coast of the US. **drfarrell22@gmail.com***

*“Advice is what we ask for
when we already know the
answer but wish we didn’t.”*

—Erica Jong

UNYOKED

Lindsay Rockwell

We are not nothing. Apple being apple.
The not round red of light upon apple.
What is round. Red. The sound of apple
and morning after wind dies. Light going
rides the marbled clouds, or are they
horses. So much more interesting
to be horses. Roan. Abiding without yoke. Cantering.
We call their names. Our throats unyoke the heavy sound
of horse. When reined their roan coats fear
the whip when the hand that holds the whip lives unyoked
from the heart that cracks it. If only
the hand cracking the whip might hear its own
shuttered sound. Hear the not round red of light
upon apple, there, where the table holds it. In the gone wind. Beneath
the roan horses. Whip of horse is the empty hand
ever unable to cup or hold itself. That hollow
that is lean never falling caught. Only tottering.
I am seeking some assignment. Or is it
sound. Unified. Unyoked. Sound of liberation not of light
or thought— of apple, throat, hand. Cantering.

.....

Lindsay Rockwell won first prize in the October Project Poetry Contest in April 2020 and the 81st Moon Prize from Writing in a Woman's Voice, August 2021. She has been published in: Writing in a Woman's Voice, Perceptions Magazine, The Center for New Americans Poetry Anthology and The Courtship of Winds. Her poetry is forthcoming in Iron Horse Literary Review and Amethyst Review. She is currently the poet-in-residence for the Episcopal Church of Connecticut as well as host for their Poetry and Social Justice Dialogue series. As a medical oncologist she has been published in the Journal of Clinical Oncology and coauthored In Defiance of Death: Exposing The Real Costs of End-of-Life Care (Praeger, 2008).



MUM'S THE WORD

Jules Dufek

Acrylic on Board – 5” x 5”

A graduate of Birmingham-Southern College, Jules Dufek lives and paints in Birmingham, AL. Her work focuses primarily on nature's bounty.

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Follow on Instagram **Julesartvendor** and **Our Living Canvas**

THE GRAND THEATER

Robert Boucheron

A toy suitable for older children who are trying on roles, learning to make speeches, and striking original poses, the Grand Theater has scenes and costumes printed in colors on stiff paper, packed in a carton that forms the shell of the stage. It has no motors or electrical wires. No batteries.

Unseal the carton carefully and unfold the flaps. Remove the contents, place the carton on its side, and attach the proscenium arch by means of tabs in the precut slots. Hang the red curtain in the arch. Open and close it with the tasseled cord. Insert the footlights at the edge of the thrust stage, the lower flap of the carton. Clap your hands!

Select a scene for the production you wish to mount. The Grand Theater has twelve scenes to accommodate a range of plays, operas, interludes, and dramas. Listed below, each scene comes in a large manila envelope that contains a set – a backdrop, two wings, and a piece of furniture – and four costumes to place on the actors, like clothes on a paper doll.

Mix items from one scene with another to achieve special effects. For example, the wall of the Prison Cell abruptly dissolves to the River Bank, like a vision of freedom to the Prisoner. Or the Prince appears in the Village Square to woo the lovely Shepherdess. It is better to keep a scene together, though, and put it back in the envelope when finished.

1. *Dark Forest*

Set: dense trees, tangled thicket, twisted vine, moss, hollow stump.

Woodcutter: jacket, thick trousers, rugged boots, beret, axe.

Lost Girl: thin dress, threadbare cloak, barefoot, frayed wicker basket.

Hunter: smart outfit, jaunty hat, gauntlets, riding boots, horse whip.

Hound: furry coat with tail, leather collar, pointed ears, mitts for paws.

2. *City Street*

Set: masonry house fronts, corner of fine house, balcony, handcart.

Merchant: woolen coat trimmed with fur, buckled shoes, seal ring, money bag.

Workman: blue smock, sabots, cloth cap, hammer.

Marquise: beautiful dress, fancy bonnet, high heels, fan hung from wrist.

Maid: plain dress, white mobcap, low mules, bundle.

3. *Royal Palace*

Set: wainscot hung with tapestry, French door, marble fireplace, gilded throne.

King: purple robe, ermine cape, gold crown, scepter.

Queen: embroidered gown, jeweled necklace, tiara, reticule.

Prince: velvet doublet, silk hose, pointed shoes, ornamental dagger.

Lady in Waiting: sumptuous gown, cross on gold chain, prayer book.

4. *River Bank*

Set: row of poplars, water beyond, boat with oars, fishing net.

Boatman: short jacket, loose pants, cummerbund, straw hat, gaff.

Fishwife: plain dress, apron, faded shawl, kerchief, bulky sack.

Poet: disheveled suit, untied laces, red scarf, sheaf of papers.

Young Woman: bright dress, fringed shawl, brooch, dainty shoes, bouquet.

5. *Village Square*

Set: half-timber and plaster house fronts, arch of shop, parish church, barrel.

Peasant: brown smock, thick boots, leather cap, cattle prod.

Farmwife: plaid dress, apron, patterned shawl, new reed basket.

Laborer: patched smock, rough clogs, cloth cap, field hoe.

Shepherdess: airy blouse and skirt, bodice, picture hat with ribbon, crook.

6. *Battlefield*

Set: open country, board fence, cannon, powder keg, pyramid of cannonballs.

General: dark uniform, spangled epaulets, plumed hat, riding boots, unsheathed sword.

Aide de Camp: dark uniform, plain epaulets, pistol in holster, dispatch notebook.

Gunner: smudged shirt and trousers, marching boots, helmet, arm bandage, steel rod.

Orphan Girl: ragged frock, castoff soldier's jacket, barefoot, ammunition pouch.

7. Cathedral

Set: high altar, stained glass window, choir stall, pulpit, bible.

Bishop: embroidered white robe, stole, miter, gold ring, crozier.

Acolyte: black cassock, white surplice, candle lighter, incense burner.

Monk: coarse brown robe, ditto cowl, rope belt, sandals, penitential scourge.

Nun: black habit, white veil, rosary, crucifix on chain.

8. Walled Garden

Set: peeling stucco on brick, flowers, fountain, gravel path, sculpture of nymph.

Youth: shirt open to the chest, suspenders, pantaloons, creased letter.

Maiden: bewitching dress, careless shawl, travel shoes, valise.

Gardener: peasant attire, straw hat, pruning knife at belt, small rake.

Chatelaine: severe gown, hooded cloak, black gloves, lantern.

9. Prison Cell

Set: damp stone wall, small window up high, iron bars, shackles, straw pallet.

Prisoner: ragged trousers, no shirt, amulet on thong around neck, pencil stub.

Jailer: plain trousers and vest, yellow undershirt, slouch cap, bunch of keys.

Warden: dark uniform, white shirt and necktie, visor cap, rolled document.

Visitor: wife in disguise as attorney, dark suit, shined shoes, briefcase.

10. Artist Studio

Set: garret with sloped ceiling, casement, view of rooftops and sky, easel.

Painter: daubed smock over good shirt, foulard, striped trousers, palette and brush.

Model: naked under silk wrapper, turban, slippers, bottle.

Patron: frockcoat, top hat, driving gloves, gold watch chain, diamond stick pin, cigar.

Lady: ruffled dress, tailored jacket, elaborate hat, kid gloves, parasol.

11. *Pirate Ship*

Set: wooden deck, bulwark, rigging, coil of rope, waves beyond, skull and crossbones flag.

Captain: brocade coat, torn stockings, gold earring, eyepatch, spyglass.

Parrot: bright plumage, long tail, curved beak, piece of hardtack.

Sailor: striped jersey, tight bell bottoms, kerchief, round hat, pipe.

Hostage: simple frock, elegant belt and shoes, cameo on ribbon, guitar.

12. *Hospital Ward*

Set: greenish wall, venetian blind askew, bed with rails, intravenous drip.

Doctor: white lab coat, black pants, horrid necktie, stethoscope.

Nurse: scrub uniform, thick white shoes, chart, pills, paper cup.

Patient: flimsy sheath, foam slippers, bandage on head, plastic bracelet.

Death: scarlet ball gown, corsage, dance pumps, silver goblet.

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Robert Boucheron is an architect in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the print editor of Rivanna Review. His stories and essays appear in Alabama Literary Review, Bellingham Review, Concrete Desert Review, Fiction International, and Saturday Evening Post. rboucheron@gmail.com

“Silent gratitude isn't very
much use to anyone.”

—Gertrude Stein

FLOWERS WOULD BLOOM

Bree Bailey

Sometimes I think if Jesus freed his hands, he'd wipe nails away
and flowers would bloom in the holes.

The ghost of survival would wait for the opportune moment to
spread steady vibrant joy in a place of sorrow.

I like to think if forgiveness was planted at gravesites,
begonias would be more popular than dogs.

Imagine the world running wild with ranunculus and lavender
pawing at our heels and not gun violence
dropping us to our knees.

Imagine how sublime it'd be to see a sky of rainbow daffodils
and not hide behind a desk during an active shooter drill.

Imagine small children practicing writing script and poetry,
not perfecting how to mark themselves safe on social media. I'm
safe, a metaphor for today I thought I would die and didn't.

Sometimes I think if Jesus freed his hands,
he'd pray for flowers.

Sometimes I think we're only god
in our final edits.

.....

*Bree Bailey has been writing poetry since she was a child but feels like she has
only been writing as a poet for a year now. Her poems have appeared in Anti-
Heroin Chic, Gnashing Teeth Pub, Olney Magazine, and All My
Relations.*



DREAM HOUSE

18" x 24"

Mixed Media

My art work has a slightly Asian feel. This is not a conscious decision but may be the result of my years of travel to Japan and my lifelong interest in Eastern philosophy. I am attracted to simplicity of form, asymmetry, and worn, weathered looking surfaces. Those Zen-like elements show up time and time again in my painting. Kay lives in Mountain Brook, AL.

kayvinsonart.com

HONEYSUCKLE

Halley Cotton Hackney – 2021 Hackney Literary Award – National Poetry – 2nd Place

Honeysuckle

Bines twine clockwise. Spring has
clapped the dust from her skirt
and paper-mâchéd a thousand
milk and butter twists.

The bees have come to cull
and found their offices closed:
petals tugored tight as a spun
maypole. Sugar ants jaw
to cleave a cream nub, but
cornucopial buds kernel unto
their own, shut up like I am,
unwilling to be the first to share.

.....

H. M. Cotton is the managing editor of Birmingham Poetry Review, contributing editor for NELLE, and production manager for both journals. Her writing appears in places such as Greensboro Review, Poetry South, and SmokeLong Quarterly. She is the founding director of the SPARK Writing Festival and teaches at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She lives in Birmingham, AL.

WHAT THEY SHOULD HAVE TAUGHT ME

T.K. Cassidy-Fleming

My first teaching job was on Guam. I'd completed my training in Montana with a horrible experience under the supervision of a man who was retiring after 30 years. He taught journalism, ran the school newspaper, and organized the yearbook. I'd never even had a class in journalism. He met me at the door every morning of the Spring semester with a strip of paper telling me the day's topic. He told me to keep the freshmen—hormonal, Spring fever-raging teenagers—busy for an hour. Then he disappeared into the teacher's lounge until dismissal. OH GIDDY AUNT!

I know NOW what a Mondrian layout for a newspaper is. Most of the kids just stared at me blankly while I struggled. A couple of the kids had crude remarks to make but for a member of the school news team who was pressed in to service often. My other class was Senior English. Bored kids with three more weeks of their school career, were already planning parties and couldn't have cared less about Sylvia Plath. Fortunately, I was familiar with the required book. Unfortunately, they weren't impressed with my pearls of wisdom.

At first, they were impossible, talking over me, making snide comments, and generally being bored teenagers. After three-weeks freshmen experience, I'd had enough. My frustration exploded. I told them that I was miserable with this whole experience and that I knew I'd made a terrible mistake even though I'd wanted to be a teacher all my life. I promised them that if they'd just go easy on me for the rest of my brief stay, I'd never teach again.

We reached a compromise. I taught some—especially on my observation days—but mostly we talked about summer, their future plans and whether I had a boyfriend or not. We got each other through the time and parted on good terms. A couple of them even told me I shouldn't quit, that I could be a good teacher, but I was steadfast in my resolve.

Shortly after that, I met my late husband. We moved to Australia for a year. No working there! With twelve percent national unemployment, they weren't about to give up any jobs to some bloody Yank swooping in from the States. I was nearly deported for doing volunteer work. On to Guam we went where I could work as I pleased.

During my job search, on a whim, I broke my promise and filled in an application for librarianship. Knowing how few, and far between such positions were, I was confident that I wouldn't be contacted. I accepted a position with an ad agency as the editor for a well-known local magazine. I didn't know for a few weeks that the magazine was on its last legs. I'd been hired to try to pull the circulation up. Though I learned a lot about advertising, there wasn't enough work in the small mom 'n' pop business to keep me there. I was fairly stunned when, three weeks later, I was contacted by the school district. I had a job if I wanted to go out and talk to the principal. Nervous, worried, and almost sick with apprehension, I jumped through all the hoops and was hired.

And that's how I found myself in an elementary school library at 8 AM on a very warm, tropic, morning in August, legs crossed, sitting on the storytelling carpet with a bunch of kindergarteners, four- and five-year-olds. They had been in school for all of two weeks. This bunch was a mixture of military kids who had experienced American schools, Chamoru (local) children who were used to new adventures, and outer island babies who were still getting used to wearing shoes. They were adorable and the teacher had trained them well. They strolled in quietly, walked right to the carpet, sat down in number order, 'crisscross applesauce' (which I soon learned meant with ankles crossed and legs tucked in) and stared at me in rapt attention.

The teacher, who was looking forward to her break time, gave me a few tips before leaving. She said they were a good group of kids who knew just what to do and I should have no trouble with them, but that I should keep an eye on 'that one.' She gestured toward a small Chamoru boy wearing a wrinkly blue tee shirt, sitting at the end of the front row. I regarded the dark-haired youngster who looked half asleep. I waved the teacher off and joined the kids on the carpet and began to read.

As I told the story, the little guy I'd been warned about began to slowly scooch closer and closer to me until he was nestled under my arm, leaning against my side. In my naivete, I thought isn't that just sweet. In the next page or two, he slid into my lap with the stealth of a large snake and snuggled right in. Not wanting to ruin the rhythm of the story, I ignored him and read on. I actually felt him fall asleep. His little body went limp and filled up the space my crossed legs created. I kept reading.

Moments later, I felt a warm fluid spreading in my lap. Surprised, I squealed and jumped to my feet dumping the poor little guy onto the carpet unceremoniously. Of course, he woke up, but he didn't cry or carry on. He just looked up at me with an angelic smile and said, "Sowwy, Miss. I slepted."

No. I didn't have a change of clothes. Yes. I had to teach the rest of the very warm day in 'fragrant' pants and yes, from that day forward—even when teaching the big kids—I kept a change of pants and a large bottle of Febreze in my office. Oh, and I used a storytelling chair from that day forward.

.....

*TK Cassidy was born and raised out West and has been writing since she learned how to hold a pencil. She earned her doctorate in education and retired after 20 years as an elementary librarian. She has traveled extensively and is currently working on a humorous trilogy. **Daleshng@gmail.com***

“Just who is Les Miserables
and why did they write a
book about him?”

—Jim Reed

THE VISION

Linda B. Breedon

I was late for my own wedding. It was not on purpose—Mama had promised Pawpaw that I'd stop by so he could appreciate his only granddaughter *decked out* in her wedding dress. Mama forgot to tell me, blaming it on her short-term memory problems from the menopause.

I kept my thoughts to myself as I cuddled our cat, Griselda, named after the old cat in the only stage play we'd ever seen, *Cats*.

Fear of upsetting Bo, my groom, made me as mad as an old wet hen. I calmed down the instant I heard the creak of Pawpaw's old wooden rocker. I sat in his lap, rubbing my hand on the wood aged to a slick finish, grayed with time just like his own silky hair that brushed his collar with its curly fullness. The seat of the rocker had been braided by his sensitive hands from the reeds he gathered from down by the creek. The seat sagged with the comfort of time, still strong, just like him.

I patted his cheek and could feel the moistness of his tears as he ran his fingertips over the fabric of my wedding gown, handed down to Mama from her Mama and now to me. The crinoline was starched into elegant stiffness, relieved only by its antique lace overlay which he rubbed gently between his fingers. "Soft as a baby's butt," his gentle voice teased. "You look like your Mama did on her wedding day."

How could he know what either one of us looked like? Blind from a genetic defect that affected every other generation, he could only see shadowy shapes outlined by a soft white glow that he said sometimes made him close his mind's eye, visions of the unseen becoming as clear as the sigh of the wind was to our ears.

"Sorry you can't come to my wedding, Pawpaw," I said.

"Me too, Susie Q. Your Granny and I were married for sixty years before she passed."

"That's a really long time—it's hard to believe two people can stand each other that long."

I laid my hand against his cheek and could feel his lips turn downward and I wished I could take my words back. Then his lips spiked upward again.

"Why we divided our household goods about fourteen times during those years. Marriage takes a lot of work, but the real work comes before the wedding day in finding the right person."

Did he know? Not a single boy had ever asked me out until Bo noticed me. When he'd asked me to marry him, I felt like the most blessed girl in the whole world.

"It's just that..."

Mama interrupted, "Shhh, baby girl, don't borrow trouble. Just let it be."

"Alright, Mama."

The doubt continued, so I pushed it further down to that dark hiding place inside me.

Mama was good at knowing what both Papaw and I were thinking. We always laughed loudly when she said, "I can see clean through the both of you." This was one of those times.

"Daddy, don't go scaring her." Her voice was anxious with worries best left unspoken.

"Just because her Daddy run off and left us right after she was born don't mean the same thing will happen to her."

Bo was the only boy I'd ever gone with. He was good to me most of the time until I told him my dream to become a teacher. He had laughed and said I really wasn't suited for the working world and that I'd be much happier with the job of taking care of him and that meant him alone—no kids. I had a fit and asked if he'd lost his ever-lovin' mind and that I not only wanted kids, I wanted four.

He laughed his laugh that made me feel stupid so, well, I pushed him. He pushed me back ... hard. I fell down and he jerked me up so quick that it clean-near pulled my arm out of its socket.

"If you want me to be the bridegroom at this wedding your Mama's always yapping about, we need to get some things straight. After all, who else would marry someone like you?"

"Like me?" I whispered, rubbing my arm where the burning pain throbbed its warning.

"You are dumb as a rock, Suzie, stumbling around like you do." He laughed again and this time I accepted the truth of his words.

The creaking of Pawpaw's rocker brought me back to my wedding day. I bent down to kiss his forehead; my lips felt the deep wrinkles etched there by the troubles of life.

"Pawpaw, I'm sorry you're feeling so poorly and hope you'll be better real soon." He held me for a long time, tighter than anybody ever had.

“Always remember who you are and what I taught you about doing whatever you set your mind on. Things always have a way of workin’ out like they should.”

“Pawpaw, I got to go now,” I said, reluctant to leave the comfort of his arms.

Even though we were late for the wedding, Mama drove slow, easing the old Ford station wagon under the overhang of the church. Preacher was waiting to open the car door, his deep voice piercing the solitude of this old country church as he said, “Susie, where you been? I was getting worried.”

“Sorry Preacher, had to stop and see Pawpaw. I’m ready to get married now.”

I felt Preacher’s breath as he whispered, “I’m sorry to tell you but Bo has run off with that waitress from Bubba’s Juke Joint and her husband is chasing after them—threatening to kill the both of them— so the wedding’s off.”

I closed my mind’s eye from the blinding sparkle within my own dark world seeing the unknown blessing of this day in the form of a shout as loud as the sound of a freight train to my ears.

“Hallelujah.”

.....

Linda Breeden’s publications include Guideposts, Redbook, Birmingham Arts Journal, Southern Writers, A Widows Might, *and* Chicken Soup for the Soul. *She has received awards from* Redbook Inspirational Story, Southern Writer’s Magazine, *and* BRCWC Foundation. *Her debut novel is* “The Prodigal Promise.” **lbreeden9403@gmail.com**

MOTHER MIRROR ME

Elizabeth Skara

I will no longer hurry you out the door
at the pace of chaos,
A tight grip on essence,
The worry of clock time
knots in neck
I struggle to
Untie
Linger longer in conversation...
slowly
put
boots
on
Notice lady bug
travel up white trim

I will no longer demand attention
in fleeting should filled moments
taking away from that
spark of wonder that leads to
discovery on
empty pages

I will not pressure you to decide,
With fear perched on my shoulder,
I release you
from the expired expectations
of old records I no longer choose
to play
And all the demands that took shape in the
Fun House mirrors
of my past

I will allow you to peacefully drift off when your body
feels ready
And spring air is clapping on living room blinds
I will not place false agendas on deep knowing

I will dance with you while boiling pots create
nourishment on the stove
Leaping in air amongst made up lyrics
And smiles permeate on lips
Until bedtime

I will get really close and quiet
when you list your fears between
blankets and candle light flicker
Holding them softly with cupped hands
Free to be and free to float into night sky

And then,
I will do the same for me

.....

Elizabeth Skara Elizabeth is a Certified Big Leap coach, photographer, painter, and writer. She lives in Tonka Bay, MN where she enjoys the unschooling journey with her two children. Her most recent work, Amongst Evergreen Giants, can be found in River Bluff Bluffs to Big Woods, an Anthology of essays.

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"There is no remedy for love except to
love more." —*Henry David Thoreau*

Jenna Mae said, “This again? I should have known it was something super-important—to you—when you turned your phone off.”

Sarcasm was to Carol as wooden door splinters were to a battering ram.

She said, “Oh hush. This is important to both of us, and I really want you to know I’m concerned about you.”

Jenna Mae said, “I know you are, but there’s nothing to worry about. I like our old house and our old neighborhood. We had good times there. And it’s not all that big.”

Carol said, “See there? You still say our house and we and think of it as a family home. I left home twenty years ago, and it has been just you there since...for five years now.”

Jenna Mae always thought Carol’s using elapsed time instead of simply saying “Since Dad died,” was cumbersome, but precious.

Jenna Mae said, “Well it’s not exactly a huge place. We did spread out a bit after you grew up and left, you know. Made your room into an office. Elbow room, cried Daniel Boone.” She wagged her arms à la chicken dance.

Carol put a hand on Jenna Mae’s nearest elbow and said, “Please stop that. It’s too much house for one person.”

Jenna Mae protested, “Now I only have the one guest bedroom, and nothing else extra. How is that house too big?”

Carol, who was more attuned to absolutes such as demographics and square footage than to what someone might consider homey and comforting, repeated, “It’s just way too big for one person, anyone can see that. You are surrounded by whole families living in that size house, or smaller. But that’s not the only thing. I don’t like you having to go up and down those basement steps. It’s not safe for a woman your—I mean, of a certain age.”

That did it. Jenna Mae pushed her salad plate away and leveled a finger at Carol’s face. “You listen here, young lady. I still run four mornings a week, three or four miles at a time. I stretch and lift weights in my unsafe basement after going down my unsafe steps, and when I’m through I somehow manage to crawl back up those unsafe steps. I run in 5K races, and I would have a pile of first-place trophies if Alberta Lieb didn’t beat me by ten feet in every race.” Alberta Lieb was Jenna Mae’s personal athletic nemesis, a woman who had been beating her by mere

steps in races for nearly thirty years, ever since they first met up in the 30-to-34 age group. Alberta Lieb was so fast that she could safely let her opponents draw within a few feet of her in the last tenth of a mile. But she had an unbelievable finishing kick and would contrive to give Jenna Mae false hope, only to snatch it away at the finish—the sadistic bitch. Oh, to cross a finish line without the sight of Alberta Lieb’s flouncy pony tail taunting her! That dream, more than any health benefit, kept Jenna Mae in training.

Carol said, “I know you’re in great shape now, Mom, but I’m just thinking ahead.”

Jenna Mae fumed, “And what’s this about me being a ‘woman of a certain age’? You do know that’s a grievous insult, don’t you?”

Carol said, “No it isn’t! It just means somewhere between middle age and old. So see, I’m saying you’re not old, really. It’s a compliment when you think of it that way.”

Jenna Mae said, “Oh no. Where I come from, it means an old spinster or something cutesy or gross. It’s never used to describe powerful, successful women. Did they call Margaret Thatcher or Golda Meir ‘women of a certain age’? Heck no! I’ve heard that label used on everyone from forty-year-old man-chasers in hot pants to the little whitehaired ladies who sit alone in the back pews at church. Don’t lump me in with any of them. I’m not some ‘certain age’ group, I’m exactly sixty-three, and I can whip your butt in a race up and down my stairs for as many times as you like.” Alberta Lieb would not be invited to participate in this private event—advantage: Jenna Mae. “We’ll see who needs to call MedicalAlert first.”

Jenna Mae was venturing into choppy waters, for Carol had begged her mother to subscribe to MedicalAlert and wear one of those call-for-help buttons around her neck at home in case she fell ill, or down the stairs. Jenna Mae had steadfastly refused to do that on the grounds that such products were for old biddies—something she was working hard not to become. The stairway challenge also carried other subtextual freight because Carol was substantially overweight and a race on the stairs really would put her, not her mother, in medical jeopardy.

Carol leaned back and raised her hands in surrender. “O-kay, Mom, I’m sorry. Can you lower your voice?” She folded her arms on the table and leaned toward Jenna Mae and said earnestly, “Listen. It was just an expression. I didn’t mean to insult you, any more than you meant to call me a fatty.”

"I never did use that word!"

"Well, saying you would run me into the ground on the steps and I would need to call MedicalAlert—that's about as subtle as 'woman of a certain age' if we're going to go around looking for insults." Carol had not risen to chamber of commerce bigwig by not being able to dodge torpedoes while returning fire in rough seas.

Chastened, Jenna Mae said, "I'm sorry too, dear. And you are not a fatty, you are beautiful. Hey! You could jog with me some mornings if you wanted to."

"Mom—Or walk. Yes, at first just walk one or two—"

"Mom, we're getting way off topic, and I've got a meeting in an hour. Will you just hear me out?"

"Well I'm sorry, I didn't know we had an agenda. I thought we were just having lunch."

As if summoned by a royal clap of hands, at that moment Carol's famous shrimp and grits and Jenna Mae's less renowned but still very good turkey club sandwich arrived, so the women stopped talking until their plates were situated and their iced tea glasses were replenished.

Jenna Mae hefted half of her club sandwich and said, "Look at this meat. When Mother packed my lunch, it was one—I repeat, one—slice of baloney between two dry slices of Wonder Bread. That's why I always let you buy the school lunch, and gave you money for extra if you wanted, you know. I was deprived!"

Carol said, "You do know that's sliced smoked turkey and not bologna, don't you, Mom?"

"Yes, please." This last was directed at another server who was wandering the dining room and raining freshly grated parmesan cheese onto dishes on demand. Jenna Mae watched the server crank the handle on his grater and reflected that his cheese dispensing function was performed at the discount buffets, with no panache but at considerably less expense, via self-serve from stainless steel bins in the salad bar.

Jenna Mae said, "Of course I know that, I ordered it didn't I? But I'm just saying I would have killed for a sandwich like this when I was little. That pack of baloney that Mother bought would last a week, and that's with three kids eating off of it, one slice per kid per day. Did you ever get the urge to pick up a whole pack of baloney and just take a big old bite out of it? They sell these things I call baloney bombs at Christian Corner Meats, eighty ounces, that's five pounds, it's shaped like the

Hindenburg only rounded on the ends, and in a bright red wrapper. I could get one of those, just one time—

“Carol said, “It’s bologna, Mom, not baloney. And you a teacher. And what is it with you and taking big bites out of things? First with the lettuce wedge, and now—what’s so funny?”

Jenna Mae said, “I was just teasing, trying to see how long you would let me go on.” Actually, she had come dangerously close to revealing her secret self-reinvention project to Carol, which would have spoiled the fun. Earlier, when Carol was doing her usual socializing from her side of the table, Jenna Mae had thought about the part of her program that involved taking a bigger bite out of life. She knew that in the expensive self-help programs this phrase was meant conceptually, and you had to buy books and seminars for them to tell you what it really meant, but her lettuce wedge had inspired her to think about the phrase more literally. Why not take bigger bites of actual things? Who decides what size bites we should take? Who elected them? She had pictured herself as the queen of big bites, with teeth appropriate to the task. She still had all of her own teeth, thank God and Colgate and Anniston Dental Group, but for her big bite campaign she would need those ceramic implants she was always seeing advertised in the newspaper. A size or two too large for her mouth would deliver maximum biting efficacy as well as visibly marking her as a taker of big bites.

She covered her secret tracks and also satisfied her literal urge by taking an enormous bite of her sandwich, burying her mouth in it such that the ends of the oval construct were touching either side of her face. She smiled a loopy smile at her daughter as she chewed the resulting cheek-popping mouthful. It was so good that way—who knew you could taste with every part of your inner mouth? Not small-bite-takers, that’s for sure.

Watching her, Carol muttered, “God bless America,” which was her go-to substitute for profanity in public. At least she was smiling. Both women dug into their food. As they ate, Jenna Mae struggled with conflicting desires. She didn’t want Carol to think that it was unsafe for her to live alone in her house, but there was no scenario in which she saw herself leaving the home that she loved. And where did Carol expect her to live? Where, in her esteemed opinion, did helpless old biddies dwell? Carol and Rod’s basement, while they and their kids thumped around overhead? Horrors. An active seniors community, with

active seniors out striding around pumping their arms and flashing their dentures and braying about what active seniors they were? Double horrors. Assisted living? Quadruple horrors. Nursing home? Exponential horrors. In her car out behind the funeral home, all convenient-like? Infinity horrors. Actually, though, that last one was the best of the lot from Jenna Mae's point of view. It was the only one that didn't come with an assigned role for her. With all of the other options, instead of waking up each morn ready to set sail upon the sea of life with the fresh wind of a new day rippling through her raiment, she would be bound by house rules. Instead of choosing her own adventures she would have some well-meaning youngster cooing in her face and trying to lure her into group games and craft classes and off-key bands with kazoos and washboards and straw boater hats. Random hobbies and a facsimile of razzmatazz were fine for people who had nothing to do, but she had things to do! All the options other than living in her car in the funeral home parking lot came with assumptions about the stage of life she was in and her capabilities, no matter how active and vital she might actually be. She would not give in to other peoples' assumptions. If she let them, they would turn her into a biddy. Living in her car would at least discourage cliché role assignment. People would peer in at her and her supplies through the window and wonder, was the old gal losing it or was she a renegade? Heck, no need to just sit there in a parking lot, either. She could do some road-tripping. Not violently like in *Thelma and Louise* but more like Jack Kerouac, though his road trip had been really druggy and boozy. Maybe more like John Steinbeck in *Travels with Charley*. Yeah, that would be her style, just easing around the country and taking in the sights, but no dog, thank you—her story would be *Travels Without a Pooch*, or maybe just *Travels*, since why mention a dog at all if you never owned one in the first place. Except that she didn't want to do that!

She liked her life at her house, and any change to that right now for no good reason other than "Carol says so," would be like taking her first step toward the grave. But Jenna Mae could not ask exactly what Carol had in mind for her. The mere act of asking the question would give the girl false hope. She was not going to budge from her house—end of story. It wasn't fair that she had to continually defend and justify her choices. She was the mom. She should be the one putting Carol on the

spot, not the other way around. How to reconcile their contrasting visions of her? She noticed that Carol was now looking down at a little square of parchment with writing on it, like something cut from the Declaration of Independence.

Jenna Mae asked, “What are you studying so intently?” Carol handed her the parchment and said, “This dessert menu. I never realized before, but I think it’s written out by hand. See, today’s date is also written on there. Do you want to get some of that cobbler?”

Jenna Mae took the offered menu and said, “Yes, I can smell the ink. Someone has nice penmanship. Let me see...cobbler—yes, let’s go for it.” She waved at the passing parmesan cheese guy and said, “Timothy Odum, could you tell our waiter we want to order dessert?” The young man smiled hugely, flipped long hair from around his face, and offered to take the order himself. Jenna Mae asked for one order of peach cobbler, two spoons, coffee, and a box for the remaining half of her sandwich. Timothy Odum hustled off.

Carol said, “Did you just call him by name?”

Jenna Mae said, “Yes. Timothy Odum. He was one of my students, oh, ten years ago? Yes, fourth or fifth grade, I think. I didn’t recognize him at first but when he was walking by just then his name popped into my head. Pretty good memory for my age, hmm? Smart boy, Timothy. I’ll bet he’s at JSU.” Jenna Mae had nothing against cheese dispensing as a profession, but she felt the responsibility common to all good teachers to imagine her students’ boundless prospects. Surely this lad whom she had taught to read, and figure, was using his cheese-grating earnings to fund his post-secondary education in...what? In what had he shown an interest back then? It didn’t matter. Few pursued their fourth-grade ambitions in adulthood or else everyone would be firefighters and astronauts. Timothy Odum must have enjoyed fourth grade, for he brought them what had to be a double portion of peach cobbler, made, according to the calligraphy on the menu, from fresh peaches bought that very morning from a Ken Easterling of Chilton, Alabama.

They dug into the cobbler and Carol said, “Wow, this is good.” Their spoons became blurs as there ensued the polite race that occurs when multiple women share one dessert. Jenna Mae started strong, but Carol had all the advantages on her side in this contest if not in the hypothetical race up and down the basement stairs. Jenna Mae soon

conceded and sat back to admire Carol's technique. She looked so content when she was eating. Her face relaxed so much that the incipient vertical line between her eyes nearly disappeared.

Jenna Mae thought, "My baby can really work over a cobbler." My...baby. Jenna Mae said, "Carol, let me tell you my bottom line: I am not an old biddy."

Swallowing the last of the cobbler, Carol said, "I know, Mom, it's just that—" Jenna Mae said, "I think we've been talking past each other. Just hear me out. I am sixty-three, not ninety-three. I don't think you understand how 'biddy' is not just a word. To me, 'biddy' is everything about being an old lady and acting like an old lady that I am fighting tooth and nail against and there goes my grammar. But do you hear me?"

Carol nodded with such a miserable face that Jenna Mae had to laugh. She took a sip of the lemon-tinged melt-water that was all that remained of her iced tea, cleared her throat, and said, "Carol, I'm not giving up my house any time soon—maybe ever. And I'm not going to do anything else that makes me feel like an old biddy. But maybe we could say that you want to protect me like we protected you when you were a baby. And didn't we put a baby monitor in your nursery? Sure, we did. And so if you need to feel like I'm being watched a little bit like I'm a baby—not a biddy, mind you—I suppose it wouldn't hurt me to have that Medical Alert thingy if it really means that much—"

Carol's wish to be seen at Classic on Noble was granted. Everyone in the front dining room stopped eating and watched her as, blubbering incomprehensible things, she grabbed her mother in a seated hug and spilled tears down her back. Jenna Mae smiled at the other diners over Carol's heaving shoulder and alternately patted her daughter's back and waved at them as if to signal, "Don't worry. Everything is fine." During the embrace, Jenna Mae had plenty of time to wonder if anything that had gone on during this lunch qualified as an element of self-reinvention. Letting herself be partially turned into Carol's old baby without otherwise giving in to old biddy-hood—that seemed significant. It seemed to make Carol happy, and it gave Jenna Mae time and space to continue with other more definite reinventions. It should at least let them find other things to talk about. Would it work?

She would find out next time they had lunch, which would be in a week at the restaurant of Jenna Mae's choosing. She had a beautiful vision of herself and Carol seated on the same side of a booth so they could watch the action at the discount buffet, Jenna Mae taking notably

big bites and Carol eating with a worry-free smile on her face, with not a single word spoken about Jenna Mae moving out of her house or giving up any more independence than she had to. It was an open-ended vision, with the joy of this moment at Classic on Noble lasting forever. She would have to think about all of this later when she was by herself and when, more importantly, she wasn't having the breath squeezed out of her.

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Christopher Jay Jones lives in Anniston, AL, home of Classic on Noble. Come on out and enjoy the food and do some self-reinvention! He writes on Substack at the blogs "Christopher Jay Jones" and "Column Inches by Chris." christopher.jay.jones@gmail.com

“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn



Sand Island Lighthouse “This is something I’ve sought after for years. It was one of those “must have” shots but I needed a drone and a boat. That finally happened in March 2021. A friend had his boat down at Ft Morgan and offered to take me out to shoot it. We had to deal with choppy waters and 15 knot winds. It was exciting but not in a good way. The fear of losing my drone to the watery depths of Mobile Bay was deeply ingrained in me. But, between my friend and me, I managed to get one of those shots of a lifetime.” **GLENN WILLS, photographer, author Finding Forgotten Alabama 1918** www.forgottenalabama-gallery.com



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