

# Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 18 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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# BAJ Birmingham Arts Journal

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**FRONT COVER: COWGIRL IN A MUU MUU** ~T.R. Reed ~2022- 22.5" x 11" x 10" ~ *T.R. Reed dreams up whirligigs – no two are the same.*

**BACK COVER: TRAVEL** ~ *Jeanie Holland* – 2022 ~10.5" x 10" x 2" *Jeanie Holland combines rug hooking and ceramics to tell old family stories.*

## THE 7th ANNUAL

### ANDREW GLAZE PRIZE FOR POETRY

Birmingham Arts Journal established the Andrew Glaze Poetry Prize in honor of Andrew Glaze (April 21, 1920-February 7, 2016), our friend and author who served as Alabama Poet Laureate 2012-2016. Mr. Glaze was inducted into the inaugural (2015) Alabama Writers' Hall of Fame. This annual award of \$200 is presented to the poet whose work is considered the most distinguished of the poems published in the Journal the previous year.

Each year BAJ Editors select an out-of-state juror who receives an honorarium in the amount of \$100. Juror and winner are announced on the Journal website in the first issue of the Journal annually, [birminghamartsjournal.com](http://birminghamartsjournal.com)

Juror Christine Poreba chose *Note to Self* by Lindsay Rockwell.

I found much to marvel at in Lindsay Rockwell's "Note to Self," most notably that each of its eleven lines both surprised me and felt perfectly in place.

The first unexpected pleasure for me was in the movement from the title, which brings to mind a to-do list, to that wonder-filled opening line "I love how branch whittles blue." I love how the verb 'whittles' conjures up the view of negative space created by a tree against the sky. I was impressed by several other surprising and fresh subject-verb combinations in the poem such as "snow holds (leopard's trace)" "memories glide (winged)" and "kites rely (on sky)." The lack of articles and scarcity of punctuation contribute to the poem's playfulness and movement, its notelikeness.

Then that beautiful turn in the continued list of things the speaker loves from a repeated "how" to an altered syntax "that arrows don't fly backward, and wind has no home." ! These are concepts I've never thought of myself, but they feel amazingly relevant once they are pointed out, this praise of physics and the nomadic wind. And then those final four lines, where her love turns to a horse, towards loving both "the sound of

the word” and “the animal she is,” even though it is one that scares the speaker and makes her feel small which in turn makes her remember “I am.”

I love how the poem ends on those two words...that the note to herself is to remember this whole universe of things she loves as well as to remember the she that she is, both a small self apart from the horse and a larger one that is part of all she loves.

At the end of this poem I feel I’ve been on both a long journey and a short one, and all I want to do is both look out the window at the wide world and sit down and think and write about my one small, gorgeous piece of it. If that isn’t a feat of poetic architecture, I don’t know what is.

## **The Poem ~NOTE TO SELF**

Lindsay Rockwell

I love how branch whittles blue  
and everything that splays has roots  
That breath arrives from green  
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

**The Poet** ~ *Lindsay Rockwell won first prize in the October Project Poetry Contest in April 2020 and the 81<sup>st</sup> 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).*

**The Juror** ~ *Christine Poreba is a New Yorker who lived for more than a decade in North Florida and now lives in Chicagoland. She is the author of Rough Knowledge (Anhinga Press, 2016,) winner of the Philip Levine Prize and the forthcoming This Eye is for Seeing Stars selected by Pádraig Ó Tuama for the 2023 Orison Poetry Prize. Her poems have appeared in several anthologies and numerous journals, including Barrow Street, The Southern Review, Cimarron Review, Puerto del Sol, The Sun, and Birmingham Arts Journal.*

“It's a terrible waste to be  
happy and not notice it.”

—Kurt Vonnegut

# LADY WITH A HATPIN

Rick Hartwell

I first heard bits and pieces of this strange tale in the mid-1960s from my father-in-law of the time, who was himself three-and-a-half at the time of the incident. Like most of the younger generation, I doubted much of what I heard from an older generation. It sometimes seems a product of age to lean towards exaggeration. But not in this instance.

When visiting the graves of this father-in-law (who also deserves his own story told), and of my son (whose biography I am still unequipped to compose), several years after both had passed, I strolled around the cemetery and encountered the inscription above on a deeply chiseled, granite tombstone in Mount Hope Cemetery, Morgan Hill, CA:

**ISOLA V. KENNEDY**

**SEPT. 10, 1909**

**SACRIFICED HER LIFE BATTLING  
A LION TO SAVE SOME SMALL BOYS.**

-----

*God said,*

*“Thy labor is ended, rejoice!*

*I will reward thee, faithful one.”*

-----

**A MEMOIR**

**BY THE U.S. LOYAL**

**TEMPERANCE LEGIONERS (Sic)**

Intrigued, I followed up to learn of the circumstances surrounding such a monument. Not being able to follow her as yet, I'll let Isola tell her own story.

I suspect my name is as good a place to start as any. Yes, my name is Isola, but that has always seemed to be so formal. My family and friends have always called me Issy, as did my fiancé, Dr. Otto Puck. Issy may seem a bit childish, but from Otto it was always an endearment. My

middle name is Viola, and the euphonic Isola Viola has always been a bit too much. But it is a strong name, nevertheless.

---

I was born in Nebraska in October 1871 to good, God-fearing Irish parents, John, and Harriet. We moved to Morgan Hill in the Santa Clara Valley when I was still quite young, and I have lived here ever since. Well, at least until I died. I've roamed around a bit farther afield since then.

I was a teacher, both in school and in church; an occupation or calling many women of my generation attained to. I believe I was a reasonably good teacher. I know that I was a compassionate one. I was 38 years young, as the saying goes, and was considered a spinster by some in town. But I was engaged to Otto, who doted on me, and we were to be married in the Fall.

With Saturday's July 4th celebrations behind us and the summer heat of the valley fully in front, I took three of the younger Sunday School boys on an outing to Coyote Creek on Monday so they could swim and cool off in the shade of Murphy's Peak. As the boys were splashing around in horseplay, a mountain lion appeared and slashed one of the boys. I stood and ran to his defense, but the lion swiped at me, knocking me down, then sinking his teeth into my arm. I yelled for the boys to run and get help and, with the only weapon I had, I fought back. I kept trying to jab him with my eight-inch-long hatpin, again screaming for the boys to get help.

I didn't know who he was at the time, but John Conlan heard the boys screaming, perhaps me, too, and came running from his camp with his shotgun. By this time I was face down and the lion was chewing on my shoulder. John, Jack to his friends, fired his birdshot into the lion's flank, but with very little effect. I was so afraid that he would shoot me! Jack used the butt of the shotgun to try to stun the animal, but nothing worked. Meanwhile, the lion kept gnawing on my arm, shoulder, and head.

Realizing that he had to do something more, Jack ran back to his camp and came back with his rifle. He fired into the lion's shoulder. Again, without real effect. Apparently, the lion then turned its head towards Jack who fired straight into its brain, killing it instantly. Throughout all this, perhaps only fifteen minutes or so, I remained conscious until I was

carried off for a doctor's care, although the brute had mangled my left arm from shoulder to fingers and the right was also torn. The lion had torn my eye socket down to the bone, although I could see out of both.

Both the young boy who first had been attacked and me were treated with the best of care the community could provide. I remember feeling that I would recover, but over the course of the ensuing two months we both developed lockjaw, spinal meningitis, high fevers, and fell unconscious. I don't know which of us died first; however, we both succumbed to what was presumed to be rabies which had driven the mountain lion to madness. I was laid to rest on September 10 of the same year, 1909.

Much is hazy after one's death, so I did not learn until much later about the outpouring of the town. The newspapers reported that my funeral procession was one of the longest in the history of Morgan Hill. But several notes of sadness still ache in my heart: my sister arrived from Kansas just hours before the end, but I never regained consciousness to greet her; my dearest Otto was so overwhelmed with grief that he sold his practice, left the town and was never heard from again; my father also left soon after to live in San Jose; and finally, my mother, my joy, died distraught only days later. I know that God in his mercy will let me see them sometime later, along with my young charge who I was unable to save.

Isola appears unable to continue, but I think it is only right that I add a note or two. John "Jack" Conlan skinned and dressed out the mountain lion he had killed and used it as a rug in his home for many years. The Temperance League Legionnaires of Morgan Hill took up a collection and raised a proper memorial to Isola.

It was almost eighty-five years later until the next mountain lion attack occurred near Auburn, California. That woman, too, fought back. That woman, too, died. Perhaps she has joined Isola, her young companion, her sister, and her mother. Perhaps Otto has joined his Issy, Isola Viola Kennedy, the lady with a hatpin.

.....



*Rick Hartwell is a retired middle school teacher (remember the hormonally challenged?) living in California with his wife of forty-nine years, Sally Ann (upon whom he is emotionally, physically, and spiritually dependent), two grown children, two granddaughters, and fifteen cats! Like Blake, Thoreau, and Merton, he believes the instant contains eternity. [rdhartwell@gmail.com](mailto:rdhartwell@gmail.com)*



## **AN IDAHO STREAM**

Liz Reed

Digital Photograph

Liz Reed is the art editor of Birmingham Arts Journal. She lives in Birmingham's Southside with her husband Jim Reed, in a house built in 1906. [lizreedartist@gmail.com](mailto:lizreedartist@gmail.com)

# PLEASE DON'T TOUCH ME

Donna Lynne Comegys

If you touch me, nothing will ever be the same.

If you touch me, from that point on life won't be a game.

If you touch me, Barbie and Ken will take on new meaning.

If you touch me, I'll be left wondering why no one hears me screaming.

If you touch me, I'll believe doctors are something I should fear.

If you touch me, I'll have to live with this fear year after year after year.

If you touch me, I'll expect the advances from my teachers.

If you touch me, I'll excel to see how far away from it all my start reaches.

If you touch me, I'll go through life with deep scars and falls.

If you touch me, I'll always be a seven-year-old little girl stuck in your stall.

If you touch me, I'll never forget how much you said I looked like your child.

If you touch me, I'll have to fight the demons that try to drive me wild.

If you touch me, I'll always need someone to rush in and save me.

If you touch me, I'm afraid I'll remember I was also abused as a baby.

.....

*Donna Lynne Comegys entwines her personal and professional experiences to create mindful and sometimes chilling poetry. Born and currently working in Baltimore, MD, she is Panel Attorney for the MD Office of the Public Defender representing people with children in foster care. She graduated from Ithaca College and American University Washington College of Law.*

# BIG SHUNNARAH IS WATCHING YOU

Jim Reed

“How’s your mom’n’em?” asks Dora, as she fills a fresh-licked, white plastic bag with thrift store wearables. Her register is asking for payment of \$15.45.

Alice, her friend on the other side of Dora’s counter, is riffing through a large slouchy handbag in search of wallet and workable credit card. As she fishes, she smiles and provides Dora with a truncated genealogy of life-up-to-now family facts.

I’m the eavesdropper in line just behind Alice. I take my time and listen and observe. This is more fun than anything on the internet or the tube.

I’ve dropped a few eaves in my time.

Alice and Dora have known each other a long while, but at this moment one is customer, the other is acceptor of payment. Family ties run through the conversation as smoothly as Jergen’s Lotion salves a rough spot. A few phrases transform updates into small endearing stories.

I am relieved to learn that all is well with mom’n’em and, with an occasional sidebar about kin being arrested or taken ill, life is proceeding with surprise and predictability.

Dora and Alice finish their exchange and part ways with smiles and warmth and mutual “Y’all come to see us!” declarations.

I’m next up. I place selected books on the counter and Dora begins scanning prices into a keyboarded device, pausing each time the machine fails to do its job, mumbling while she has to hand-enter rows of numbers. She pulls a fresh plastic bag from its rack, licks her fingers to make opening the bag easier, slaps the bag by its body-shirt handles, and balloons it big enough to drop the books in.

“You need to press this button and sign this screen with your finger and then sign this paper receipt in order to please the pencil-pusher who set up this redundant and time-wasting system,” she says. Only, she

doesn't say anything of the kind—she just thinks this with a bored frown. She and I silently agree that the only way to get through the day at the counter is to take breaks, grab lunch, gossip with other employees, and occasionally catch up on friends and relatives and strangers who pass by.

As I drive away from the store and head back to my village, I glance here and there, amazed at the gigantic billboards mostly filled with images of a smiling attorney screaming “CALL ME ALABAMA.” No commas needed.

What would my normal day be like if I didn't see and hear a dozen BIG SHUNNARAH IS WATCHING YOU messages? What would my day be like if I couldn't catch up on mom'n'em and all the real, living adventures that await friendly inquiry?

Knowing about mom'n'em enriches my time and makes me want to call distant family and catch up. Big Shunnarah doesn't seem to matter at all

.....

*Jim Reed reads and writes in Birmingham, AL. [www.redclaydiary.com](http://www.redclaydiary.com)*

No one reads introductions  
anyway. (Admit it. You're  
not reading this, are you?)

—Neil Gaiman

# MEDICARE

Robert Guard

What is your minimum heart rate  
have you fallen in the last six months  
the earth is constantly pulling at you  
you will eventually be nagged to death  
do you often return to the room of your upbringing  
do you stare at the wall with a knife  
do you dare to take a stab at your own creation  
spell the word world backwards  
count back from fifteen by threes  
have you tried taking shorter steps  
is your life a circle, a square, or a triangle  
it's okay to take in the round and roll  
of the woman in the dairy aisle  
how many stairs does she have at home  
sooner or later you will have to take a pill  
all answers are confidential, like your life  
have you ever stepped off a curb that wasn't there  
do you speak to yourself as if you were someone else  
say the following words in order:  
umbrella, pie, saddle, goat, obituary  
does your shower have a chair  
has anyone you've known died in a chair  
when was the last time you held a child

where are your keys right now  
are you a conscious tool of the universe  
what is your password  
what do you have trouble opening  
who can't you stop remembering  
record your happiness with a broken pencil  
have you been to the hospital recently  
do you look forward to garbage day  
are you lonely or happy in a crowd  
are you the oldest person you know  
do you sometimes require assistance  
repeat in order the five words previously stated  
press pound when you are finished.

.....

Robert Guard has been published in *Harpur Palate*, *Amoskeag*, *Apricity Magazine*, *Chapman Law Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Chaffin Journal*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Courtship of Winds*, *DASH*, *Down in the Dirt*, *El Portal*, *Glint Literary Journal*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Nixes Mate Review*, *The Opiate*, *Perceptions Magazine*, *Poet Lore*, *river Sedge*, *The Round*, and others. Robert attended the Kenyon Review, Writers Workshop, and studied under David Baker and Rosanna Warren. He worked for thirty-five years in advertising as a writer and creative director. Robert teaches yoga and has an energy healing practice. He also conducts workshops on various health and fitness topics including meditation and stress reduction.

## DEATH AFTER SUNRISE

Michael A. Calvert

On a cold, crisp morning just before dawn, Grandmother carefully set before me a flowery tea cup of hot cocoa on her small granite table at the window. On a matching small plate were small cubes of cake covered with icing and filled with jam. She told me that they were petit fours and had me repeat those words until I pronounced them correctly. I had awakened way too early, but Grandmother was unperturbed, happy to have her young grandson for a weekend.

As she sat opposite me with her tea, steam spiraled from our cups as we turned to stare at a faint gray light that slowly became a mauve slash across the sky. Gradually it brightened to deep purple and spread above the horizon. Wispy cirrus clouds flared to an intense pink.

“The Good Lord is bestowing a beautiful sunrise upon us,” said Grandmother.

I nodded, and we watched the light intensify and become an orange and crimson backdrop for the fiery sun rising from the horizon. Soon it became so brilliant that we had to avert our eyes. The shades of red, orange, and pink faded as golden light flooded the landscape before us.

“Oh, grand! Just grand!” Grandmother exclaimed, her face gleaming in the sunlight. Then I saw her jaw set, and her blue eyes stare into the distance.

“Many years ago, my older brother, John, was dying from tuberculosis, gasping for air. It was awful. Our entire family had gathered in his bedroom after midnight.

He pointed out the window and whispered in a barely audible voice, ‘I want to see one more sunrise, just one more.’ Those may have been his last words because he then had a terrible coughing fit,” said Grandmother. She turned to me, nodded, and said solemnly, “He did see the sun come up, and a glorious sunrise it was. Then he slipped away from us.” She shook her head slowly.

That sunrise and her story became embedded in my memory. Early mornings were opportunities to revel in the grand spectacle of sunrise, not indulge in a little more sleep.

I took pleasure in many sunrises when I delivered a morning newspaper and on my way to a part-time job at six in the morning while in college. For many years, I rose twenty minutes before the sun's scheduled appearance to make coffee and welcome the first light. It was a treasured period of beauty and serenity.

On a camping trip to Maine, I quietly slipped out of our family tent and hiked up to the rocky peak of Mount Cadillac before dawn to the place where the sun first shines on our country as it rises from the Atlantic.

On the south rim of the Grand Canyon, awaiting the sun in gray light before dawn, I recalled the sprightly musical theme of the Grand Canyon Suite by Ferde Grofé steadily swelling in speed and volume as sunrise approaches and the frenzied crescendo when the sun's golden rays illuminate the strata of brilliant red and orange hues on the canyon walls.

I've had the good fortune to revel in sunrises reflected on rivers, lakes, and oceans and to marvel as the sun emerges from behind mountains and city skylines. I've never tired of this wondrous spectacle.

I have even dared to envision myself, a long time hence I hope, on my deathbed during a dark, night, marshaling my waning strength to stay alive for a few more hours to see the sun rise once more.

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*Michael A. Calvert, a native of Ohio, is a retired urban planner in Birmingham, AL. He is pursuing memoir and short story writing and has been published previously in the Birmingham Arts Journal.*

**michaelalancalvert@yahoo.com**



# HYPNOTIZING CHICKENS

David Strickland

I remember reading an article describing an incredible breakthrough. My brain was immediately overwhelmed as the words leaped off the page and rearranged themselves into mesmerizing possibilities. This prospective path to wizardry caused my eyes to squint and my heart to race. It offered a ray of hope for redemption.

Of all the astonishing facts in this universe, that a chicken could be hypnotized was the sort of divinely inspired knowledge that might just heal an old wound.

So far, my journey into the world of hypnosis was an abysmal failure. I acquired my *Hypno-Coin* after reading an advertisement on the back page of a 1960 issue of *Mechanix Illustrated*, right next to the X-ray glasses. I sent my seventy-five cents to an obscure destination and waited.

I pored over the instructions accompanying my disc. However, after many attempts to hypnotize every family member, a squirrel, and half the neighborhood, I carefully examined the coin, fearing it might be defective.

I could only point to one near success involving a classmate years ago in Chicago. He overheard me brag about my newfound powers to another student and asked if hypnosis could make him stop smoking. I pulled my trusty *Hypno-Coin* from my pocket and told him to meet me in the cloakroom at recess. I assured him that his bad habit would soon disappear.

I paused before entering the coat room, rehearsing the words to alter my friend's life. "Your eyelids are getting heavy. You're growing sleepier and sleepier. Heavier, heavier, your eyelids are growing so very heavy. You can hear nothing but the sound of my voice. Deeper, deeper, sleepier."

I couldn't believe it when his eyelids began to flutter. "Listen only to the sound of my voice. When you awaken, your desire to smoke will vanish, and the sight or smell of a cigarette will become repulsive to you."

I reveled in silence at the gravity of my accomplishment when, suddenly, the other kids began to filter back from the playground. "Open your eyes when I count to three and snap my fingers. You will feel rested, energized, and *forget everything I've told you.*"

"One, two, three."

"Aren't you going to hypnotize me? I knew you couldn't do it. You can't hypnotize anybody." Alan abruptly left the cloakroom as I protested, "But I did, I did, I, I..."

## **Okley**

My aunt and uncle moved to Chicago in 1964. They lived a few blocks away, and I visited them often.

One Saturday evening, I asked Uncle Okley, "Have you ever been hypnotized?" After a brief explanation, he said it reminded him of the trance he often encountered after drinking a bottle of Old Crow. I produced my plastic coin, "This may look like an ordinary disc, but it has the power to change your destiny." He reached for a brown paper sack, twisted the top off a bottle, and filled a jelly jar half full. He swallowed, shook his shoulders, and said, "I'm ready."

Three more glasses and several rotations of my irresistible coin, and I knew he was close. His eyes shut. "Listen only to my voice and raise your right hand." My cousin started to snicker. Okley's eyes opened, and he slowly emptied the last of the bottle into the glass and raised it to his lips. "It's working," he said.

## **Olivia's Chickens**

Several years later, we all moved back to Alabama, but I couldn't accept the idea of failure. I needed to find the perfect subject for absolution, and I figured one of my aunt's chickens might be the ideal subject.

"You better not hurt them hens. They barely lay enough eggs as it is," said Okley when I approached him about using a chicken for a demonstration. I couldn't help but remember that article claiming

chickens were susceptible to hypnosis, and I was determined to prove to him and everybody else that it could be done. "Oh hell," he said, "Let me get my sack."

I borrowed a piece of white chalk--all I needed was a feathered volunteer. I enlisted my cousin Kenny to help. I removed the dip net from a nail on their front porch and eased through the house and out the back door.

We had thrown a handful of chicken feed in the front yard, and Kenny waited as the wary hens stared from a distance.

After about a half-dozen hens gathered, Kenny bailed off the porch, chasing them towards the back. "Here they come," he yelled. I raised the long-handled dip net as the raucous sounds of frantic feathered wings grew closer. I swung as a blur of red feathers roared past my lair, and the squawking began. I captured Henrietta, my aunt's favorite laying hen.

I used my calmest voice to assure her and my aunt that no harm would result from this simple demonstration. I tucked the bird under my arm and slowly walked to the front porch. Oakley clutched a small brown sack as he sat near the door. I removed the chalk from my pocket and drew a straight line on a weathered board. "That damn chicken's smart, but it can't count," said Okley.

I carefully held her beak near the white line. Her eyes began to flutter as crinkling sounds emanated from Okley's sack.

### **Vindication**

I grinned as my hands released their grip and took two steps back. I was basking in the moment when Oakley started snoring. "Damn, you done hypnotized daddy too," exclaimed Kenny. "She ain't dead, is she? Wake up, Henrietta, wake up," shouted Aunt Olivia.

Those gold and fiery red feathers exploded off the porch like an overgrown quail bursting from a briar thicket. Henrietta glided toward the nearby sage field, loudly squawking her displeasure.

"Hang that dip-net back on the nail before you leave," said Okley.  
"You done upset your aunt. Besides, I need a nap. Why don't you try that  
on a dog next time."

Halfway down the steps, I paused and thought--I wonder.

.....

*David is a husband, father, grandfather, and amateur naturalist. Author of around  
one hundred published articles, he's currently working on a collection of short  
stories involving a small stream called The Sipsey and its impact on the inhabitants  
of a small rural community near its flowing waters. **Sipsey001@aol.com***

“Reason cannot defeat emotion,  
an emotion can only be  
displaced or overcome by a  
stronger emotion.”

—Baruch Spinoza



*Sean Kyung is currently attending Seoul International School in the vibrant city of Seoul, South Korea. His ardent pursuit lies in creating an impressive art portfolio for university admissions. [seankang203@gmail.com](mailto:seankang203@gmail.com)*

# ROLY-POLY BUGS, ANTIPODES, AND MOLE MEN

Lynn Edge

Or Why I walk around looking as if I haven't had a good night's sleep in ages.

## Midnight

I'm awake and having trouble going back to sleep. This is nothing new for me, so I am prepared to deal with it. I simply do what every red-blooded American does in this situation. I turn on my tablet and start to scroll through Facebook.

### 12:15 a.m.

Roly-poly bugs. It has been seven decades since I even thought about them, but now a friend has posted a picture of one. I immediately am taken back to my growing-up days, walking barefoot across my grandparents' vast lawn, and occasionally kicking over a stray piece of bark or large leaf. Often this action would disturb a roly-poly or two and, usually, they would take up their defensive position, curling into a ball with only their armadillo-like plates showing. If they didn't move quickly enough, it only took one poke with a finger or toe to get them to become "roly." Back then, I knew only two things about these critters:

- (1) If you touch them, they will roll into balls.
- (2) My cousin ate them.

Full disclosure: I have not had occasion to learn a lot about them since then.

### 12:30 a.m.

I should be working on going back to sleep. Instead, I am standing on the precipice of a rabbit hole getting ready to jump in. I Google "Roly-poly bugs" and click on a result that comes from what seems to be a fairly reliable scientific source. I'm down the rabbit hole. For the next hour, I read about roly-poly bugs. I learn:

1. They are not bugs at all. They are terrestrial crustaceans.
2. They breathe through gills.

3. They are cold-blooded.
4. They molt – but only half of their body at a time.
5. They compost soil and eat heavy metals.
6. They do their small part for the planet by, ever so minutely, lowering the amount of carbon dioxide in the air.
7. They need a damp environment, but they can't live underwater.
8. They don't carry disease. (A good thing. Otherwise, the American South would be littered with the carcasses of kids like me who could not resist poking them to see them roll up but did not necessarily run in and wash with soap and water each time they touched a roly-poly.)
9. The act of rolling into a ball to protect oneself is called conglobating.

**1:30 a.m.**

I have been down this rabbit hole for quite a while now and my eyelids are getting heavy. I think I have absorbed about all the information I can about roly-poly bugs. I am ready for sleep. I turn off my tablet, lie down and close my eyes. An image of my cousin pops into my head and I begin to wonder why he ate roly-poly bugs when we were children. They tasted good. (Highly unlikely, I decide.) He was a gourmet before his time. (Again, highly unlikely.) He craved them because his body was lacking some sort of essential mineral that roly-poly bugs could provide. (A possibility. It's not unheard of.) He was trying to gross everyone out. (Probably.)

Then I remember the day he was caught digging a very large hole in my grandparents' yard. He did it, he explained, because he was planning to "dig through to China." I find myself on the edge of yet another rabbit hole. I sit up, turn on the tablet again and google, "Can you dig through the earth from Alabama to China?" I am about to increase my education and decrease my sleep time once again.

And I learn:

1. As it turns out, the United States is not antipodal to China, therefore, you could not dig from a small town in Alabama to China. One article did say there was somewhere in Kansas that might be opposite China, but others say you just can't dig from the United States to China because of the antipodal thing. Obviously more research is needed on my part.
2. There is such a thing as an antipodes map, which you can use to find out where you would pop out on the other side of the world if you could dig through the center of the earth from your location. However, I need to find a better one than the one I currently am looking at, because this one can't tell me the exact landing spot I would reach if I started digging in Ragland, Alabama.
3. Digging through the center of the earth wouldn't be easy and you don't even want to think about what might happen to your body if you were to succeed and then jump into the hole. (Think heat, air pressure and, according to one article I found, the possibility of mole men.)
4. There may be some sort of hole in the Indian Ocean (the landing zone for folks trying to dig through from most spots in the lower 48). I wonder if the hole exists because of all the folks from here digging through to there. I'll have to go back and read the entire story the next time I can't sleep.

**2:30 a.m.**

I've used up another hour and I think that maybe I really can get back to sleep now. (Even though I still haven't discerned the polar opposite of my small hometown.) I turn off my tablet, lie down and close my eyes. I'm almost asleep when my brain says to me, "Those mole men that article was talking about . . . do you think they really exist?" I fear I shall never sleep again.

.....



*Lynn Edge has been a professional writer since 1968, beginning as a general assignment reporter with The Birmingham News, eventually becoming the religion editor for the paper. She won an Associated Press Newswriting Award for her coverage of a sniper shooting in Bessemer in 1969. She is the author of several books and has edited/designed a number of books for other authors. A native of Ragland, AL, she is married to fellow writer Garland Reeves, and they have two children. [lynnedge@bham.rr.com](mailto:lynnedge@bham.rr.com)*



## **RAPTURE**

A Chemical Painting  
Andrew Tyson

*Andrew Tyson created this painting by exposing the paper to light. The process also involved a microwave oven, developing solution, bleach, and a butane lighter. Andrew is a self-taught artist who lives in Homewood, AL.*

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# [I NO LONGER SQUANDER GRIEF]

Meredith Davies Hadaway

I no longer squander grief,  
but save it for enormities

to come. The vandal death  
of a sycamore, a friend's

beloved dog—I stop,  
I wince and shake my head,

but then move on. I'm frugal  
with my sorrow, saving all

my tears for the day I wake  
to find—among the song

of ticking pipes, inquiring  
birds, and sighing traffic—

your voice has gone.

.....

*Meredith Davies Hadaway has four published collections of poetry including At the Narrows, winner of the Delmarva Book Prize for Creative Writing. Her work has also appeared in Salamander, Southern Poetry Review, and Valparaiso Poetry Review, among other journals. Hadaway is the Sophie Kerr Poet-in-Residence at Washington College. [mhadaway2@washcoll.edu](mailto:mhadaway2@washcoll.edu)*

# SELF DRIVING CARS PERMEATE THE CLOSING SOON SALOON

Edgar Rider

If you walked down the street from Old Town there would be an old strip mall with some decrepit businesses all lined up next to each other. In between a Mexican restaurant and a laundromat, is where I began to frequent a dive bar called Closing Soon Saloon. I would start going there during long nights because I did not want to be at the chaotic apartment for too long. The bar had its own strange regular barflies. Me and my friend Muller joked that it was aptly named because we felt the bar would be shut down for good any day now.

When you first sit down, on the bar shines a sign in front of the television that says “It Is What It Is.” That summed up this situation I was in or more clearly “It Was What It Was.” The 12-seat bar was shaped like a backward L. Everyone had to sit at the bar even though there were other seats surrounding it. There was a group of regulars that I would see there nightly, and at times I could see them there just walking past on my way home. On the other side in front of the bar, there were three round tables, and four chairs surrounding the small tables.

Smokers are not allowed to smoke in the bar; this was an inside State law. So they sat out back, on milk crates. This was past the bathroom doors and was sectioned off so no one could escape out the back.

There were many signs in the bar that probably encouraged regular patrons. Some of the obvious ones included a sign that said, “Happy hour all day.” Other signs trying to show their sense of humor, such as a “Free beer tomorrow” sign. Guess that would be a promise of beer the next day every day.

This hole in the wall had been here 31 years 1985. It had even been voted best dive bar. The bar had lots of attitudes, as well, such as “Service may vary according to my mood and your attitude!”

Of course there was always the “No whining!” sign looming at the front of the bar. My favorite was the PBR special \$2.25. Because my budget is about all I could afford. You could order Popcorn , White Castle burgers , pretzels, and crackers.

It was harder and harder to hang out there with the same people every time playing pool. It was a depressing atmosphere. Every time I came in the same people would show up and it didn’t matter if it was Thursday or Tuesday or in the early afternoon of a Sunday.

The same lady who was somewhat attractive except for her voice which sounded like cigarettes. There were slim pickings for either sex. Most of the other dudes were older. One wore a cowboy hat and asked the token-only bar lady at least most of the time to play Willie Nelson. An obnoxious group kept singing Wooly Bully for up to what seemed like fourteen times. I wanted out of the bar even more. I called my best friend Muller and said, “I got to hang out man, where you at?” We hung out until early in the morning and noticed something peculiar.

We noticed a strange car in the neighborhood driving around randomly at 5 am. It had huge antennas spinning at the top. Friend Muller and I had not seen a car like this. I thought it was a government spy car or a land surveillance car. It stopped in front of us, took off and then stopped suddenly down the street. I Googled the type of car but could not come up with any answers. Was it A Google car, a surveillance vehicle, or a map car?

I asked on a social media group if anyone had seen this type of car. I joined a local area group called the Paiute Community to see if anybody could help. I joined also because I went to grade school at the elementary school now turned into a Community Center . Somebody got back to me and said it is a self-driving car.

#### FUTURE DESTINATION UNKNOWN (THE ENTIRE POINT)

Over the next few weeks, I saw more self-driving cars on different corners of both sides of the street. Those futuristic cars driving around the

neighborhood became more and more prevalent. I wondered how safe they were, watching some videos on the internet of cars that had crashed in Chandler. I watched as people came out of the Closing Soon Saloon right down the street from the self-driving cars walking down the street as recklessly in some cases as the cars driving themselves with a driver in the vehicle supposedly just hanging out.

We began ignoring them. “Who knows where the future will take us?” Muller said and put his shades back on. He nodded his head as we got in our own car that barely started. On this journey, it was painfully obvious just like these cars we could not let ourselves go completely full throttle. We had to bring in the reins, so to speak in certain ways. Although we had been bold in our consecutive jumps, we still needed the safety of jobs.

The Closing Soon Saloon was our momentary refuge. What was thought of as just a liquor haze of street cars had become the reality of our situation. It was then that we found out the Closing Soon Saloon closed for good.

Who knew where the future would take us? The cars were frightening and alluring at the same time. We wondered, in ten years, would everybody be driving one? How would they work? Would you need a license if you were ninety-five? And could you get in your car without one if the car was driving itself?

It was a metaphor for my and Muller’s experience navigating through someone else’s world trying to control aspects of it but not being in complete control; strapping ourselves to a chair on a couch in a living room, a roller coaster ride where autopilot completely takes over.

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*During the nineties, Edgar Rider worked in a hamburger restaurant. He had a difficult time dealing with his job and began talking to a bong and suddenly realized he was actually talking to himself. His work appears in Static Movement, Danse Macabre, Haggard and Halloo, and Warwick.*  
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# THE CLUB FROM NOWHERE ~ October 1955

Camryn Flowers – 2023 Winner Glenn Feldman Prize for Writing

One Friday evening, I was getting on a bus with my mama, Georgia Gilmore, when the bus driver told us to get off the bus and go board the bus in the back. He drove off, even though we had paid our ten-cent fare. My mama decided that we would quit riding the bus. We walked everywhere. We walked to church, to school, and to the grocery store. Mama walked five miles to work each day. Our feet were so tired and sore. Sometimes we got blisters, but we still walked and walked.

## December 1955

When my mama got home from work On Thursday, December 1, she told me she heard on the radio about a Black woman named Rosa Parks who refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. She got arrested. Buses are divided into sections for Black people and whites, and Black people are expected to give up their seats for white people, but Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to move. Because bus drivers have police power, Rosa was arrested.

On Monday night, my mama went to a meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church. I stayed home to babysit my sister and brothers. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was speaking there. He and the other members of the Montgomery Improvement Association decided to make a bus boycott. My mama came home and told me that they were asking all Black people in Montgomery to stop riding buses until Black people and whites were treated equally and Black people were allowed to sit up front just like white people and didn't have to give up their seats to white people. I was proud of my mama because she had already stopped riding the bus two months ago.

My mama decided to start a cooking business to help support the bus boycott. She got other women to help, but they had to keep the club a secret so that no one would lose their jobs. They called the cooking club "The Club from Nowhere" because they were not allowed to tell anyone where the money came from.

Mama got up at 4:00am each morning to cook pies, fried chicken, and vegetables. She sold the food to help raise money for the bus boycott. My brothers, sister, and I helped by delivering the food. Mama's cooking club helped raise money to buy gas for the carpool, and they also raised enough money to buy station wagons for the carpool.



### **March 1956**

My mama got fired from her job for making pies and other delicious foods to help with the bus boycott. Reverend King helped her start her own cooking business. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders of the bus boycott had meetings at our house on Dericote Street. They talked about the boycott and other plans to stop segregation, and Mama cooked for them. I was usually in the other room babysitting all the children whose parents were at the meetings, but Mama always told me what they talked about after everyone left.

### **December 1956**

The bus boycott ended. On December 21, 1956, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. rode the first integrated bus. I heard him tell Mama about it at our house that night. On Christmas Eve, we rode the bus to church. We got to sit up front where only the white people used to be allowed to sit. It felt great to be able to sit up front and not worry about getting in trouble or getting arrested.

.....

*Camryn Flowers is now a fifth grader at Southminster Day School in Vestavia, AL.*

“Sometimes I think I understand everything. Then I regain consciousness.”

—Ray Bradbury

## ABANDONED HOME

Robert McGowin

An autumn silence  
Now drifts past darkened walls where  
Joy once resounded.

## PATHS Robert McGowin

Stairways to nowhere  
Lead to nothing. Every climb  
Must be worth its toil.

.....

*Robert McGowin is a writer, teacher, and typewriter enthusiast. In 2010 he organized a creative writing workshop in Montgomery, Al, which he continues to direct. In his spare time, he grows older and enjoys exploring remote destinations.*

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“Never let your sense of  
morals prevent you from  
doing what is right.”

—Issac Asimov

## CALM DOWN

Elizabeth Morse

The lines Cody had cut into his wrist were slapdash and awkward, like his handwriting. In his life, nothing proceeded in a straight line, Diana reminded herself. Thankfully, the paramedics were bandaging him. At least, he'd had the presence of mind to call 911. He was only sixteen.

Afterwards, Diana and Cody, mother, and son, climbed into the ambulance together. He leaned over in the seatbelt, hair covering his eyes.

She felt dazed, wounded. Names of his doctors and medications had been shoved into her bag along with his health insurance card, which she pulled out to check. Cody William McCrimmon, it read, followed by the number. She'd have to call the 800 number for exact coverage. Mental health was tricky, and in dealing with practicalities, she was just going through the motions.

When her boyfriend, Ben, called, she told him what had happened. His voice was flat but importuning. She realized he wasn't listening to her.

After a couple of days in the psych ER, an ambulance took Cody and Diana up to St. Brigid's Hospital seventy miles upstate. She couldn't help noticing that it passed the town where Ben's house was.

She took the train home from the hospital alone. On the ride back, raindrops streaked across the window. She closed her eyes until the train's final stop.

Arriving back at the apartment, her first thought was that Cody needed more care, more attention. She needed to spend more time with her son and really listen. They would do things together: go to the movies, go for walks, go see the cousins in West Virginia. She thought of the times she'd brushed him off, the times she'd had something else to do. And she knew that when there was a first suicide attempt, there was often a second.

When Cody went to his father's, she visited Ben. Ben hadn't exactly gotten along with Cody. At first, their exchanges had been joyful and

included plans for a baseball game. Then the complaints and resentment started, their hissing voices, their shouting. Her son wanted nothing to do with Ben.

So, Diana would break up with him. She'd had misgivings before. He expected empathetic listening for hours about his boss and co-workers, but he peppered his conversation with stories about old girlfriends, saying even more about them when Diana objected. And he had the exasperating habit of telling her to calm down when she was angry or enthusiastic, when she would have preferred understanding.

He'd been having some mild memory issues where he'd forget a word. It was probably nothing, but she was concerned. He seemed a little too young, but you never knew.

\*\*\*

While Cody was still in the hospital, Diana took the train up to Ben's on a Friday night. It was the same train that went to the hospital, but she had to stay on an hour longer. Through the window, the scenery looked like a Van Gogh painting.

Ben met her promptly at the station. When he saw her rolling her suitcase, he did a silly but charming dance that ended with his carrying her bags up the stairs. Given the reason she'd come, this movement seemed sad.

"How's Cody?" he said when they got to the car.

"Hanging in there," she replied, getting in. Ben started driving as he frowned at the traffic up ahead.

\*\*\*

Ben took Diana to the Italian restaurant they always went to. When the antipasto arrived, she said, "I have to tell you something."

He gave her a stern look over the food.

"I have to focus my attention on taking care of Cody," she ventured, and took a deep breath. "So, I'm afraid we'll have to stop seeing each other,"

Open-mouthed, he cocked his head. “How can you just say we’re through? I love you, Diana!” This was the first time he’d ever said that.

“I—I don’t know what to say,” she stammered, unsure as to exactly when she’d stopped loving him. “This is what I have to do. I’m sorry.”

He looked at the table as the main course arrived: excessive helpings of pasta garnished with cheese. The food was sure to be wasted, whether stuffed down or just ignored.

“What’s that word?” he said, looking directly at her.

Then she thought of his memory issues. How could she leave him when he was getting sick himself? She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead on her palm. He had seemed better, at least for a while.

“I just need to take care of my son.” She sighed.

Did he want a word that signaled outrage? Regret was unlikely, knowing him. What would be nice was a word showing empathy. “I cannot even imagine what you’re going through and I’m sorry to lose you,” he might say, though she couldn’t begin to guess the word he was thinking of. Right now, all words were senseless, like a random group of Scrabble letters.

Cody’s life hung in the balance and for a moment, everything seemed futile. If he were lucky, he’d get better and never cut his wrists again.

There was no possible word. Not for this.

Silently, Ben attacked his food. She tentatively took a few bites of hers.

She’d never thought of this as a possible moment in their breakup. She’d just planned what she would say, not imagining how it might actually play out.

Ben motioned to the waiter for the check. “I’ll drive you to the train,” he offered.

Diana nodded. She crumpled the napkin and left it in her mostly full plate.

“What’s that word?” he asked in a softer tone.

Only he knew, but of course he didn’t.

Head in hand, she started to cry. Then, she felt his hands on her arms and shoulders. “Calm down,” he said in a gentle voice. “Calm down.”

.....

*Elizabeth Morse lives in New York’s East Village. Her fiction has been published in Scoundrel Time, The Raven’s Perch, and Bright Flash. Her poetry chapbook is “The Color Between the Hours.” She earned an MFA from Brooklyn College and supports her writing with a job in information technology.*

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## **SPRUCE BOG**

Alison Hicks

The bog’s ice heart  
melts into a hole without feeder or outlet.  
Outcasts, sacrifices—is there a difference?—  
preserved in acidic, oxygen-poor peat.

Broken bones evidence of torture  
or the peat’s crushing.  
Let them sink, skin tan, flesh compress,  
clothing dissolve, bones leach.

Let the hard things fall,  
errors, embarrassment, shame,  
bodies we can’t bear to face.

Black spruce shadows  
encroaching on sphagnum.  
Foot stepping onto the floating mat.

.....

*Alison Hicks was awarded the 2021 Birdy Prize from Meadowlark Press for Knowing Is a Branching Trail. Previous collections include You Who Took the Boat Out, Kiss, and a chapbook, Falling Dreams. Her work has appeared in Eclipse, Gargoyle, Permafrost, Poet Lore, and Smartish Pace.*

**ah@philawordshop.com**



*Erin Kim is a student attending Seoul Foreign School in Seoul, South Korea. When she has not trapped herself in her room alone working on her art, she enjoys playing tennis. [erinkim480@gmail.com](mailto:erinkim480@gmail.com)*

# RUSTICATING

Tracey Meyers

Cities tire, and  
Tear me down  
They make me dream  
Of mountain towns

Alpine air and stars  
you see  
Demarcate peace  
And privacy

I must march West  
So I can be  
away  
From all calamity

Ambrosial days and  
Country ways are all  
I need  
To be set free

But heed, just yet  
In time we see  
we're meant to go  
Where fate will be

Through city living's  
A daring feat  
Hearts can change  
in just one beat

.....

*Tracey Meyers is a Brooklyn-based writer, editor, and strategic communications consultant focused on content initiatives for mission-driven brands and organizations. [traceyagmeyers@gmail.com](mailto:traceyagmeyers@gmail.com)*



## SITTING IN THE DARK

Larry Smith

Della lay in her large black leather recliner in the unlit great room. Her orange tabby sat on the chair's left arm facing the large windows. Della absent mindedly stroked the cat's neck with her fingers. They had watched the large backyard fade from bright emerald to charcoal gray as the sun set.

The landscaping was Ralph's pride and joy. Each Saturday morning in the summer, he mowed the grass, planted flowers, pulled weeds, and trimmed bushes. At lunch, they sat on the screened in porch and he would tell her about what he was planting. He explained how the colors would blend and enhance the shrubbery. In the fall, he raked the leaves and added them to the grass clippings in the compost pile.

"You know, Sabrina," she said. The cat twitched the tip of her tail. "They are right." The cat closed her eyes. "When the food's put away, dishes washed, every one's gone home, and you take off your church clothes." Sabrina twitched her tail again. "You're alone."

Della could see the half-trimmed bush she found him under. She closed her eyes and bit her lower lip to fight back tears. "He died doing what he loved." She kept her eyes closed.

Della gently touched the base of the brass urn next to her chair with her right hand. She put her left hand over her mouth to fight back tears. "I'm alone." Her chin quavered. "For the second time in forty-one years," Della sobbed through her fingers. "I'll sleep alone."

The cat twitched her tail.

.....

*Larry Smith is a retired licensed Civil Engineer living near Lacon, AL. He has won an Alabama Writers Conclave prize for fiction and a Hackney Literary prize. He is presently working on a novel about a guy hiring a girl to act as his wife.*

**[sleepynlacon@yahoo.com](mailto:sleepynlacon@yahoo.com)**

## **SALLY BRANCH**

Ernest Edward Pickel

Sally Branch cuts a tiny path on Sand Mountain  
Gently flowing over pebbles and sandstone shelves  
Rounded water profiles branch off into vernal pools of frog life  
Bare toes test the texture of water, leaves, and sand  
Alone with my thoughts, I am at peace in this place

Sally Branch stops to rest in a tiny cove near my home  
I sit for hours and watch the wind make ripples on its mud-brown water  
Appearing and disappearing – ripples on the water become wrinkles  
On Sally's sunbaked face  
The chatter of squirrels in the hickory trees

Becomes the playing voices of her children  
I ask my neighbors who Sally might have been  
No one seems to know; She is older than myth  
Once born and loved here, she is forever quiet  
The stoop leading to her door buried by a hundred autumns

Only her name remains - printed beside a stream  
On a map of a place  
Snaking out of its restful backwater, Sally Branch leaves the cove  
Flowing quietly into Mitchell Creek  
Having merged, they pass through forests and pastures

Becoming a life-giving mountain watershed of sorts  
Branch lettuce and bluegill for the table

My grandson running, he leaps over a blackberry bramble  
Baptizing himself into Sally's cool waters

Shrieking, our laughter bounces off the hillside  
And rolls like the foothills of southern Appalachia

.....

*Ernest Edward Pickel is a retired college administrator who spent a good portion of his life contemplating what it means to be Appalachian. He earned an undergraduate degree in Anthropology and a graduate degree in Psychology, both from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He and his wife live on Sand Mountain in northeast AL. **nativehill2016@gmail.com***

“What if nobody was  
President and we all  
promised real hard just to be  
cool.”

—Argus Hamilton

# THE PROBLEM OF CHANGE

Lynn Glicklich Cohen

“Change is an illusion.”  
—Parmenides of Elea, 475 BCE

I am ready  
I am not yet ready.

It is time  
It is not yet time.

So I spend my days  
bound in quandary

match in one hand  
flint in another

afraid, afraid.

The ancients argued  
that what is can never not be

that we misunderstand death  
mistake it for absence, and mourn

but the wave that appears  
to wash away your prints

leaves the sand as it always was  
and you, as ever, shall remain

afraid, afraid.

*Lynn Glicklich Cohen has been published in Amelia, Amethyst Magazine, Brushfire Literature and Arts Journal, Cantos, El Portal, Evening Street Review, Flights, Front Range Review, Grand Journal, The Midwest Quarterly, Oberon Poetry Magazine, OPEN: Journal of Arts and Letters, Peregrine, The Phoenix, SLAB, Spotlong Review, St. Katherine's Review, and more. [lynncohen@discemail.com](mailto:lynncohen@discemail.com)*

## THE FISH BONE

Ken Dykes

I was born to “Florida Crackers.” Now, don’t be offended. Most modern folks don’t have a real clue as to the real meaning of that term—first of all, it’s definitely not a derogatory term, anything but; a Florida Cracker is the formal and official name for that group of pioneers who settled in the thick piney woods and river swamps of Florida. They farmed, hunted, fished, and raised cattle and were known and named for the sharp, cracking sound of the long, rawhide whips they used to round up their cattle from the thick brush of the Florida woods and swamps (as you might expect round ups on the prairie and plains). They were experts in the business of survival in a hardscrabble kind of frontier existence, tough, determined, and fiercely independent. I’ve heard them described using a term that struck a chord with me which is most often associated with the cowboys of the late nineteenth Century America—they were “plumb salty.”

For us and our branch of the family, it was good root stock, but my intent in writing this yarn isn’t to tell you a lot about family history or even to introduce “Florida Crackers” to you—it’s to set the stage for an incident that demonstrated that “plumb salty” mindset from which we are sprung.

One day in about 1955 or 1956, my parents and I were visiting my mom’s folks in Scott’s Ferry, Florida. Being there was always a great occasion. There were tons of cousins of all shapes, ages, and sizes, a collection of very independent, opinionated, and “rough” adults and young adults, and an abiding sense of wellbeing in the midst of a host of very different, contentious, and contrary people who were unwaveringly loyal to a sense of “family.” Sometimes it seemed as if their differences would tear them apart, but that was mostly for show, to prove that they were independent and thought and acted for themselves—the proof was easily (and quickly) demonstrated if an outsider ever dared to speak up or act out to the possible embarrassment or detriment of a family member.

As usual, Bigmama organized a virtual feast. It was amazing. We had pork BBQ, fried steaks, meatloaf, fried fish, roast beef, venison, fried chicken, turkey and dressing, mashed potatoes, fried potatoes, four or five casseroles, dozens of both cooked and raw vegetable dishes, all kinds of home baked breads (my favorite was pone cornbread) and fried hushpuppies, a table full of cakes and pies, brownies, cookies and sweets, all topped off with a couple of churns of homemade ice cream (chocolate and vanilla). It was amazingly noisy, and everyone was laughing and talking right up until Bigmama asked someone to pray the blessing (she usually asked Uncle Floyd or Dad). Then as the prayer was being said there was a discernable creeping movement closer to the tables that held the food, and when the “Amen” came, the elbows started flying. Adults were always first, but there was always more than plenty and staying out of their way for a couple of minutes gave me a chance to reconnoiter and plan my strategy for my first pass along the bowls and dishes.

My Aunt Mary and Uncle Zadok were there at the dinner and were actively participating in the blessed magic of making good food disappear. For a few minutes conversation waned as everyone tucked in to the meal. Then there was a cough and a sputter, clearly an indication of distress from Uncle Zadok. At first, we thought he was choking and several of the adults ran to his assistance, but it soon became clear that he had somehow swallowed a fishbone and it had become caught in his throat.

Today, if I saw something like that happen, I'd be quickly dealing with my own panic attack, but that just wasn't the case in this bunch of people. They looked at Zadok and managed to establish a kind of communication with him using signs and grunts and gestures. He pointed to the fish he was eating and made us understand that he had swallowed a bone which had become lodged in his throat. He was clearly in some distress because of this but he was not at all agitated or panicked. Again, using signs, grunts, and gestures, he made us understand he wanted a piece of cotton and also a piece of thread (from Bigmama's sewing basket). A space was opened up around him as a cousin of mine ran out the door and into a cotton field next to the house. Several bolls of cotton were brought to him promptly

and Bigmama was quick to bring him a selection of thread and several balls of light twine.

He coughed and sputtered but peeled out a ball of cotton, took a light piece of twine and tied it to the cotton, and then proceeded to swallow the ball. I watched in awe as he calmly pulled the ball of cotton back out by the string. No cigar. He did it again, probably a dozen times. Each time it was calm, deliberate, and measured. Everyone watched intently. Then, even around the twine and cotton boll in his mouth and throat, he began to smile as the cotton boll snagged the fishbone and began to be pulled back up out of his throat. Then it slipped off and he looked up, shook his head, and started all over again.

The next time was the charm—the cotton boll snared the fishbone and pulled it up out of Uncle Zadok’s throat. There was a cheer that went around the table and everyone seemed to speak on top of each other to congratulate him. He coughed, drank a little sweetened iced tea, smiled, shook his head again, and went back to eating his fish and hushpuppies. And, we, his loving family, shook our heads, grunted, and did likewise, the show over and no reason for further concern.

Uncle Zadok Anderson must have been 75 or 80 years old when that happened, and he lived a few more good years after that. Me, I’d have given up fish altogether, but he enjoyed a mess of them that day and lots of other days. When I think of our family’s Florida Cracker heritage, I think of him—you’ve got to be pretty durned “salty” to be able to do what he did and not even think twice about it...my strong suspicion is that pulling that fishbone back up was the smallest example of the pioneer spirit he possessed. But you know what, even after all these years, it still makes me shiver!

I’m proud to be related to folks like that!

.....

*Kenneth E. Dyke (September 17, 1946 - June 8, 2016), was a lifelong reader and a closet writer. In his last years he wrote and shared with his children several dozen tales about his life and history. This is one of those stories. irene@irenelatham.com*

# I, THE CRADLE, WILL ROCK

Jim Reed

Cleansed breathing linen,  
unstarched,  
pressed,  
simple.

Pure fabrics,  
Textures that you rub against your head,  
textures that will define forever  
your attitudes toward textures.

The surrounding bars will grow too short.  
You will leap over them and mock them,  
your spirit too high to be contained.

White curved rockers are ready to soothe  
and comfort  
and invite you to sleep.

Now you're off and on your own.  
Little baby,  
Little child,

You are not mine, but it feels like you are.  
I nursed you and kept you dry and snuggled you.

You lay against my breast and smiled  
languid dreams into the vast starry night.

You come and go, small baby, small baby.  
You come to my breast and fly gently away.

.....

*Jim Reed is editor of Birmingham Arts Journal and proprietor of Reed Books, the Museum of Fond Memories. He lives with his wife and extended family in Birmingham's Southside. [jim@jimreedbooks.com](mailto:jim@jimreedbooks.com)*



## BLUE: A SONNET

Beth Brown Preston

He asks for a song, so I sing one just for him.  
I sing of these unholy gifts stolen from within  
the refuge of music. A pale moon loiters  
under a geometry of stars. They know about us:  
Together joined under the white moon's angle of light.  
Gossip spreads like shards of broken glass at our feet.  
We stroll along the harbor of another night without sleep,  
a festival of dreams awaiting us on the other side.  
My song seems to be filled with other poets; songs more generous.  
They know about us: the way a simple riff rules our evening moods,  
or the tattered silences between us. Each night  
a quiet desperation. The stars measure the breadth of my love.  
I cannot be for him whom I never have been.  
I will wait for him....

.....

*Beth Brown Preston is a poet and novelist with two collections of poetry from the Broadside Lotus Press and two chapbooks of poetry, recently OXYGEN II (Moonstone Press, 2022). She is a graduate of Bryn Mawr College and the MFA Writing Program at Goddard College. She has been a CBS Fellow in Writing at the University of Pennsylvania; and a Bread Loaf Scholar. Her work has appeared in the pages of ADANNA, AFRICAN AMERICAN REVIEW, THE BLACK SCHOLAR, CALLALOO, EVENING STREET REVIEW, PENNSYLVANIA REVIEW, PENSIVE, and other literary and scholarly journals. [mary.oliverbrown@yahoo.com](mailto:mary.oliverbrown@yahoo.com)*



## BOUQUET OF FLOWERS

Yoonji Huh

*Yoonji Huh is a dedicated student enrolled at Seoul International School in Seoul, South Korea. With a strong passion for the arts, Yoonji is diligently curating her art portfolio in preparation for university admissions.*

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Lee Raybon is the father of two, grandfather of five, happily married, retired, and living in Vestavia Hills, AL. Self taught, his art career began with doodling after which he studied various art forms and media. Ultimately, he picked up a brush and started laying out his ideas using watercolor, acrylic, pastels, pencil, and ink. His work is usually focused on animals and nature. [artbyleeraybon.com](http://artbyleeraybon.com)



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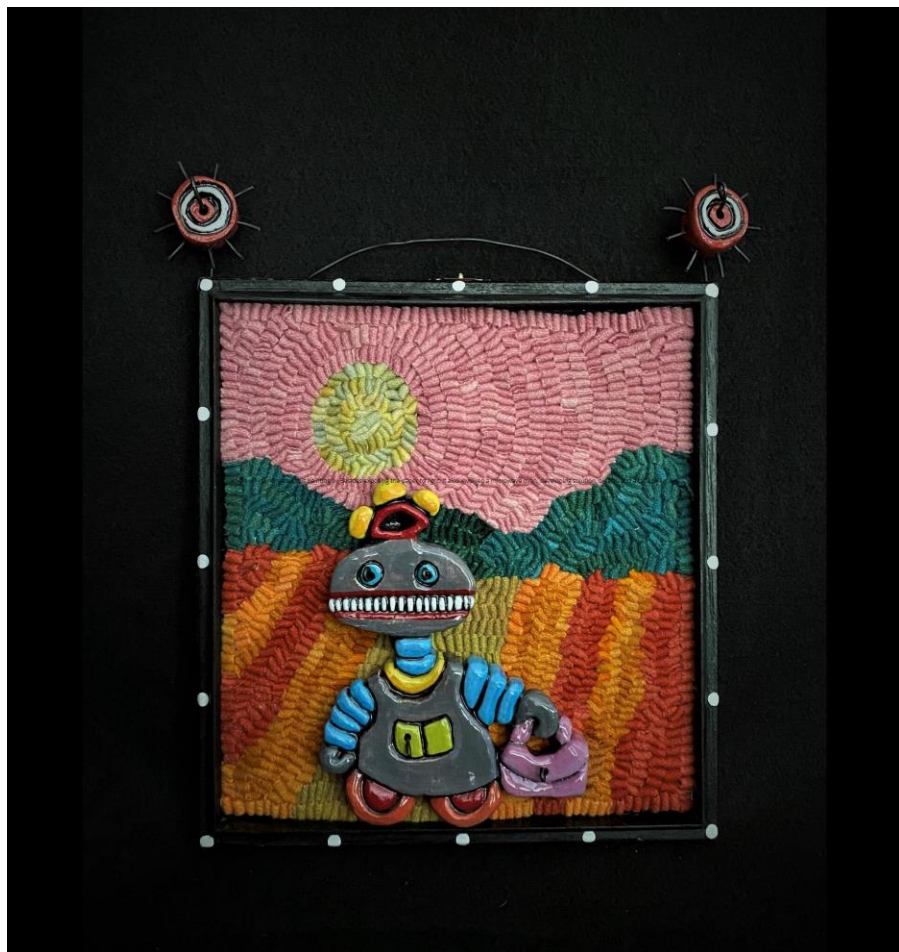
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