

PLACEHOLDER FOR INSIDE FRONT COVER

NOT A REAL PAGE

SHIFT

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"Beyond the Edges"

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Editor's Introduction

I have been part of creative writing culture since my undergraduate program in the late '80s. By that, I mean the undergraduate workshops, *Best American* anthologies, the MFA programs and lit mags, the AWP conferences and publications. I remember the time when creative writing still existed along the fringes of ivory tower academia, when the workshop was looked at askance by the literary theorists, Victorians and Medievalists and Shakespeareans. Back then we submitted our stories and poems via the USPO in big manila envelopes. We consulted thick copies of *Writer's Market*, and we relied largely on word of mouth to learn about calls for submissions. We used paperclips (never staples!) and we included SASEs (self-addressed stamped envelopes, for you youngsters) for our responses—these took many months. When the rejection (most of the time) arrived, it was a little square slip of paper or sometimes even a letter on stationery; we took the rejected manuscript from the envelope and slipped it into the next waiting envelope to send off to the next magazine. It was time consuming, and all that postage wasn't cheap. Submitting was a job in and of itself. You got to know the postal workers. There was a lot of paper involved.

Now we have email and Submittable; the internet makes it easy to find contests and calls, and submission is instant. The AWP Guide to Writing programs lists nearly 1,000 different creative writing programs supporting and nurturing emerging writers. Don't get me wrong; I love that creative writing is now (mostly) recognized and celebrated in academia and that the internet has streamlined things. But now that I am on the editor's side of the submission and publication process, I sometimes wonder if this thriving culture hasn't become a bit of a bubble, an echo chamber. In his 2016 essay in *Ariel*, Harry Whitehead went so far as to suggest that creative writing programs were becoming a form of "Cultural Imperialism." We at *SHIFT* were wondering if we weren't missing out on some great writing by limiting our CFS to the standard avenues when my spring graduate assistant, Jordan Russ, came up with our "shift" in this issue: to reach beyond the bubble of CW culture by soliciting work in unexpected places well outside the MFA club.

With Jordan's help, we sent this CFS beyond Submittable via email and snail mail postcards to hundreds of colleges and universities, high schools, community centers, libraries, churches, retirement/assisted living facilities, prisons, veterans' programs, arts centers, and local writers' groups. The result was a full mailbox, lots of scanning and transcribing for interns, and some impressive writing unhampered by the whims of CW culture.

As I reflect on this second volume, I find that I am both proud of the quality of the work and pleased to have achieved a goal we set to reach beyond the edges of the typical creative writing pool to find writers who might otherwise not be heard. One third of our eighteen selections are pieces we would not have seen without this "shift." We are proud to publish four new writers, two of whom are retirees who have come to writing as life's third act. Three contributors are writing while incarcerated, and two came to us via veterans' writing programs. None of these writers' work would have reached us had we not reached out to them first.

As a result of our beyond-the-edges search we have collected a wide variety of high quality writing. I am pleased to see some modern formal poetry, both having fun (Pantoum) and celebrating the romantic tradition

(“Romeo and Juliet”). I am just as excited about the genre bending and blending happening in “Blusin” and “Obituary” and “If Anybody Asks.” I am thrilled by the strength of the voices, most notably in “Blusin” and “The Disappeared.” The emotional intensity of “Vigil” and “Winter Break” illicit a visceral response each time I return to their gritty and awful rawness. I found myself equally moved by the nostalgia and evocative imagery of “The Hummingbird” and “Lakeside.” On the local front, we are happy to share another piece from Volume 1 poet Vickie Harden, as well as work by MTSU Write program alums Katie Hamblen and Phil Scarce.

Overall, this is a slim volume but simultaneously a wide-reaching collection. I hope that you enjoy its variety and density as much as I have and that you too experience your own shift in how we view creative writing culture, the paradoxical joy of both its rapid interior growth and its continued borderlessness.

— *Jennifer Wachtel Kates*

Editor

Director, MTSU Write

If Anybody Asks

by Kay Lindsey

My name is Cherisse

a cry

a chrysalis

luna moth of her mama's invocation

If anybody asks

my name is Shawanda

a mystical arrangement of sounds

sh sh sh sh shaaaaah

a soft aspiration

a tiptoe of bangles & rings

for the blueberry girl before she hits

the street & while powder still lies

in the folds of her baby fat

If anybody asks

my name is Tyesha

an amulet

for a polysyllabic tower of babel girl

who twists just like we did last summer

If anybody asks

my name is Shanai

roaming halls

reeking of unguents & oils

pretty is as pretty does

Anybody want to know

my name is Chante

a shield, a tattoo
against a world salivating for her blood
& catatonic neighborhoods move briefly to the syncopation of her name

Incense & ottoman names
for long-legged somebodies
Zanzibar girls zigzagging life
with spices in their teeth, chewing gum
laughing low

Your names should anybody ask
are Ohmesha, Emandrea & Jalil

Look at me
when I speak, ember eyes
Don't be shamed
A thousand & one nights will come
& go & a good name will still
be better than gold

Opalescent church pew girl
If anyone should ask your name
it is a blessing.

30 North

by Fred Arroyo

No. Just cold. Something else bothering Manuel. He's in a tired bad mood this morning. Says he hates living here. Likes the house, his own room looking down on the rocky, swift river, his friends at school. Why is it always so cold? If Mom gets the job in Berkley, do we get to move there? An orange tree in the backyard, hiking Mt. Tamalpais, the fragrant scent of eucalyptus, reading Rexroth poems before sleep. The radio makes it clear that by this afternoon earth and sky will become one: snow falling, without end, until Friday, as little as eight inches, or as much as two feet. Windy, the flakes dance along the yellow center lines.

I don't know what to say to him, how to explain that, Manuel, sometimes, like birch trees thrashing in the wind, the weather won't calm, and people decide to go their separate ways. They're at a gas station in a small village on 30 north, let's say. They've filled up. They've been to the restrooms, got a few snacks and cups of coffee, and then drive away in opposite directions. They'll now have different beds, new sheets to get used to, and the distances will become home. Maybe in the end it's like in November when you said you couldn't eat another bowl of oatmeal—and then ate bowl after bowl of grits, a small pat of butter in the middle, drizzled with maple syrup. Change is good, I said. You'll always have to make room for it. And maybe I recognized—the questions in your eyes, how your jaw trembled and you almost said something—how these patterns and routines we hold onto mean nothing when it comes to a shattered heart.

The snow is banked high on both sides of the road. We pass a field, cows making their way to a red barn, snow heavy on their backs, fluffing in the air with each step. Manuel turns a page in his book, the paper sounding crisp, heavy. The sun breaks through the clouds, the dark green mountains fleeced in gray and gold, shadows pocketing the twisting road.

All I know: Still four more hours to go, Manuel, before we make Montréal.

At Unity Hospital, Autumn, 2015

by Jennifer Maloney

My favorite color
is the color of your eyes when they are closed,
a color
I have to close my eyes to see.

My favorite color is the color of the sun
after the two AM hospital when
all the other reds and yellows are only
piss and blood.

My favorite color is the color of the lake
in this picture
from forty years ago. You are standing
squinting
grinning
under willow trees
under a hat bleached to no color at all
except the silver of a hundred flashy lures and
my favorite color is
the color of a largemouth bass hanging
heavy from your index finger, drooping, dripping,
the color of algae,
earthworms,
and night.

My favorite color is the color of your hospital gown.

Your favorite color is green,
the color of life.

I watch a sunrise the color of the parking lot.
Other patients come, go, splintered bones splinted,
close calls caught like fish, gasping
and green
with another day on this blue earth.

My favorite color is the color
of the insides of my eyelids
when I'm sleeping.

When I dream,
you fish,
and the brilliant dragonflies,
electric blue and hot-rod red,

skim a lake the color of summer air,
tempting great green bass to the surface.
They swim through eternity
take the bait like a promise.
You jerk the line, set the hook.
Let them run.

So soon they tire,
and you laugh like a god, reeling them in—
pull them, green,
from the blue
lay them in their white belly rows
trailing smears of blood and sparkling mucus
on a wide and empty beach

which is my very favorite color

the color I must close my eyes to see.

The Disappeared

by Brian Kerr (a.k.a. Seven Scott)

In stature, Danny was a man on the smallish, side; of a finely drawn and pinkened countenance servile only to protracted youthfulness, who rather than bear his prison uniform with a natural fit, was enveloped by it, like the desiccated skin on the seed of a blueberry raisin. This was due to the concavity of his chest that hunched him forward in a bit of an arc, which—he had been cursed by his superstitious mother since his first day in elementary school—was a hallmark of ill-tidings for him in life; and the severe slope from neck to shoulder, along with the curvilinear aspect from armpit to heel seemed to stretch him into the headlong air of a man forever eager for somewhere else. Most of his hair, thin and wispy since birth, had long ago fled the tyranny of the fine-toothed comb. It fell on his hands to find something physically becoming in the man. His most comely features, they were what had led him to his current environs. Favoring the maternal contribution to his genes, to his everlasting chagrin, they were of a touch very sensitive, almost delicate, perfect for appreciating and purloining fine jewelry and twirling to satisfaction the combination lock on most any home safe. He delighted with great pride in the fact that he could feel every important click when a tumbler fell into place. He gloated over his hands. He was forever inspecting them, protecting them, slathering on them every next best oil, lotion or unguent that promised to keep them soft, pink, and pliable; for although he was out-of-action temporarily, like a Major League pitcher placed on the DL, he wished only to continue relying upon them for his livelihood after his parole.

Of a natural course in comedy or tragedy, depending upon one's point-of-view, Danny's dainty hands, or more particularly his fastidious attention to them, certain to his entry into incarceration, presented a singular problem for him, which was that he had had the abject misfortune to be imprisoned amongst a number of vile people who misunderstood the nature of his genetic variation in the features of his diminutiveness by mistaking it for effeminacy. By the observation of two of his fellow convicts, there occurred an egregious error in this premature conclusion in which they came to believe they had misjudged him, of a manner so horrible as to curdle their blood.

One particular morning, not so far into the remainder of Danny's prison "bit," he found himself alone in the small cell regulations forced him to share with another. Refusing to become a slave to prison's cruel taskmasters that are Despair and Monotony, he had decided he needed to exercise his twin faculties of touch and feel, if for nothing else than to reassure himself of their sensitivity. Recognizing the fatal folly inherent in being caught rolling the padlock and rifling through the contents of another convict's locker, he instead chose to polish his cell's stainless steel toilet seat to a mirror finish, a feat he could manage with the mindless and unflustered certainty of one who no longer feared entrapment, though, when one considers his current environs, why he should worry about that in the first place only one may guess. Of course, this lowly seat wasn't anything like a mastercrafted ring of platinum and diamonds, or a one-ton, fireproof AmSec in satin-gray finish, but he relished the chance to engage his capabilities, nonetheless. In prison, a man endeavors to humor himself to no one's pleasure but his own, often just because he can.

Standing to it, having donned a pair of thin latex gloves misappropriated during a prior visit to Medical to protect the skin, Danny plied his handiwork at every possible angle. Sweat beaded upon his brow as he fingered a blemish here and a flaw there, until he gained on the finish he sought. Applying much elbow grease, he swirled and rubbed and buffed the metal with an ersatz polish of his own admixture, a noxious-smelling liquid of spit, V-05 hair shampoo, and a creamy toothpaste of such inexpensive manufacture that its foreign maker had dyed it a deep, thick red in hopes that its rich, raw, and severe hue, so pleasing to certain Asian cultures as indicative of good fortune, would boost sales. This polish worked so well that, from time to time, he stopped to inspect his teeth, shining like two rows of white chairs aligned side by side in a small, dark cave, there being handy no better test of his effectiveness. Whenever he spotted a blur, he rubbed and buffed it out with a vigorous thumb. As a matter of convenience, the toilet, besides its obvious and intended usage, served quite well as a general “Dispose-All.” When one pressed the wall-mounted button, a huge volume of noise, not unlike a climbing jet plane, filled the tiny cell, drowning for several seconds all other sounds. This was due to the rapid rush of water through its plumbing, which many convicts had found would swallow most anything—linens, blankets, food scraps, paper trash; there was even a running joke that one could flush an entire human body, if cut up into small enough parts, though that had never yet happened, as far as anyone knew. Now pinkened and blackened by his efforts, the rag strips of a white terry cloth towel were flushed away. Following this moment of self-amusement, a familiar pair of voices from the fallway below his cell reached his hearing, echoing within the cell’s cloying confines like the report of artillery, appropriate enough, as this had caused him to jump as if he had been shelled.

Danny turned a frown and cocked an ear to this disturbance of his rare moment of silent reverie. As one might imagine, in a prison filled to the rafters with twelve hundred sadsack souls, the constant roar and the mere proximity of others marched upon a man’s entire being and senses like an invading army. Finding no response, these shouts faded into a pair of heavy treads that stomped in dissonant rhythm down the hallway, only to be heard clomping up the stairwell there and approaching. The next moment, two sets of knuckles rapped in earnest on his cell door, which had been resting ajar to allow a refreshing charge of air flavored by the summer’s blossoms of dogwood and honeysuckle to enter from outside; untold are the numbers in the changes of mood when exposed to pleasing scents. Pushing the door further open, Jake and Jooky thrust in their eager, illumined faces. In a relative manner of characterization, they were two of the prison’s most prepossessing convicts, as good-natured and humble, even a bit silly at times, as one may hope to find in such dangerous, often desperate environs. Like so many, Danny liked them, too, and he took only tasteful joy in besting them at various card games and trivial pursuits. They were considered harmless, generally speaking.

“Danny! Hey, Danny, didn’t you hear us calling you?” they cried in near-breathless unison. Jake and Jooky were the best of friends, still youthful and exuberant in their advanced ages despite several decades of experience behind bars, and they behaved somewhat like twins, or, if one listened to the spiteful and miserable among the many convicts, like twin children. They were longtime cellmates and locked just down the corridor. Jooky spoke first, he being the elder by two years:

“We were just in the Common Room, and a microwave’s open. We’re gonna cook up some bean-and-cheese burritos. If you want in, better get your stuff together. The guards’ll be around in a minute for headcount, and we’ll miss our chance.” As if reflecting the other in a mirror, each threw a hooked thumb over a respective shoulder at a disjointed gang of wannabe thugs and knuckleheads—a greasy, unprincipled bunch that in another place and time would not have been out of sorts on a pirate ship or in a highwayman’s lair—loitering on the floor directly below, hooting and hollering at nothing but each other and the sky in particular; up to no good, really.

Whether Danny was disinclined to participation as a matter of form, or whether, like others of his smallish and prospective nature, he experienced a visceral, antisocial reaction at being startled, or whether he was simply anxious to finish the task now awaiting completion in the solitude he had learned quickly to covet, as that mighty Olympian Zeus had lusted after future conquests, he failed to respond to the invite. Instead, his thought process ran its course to the rapid blink of his eyes. The only indication he gave that he had heard them came when he shifted from his knees resting on the floor to his haunches, whereupon he absentmindedly pulled a mishmash bundle of red-spotted clothing from beneath the toilet bowl, sorting colors from whites.

“Danny, you in, or what? We need a third to make it a good cook-up. Duke and Sid ain’t got nothin’, so we’re lettin’ ’em ride with us. How ’bout it, huh?” said Jooky. The near-desperation in his eyes, wrinkled by time and the wisdom gained by a man who has known for most of his life the dark side of it, betrayed the anticipation of success in his toothy grin. He was on the precipice of a nasal whine and becoming insistent, the one real character flaw in him.

Danny, discomfited by this intrusion into his morning’s peace, nevertheless forced a deprecatory smile and replied, “Guys, not this time. I’m just not that hungry right now.” He understood that cook-ups between the like-minded had a way of multiplying into an ungainly affair, another one of those things he wanted nothing doing, as Jesus no doubt must have pondered in dismay as he watched a small gathering of hungry souls seeking meager repast metastasize into a clamoring by thousands for bread, fish, and wine. “Sides,” he continued, “they’ll be serving tacos in the Chow Hall for lunch today.”

As the two were one, the light in Jake’s and Jooky’s faces darkened in the same dimming manner, their eyes searching for a solution in the pits and craters in the cement floor at their feet. Jake, in a rare show of initiative, asked, “How ’bout your bunk? Where’s TwoBit?”—so called because he was on a return run through the Department of Corrections; tellingly, “TwoBit” is a popular nickname—“I bet he will.” He turned his freshly brightened face to Jooky, whose nod of approval brought a bigger smile.

“A view,” said Danny, matter-of-factly, employing the jailhouse term for a sanctioned visit with family or friends.

“A view?” the pair piped together.

Jake again took the lead. “Wow! He ain’t had one of those in three years, at least!” He looked to Jooky for confirmation, though he had related the tidbit as if it was common knowledge, which it was, because if there is one universal truth on a prison “rock,” it is that a roach doesn’t pass without somebody hearing it, smelling it, wanting to tell somebody about it.

Jooky whistled. “Are you sure, man?”

Danny made a display of checking his watch, hoping the twosome would catch the hint. “That’s what he said when the guard came by . . . ’bout eight this mornin’.”

They couldn’t have caught a cold just then.

“Eight? Visits don’t start on Saturdays until nine-thirty,” said Jake, ever a pedantic font of useless information at irrelevant intervals.

Danny’s eyebrows shot skyward. “Oh, did I say ’eight? I meant nine. He wanted to shower, I guess, before he left out.” He maintained an innocent half-smile, but inside he wearied of the twins and their enthusiastic, though harmless, impertinence.

“That’s funny,” said Jooky. “The porter was cleaning in there ’bout nine, like usual. You know how he is ’bout people bein’ in there while he’s cleaning. Don’t like it one little bit. Kicked me out the other day, and I was just gettin’ ready to soap myself up!” he rubbed the back of his head, reliving the pain associated with the knuckle-sized knot still hidden under his bush of white hair.

This new information switched Jake’s train of thought to another track. “Hey, whatcha doin’, anyhow? Your toilet looks like blood’s been spilled all over it.” He nudged Jooky in the ribs. “Look, it’s all over the floor there, all over them clothes and shoes. What a mess!” this was followed by snorts and sniggers that infected Jooky, whose wheezy chuckle helped to form a two-man chorus of puerile exclamation.

In an eight-by-twelve-foot prison cell, there is barely enough space for one person, let alone two. Shoehorned in with them are two all-metal locker room-style lockers for personal property storage; an all-steel desk (sometimes, two) with faux-woodgrain surface; an all-steel bunkbed which jostles and creaks at the slightest movement by an occupant; and the requisite stainless-steel toilet/sink combination which forces a man to drink where he shits. Each man has little if any space left over for what only the most optimistic sort—likely the prison’s compliance inspector—could call “living room.” The cellmates, or “bunkys,” are forever stepping on one another’s spare shoes, stubbing their toes on some remorseless protrusion or another, usually the tiny trash can, or tripping over a pile of dirty clothes yet to be turned in for laundry service. To get along in such tight confines, each man goes far out of his way to keep everything, especially *his* things, neat and orderly, but circumstances sometimes transpire to prevent such designs. If the two bunkys cohabit well, no problems will arise. They help each other maintain the cell, if for nothing else than to help each other maintain a general accord. If not, things could turn ugly, which it often does, and fast. Decades of the prison’s security logs are filled with descriptions of “bunky-on-bunky” violence. It is well worth remarking that more than a few have resulted in death.

All of a sudden, it was as if the same bolt of lightning had struck in two places. Jooky, jolted first, cried, “Holy crap, Danny! You didn’t!” The fingers of his gnarled and bent right hand formed a grate over his mouth. He directed his full moon eyes at the mess on the floor at Danny’s feet, then to Danny’s face transforming from one of forbearance to puzzlement, finally to Jake’s mouth frozen in an “O.”

Momentarily stunned, Jake then gasped. “Jesus Christ, man! What’d you do?” He ducked his head backwards to inspect either side of the corridor for eavesdroppers and guards. Amazingly, no one was within earshot.

Danny, now burning with indignation, stood up and adopted as defensive a posture as his small body would allow, arms akimbo. Brow wrinkled with deep furrows and with a gravitas unknown to the twins, he said, “What in the hell are you two talking about? What do you mean ‘What’d you do?’ I didn’t do nothin’.” It was the “Convict’s Declaration,” and it helped Danny’s cause not at all, because such a statement is always burdened by its precedence of ill repute.

“A view!” cried Jake. “I knew your bunky didn’t go on no view!” Daggers of accusation flew from his squinting eyes, flashing and ever wary.

Danny peered down at the toilet, at the clothes and shoes, the rust-red spots drop-dripped on them like a monochrome Pollock painting. Then, at the twin knuckleheads—for, in his mind, they had suddenly become—gaping at him with open mouths in alarm, his own face flushed beet-red. “Are you two goofs gone crazy, or am I? Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking? Get the hell outta here! Go and get the guards, if you think that! Go on, go and get ’em!” He thrust his arms to his sides, fists balling and unballing. As yet in his time in prison, he had not been called to engage in violence, but he remained determined to act just so, if need be.

Jake and Jooky, called to task by Danny’s rapid alteration in mood and manner, looked at one another, the ground, so to speak, moving beneath their shifting feet, undecided as how to proceed. Of course, they had liked Danny right from the first. With his even temperament, his fantastic boasts of the various jobs he had pulled, the places he had been and the things he had done with the money, he had been a fitting addition to their companionship. Such harmony of mind is hard and rare to find in life, let alone prison. When one finds it, it’s best to keep hold of it as long as one can. They looked upon Danny as one might a worldly cousin of the Big City. But, despite their combined seventy-seven years in the system, the scene they now encountered was something altogether new and unreal. They were frozen in thought and deed, as if caught between the twin terrors of total amazement and total confusion.

A ringing peal of laughter from the gang standing below broke their spell. Speaking first, Jooky said, “I don’t know, Danny. We know your bunky pretty well. Everybody does.”

“Yeah,” said Jake, concurring as if by rote. “But it’s not as if he wouldn’t have provoked Danny sometime.”

“What do you mean?” Danny replied, his anger still red-hot.

“Well, the whole rock knows he’s a real butthead, but try tellin’ that to a jury.”

Yeah,” echoed Jake. “We all figured it’d be just a matter of time before you two got into it . . .”

Jooky cleared his throat to finish the thought, “and something happened.”

Danny raked a forearm across his forehead, then said, “What do you mean by ‘and something happened?’”

Danny had heard the warning rumors, the snide comments, and the sniggers behind his back, even before he and TwoBit had been placed together, that his bunky carried a big red “P” in his prisoner file. (It stands

for “Predator,” and it means just what it sounds like.) His bunky had been labeled by the powers-that-be as incorrigibly and irredeemably violent, a hustler, a swindler, and was found to be sexually aggressive towards other convicts. Everyone had assumed, as had Jake and Jooky, that something cruel and foul would befall Danny sooner or later, and, like everyone else, they had felt powerless to help him when it should happen. As a realist and infinitely pragmatic, instead of fearing for his anal virginity and/or his life, Danny had recognized that locking with such an individual could be to his advantage, as such an ally could be manipulated into becoming his “protector” without the man even realizing it. From that first night in their shared cell, finding he was no match on a physical level for TwoBit’s hulking, heavily tattooed bulk, Danny had understood the need to ingratiate himself but in such a way that wouldn’t detract from either man’s dignity.

As it worked out, it had proven simple, for Danny was an excellent judge of character. He had recognized in his bunky a longtime and utter lack of proper mental stimulation. It was a situation and a condition for which he was wholly suited, for, besides his seemingly unnatural preoccupation with money, Danny hungered after the written word. From the age of three he never could be found without a book, a magazine, or a newspaper in reach. Born, cursed really, with an innate curiosity, he had traveled by page to faraway locales like Crusoe’s Island; pondered inscrutables like the face on Mars; fought in the trenches of the Argonne and The Bulge; and fingered the warts and dirty laundry of those who wished him to and those who’d rather he hadn’t. Of these adventures, he had loved every minute.

Interspersed between those high times, Danny had absorbed a rudimentary understanding of the various “isms” deemed sacred philosophies of the Ancients, the geniuses of the Enlightenment and the Modern Era. With an insight gained by someone as well read in the greatest novels ever written, Danny had come to understand that one of several themes were common to them all: in every iteration of human life those authors could dream up, there lies an unquenchable thirst for identity, respect and/or acceptance, whether it be by oneself or one’s peers. Drawing upon this vast appreciation for literature, Danny borrowed from Shéhérazade, and thus had begun his own thousand and one nights, whereby he was able to soothe the savage beast and lie within its murderous fangs and claws, the safest spot in the animal kingdom—prison too.

Of course, Jake and Jooky knew of Danny’s storytelling charms, but not of the lengths he had gone to make his prison bit as comfortable an existence as he had. It was Jooky who assumed an air, one he hoped would capture the attention of the other two. He said, “We’ve got to think now. We’re in a pickle.” He rubbed the white stubble on his bristly chin, again peering down at the cement floor as if he would find in its pitted surface the solution he sought.

“Yep, we’ve got to think,” Jake parroted. “This is serious. Provoked or not, there’s the law to be considered. They might think we was accomplices or something. Helped you after the fact, maybe.” The image of potential courtroom drama flashed over his mind’s eye, a vivid replay of those he had suffered years before, which forced an involuntary shiver from him.

Jooky said, matter-of-factly, “We got to fix this somehow.”

“Fix this?” Danny questioned. “How are we going to ‘fix this?’”

As if by instinct, Jake said, “Yeah, Danny, they’ll hold us responsible, too, if we don’t fix this up.” He looked at Jooky. “Any ideas?”

“Take it easy, now, fellas. Easy now,” said Jooky in a smooth, even voice, holding up his palms in the universal fashion of supplication. “Look here, Danny, you did what you had to do. We get it.” Jake nodded with him. “Everybody will, but what you did was already did by the time we came—”

“COUNTTIME, GENTLEMEN! OFF YOUR PUNKS AND ON YOUR BUNKS! IT’S COUNTTIME! GET IN WHERE YOU FIT IN!”

It was one of the unit guards, shouting into an intercom microphone from the station at hallway’s end. Several times per day, as formalized by regulations and procedures, the prison needed to assure itself it had performed its intended public service well in ensuring that the guilty and the innocent alike were present and in their correct, respective places. This was the “Eleven AM Formal Count.”

“Up here,” Jooky said. “Nobody saw us up here till a few minutes ago.”

“Yeah,” said Jake, following along in Jooky’s tracks. “A few minutes ago. When the guards come around, you tell ’em”—here, Jake’d stepped his wiry frame towards Danny, puffing his chest a bit so as to seem menacing, but the effect was lessened to a comical degree by the whine to his tone—“we only came by a few minutes ago. We never entered your cell.” It was true enough.

Danny snorted, “I wish you hadn’t come by at all.”

Jooky elbowed Jake and bent his head to the left. “Here come the guards.” To Danny, he demanded, “Remember, we only got here a couple minutes ago.” To Jake, he commanded, “Let’s git.”

The twins vacated the cell’s door frame in haste and thudded down the corridor to their own shared cell, the door closing with an emphatic slam.

Left alone finally, Danny sat on the edge of his bunk, his being the lower of the two. A sort of gloss on the morning had been dulled by the intrusion of the twins and their outrageous accusations. He had awakened with a determination to maintain a sense of purpose, if for nothing else than to help preserve his sanity, and now he had been accused of something so ghastly he couldn’t bear to contemplate it to its fullest degree. What had possessed them to think so poorly of him? What in his character, his demeanor or his actions had led them to believe he was capable of such a thing? He liked Jake and Jooky, as did most everyone, but as his thoughts were invaded by every sort of self-doubt, he had to reason that something had gone terribly awry in their minds. What in the world . . .

Danny was sitting like that, mind abuzz, when the cell door sprang open and, just as quickly, closed. A heavy body jumped into the bunk above and moved about, settling in for the imminent head count. Danny craned his neck and twisted his head upwards, bewilderment and bemusement in his eyes, competing for prominence.

“What’s up, bunky? You ain’t done polishin’ that toilet yet?”

All of a sudden, Danny exploded into laughter—a thin but raucous belly laugh that had been lurking somewhere within him ever since he realized what the twins were insinuating.

“What’s so funny?” said TwoBit, his face wrinkled by innocent curiosity.

Country Music

by Colleen Powderly

Gunmetal gray sky full of dizzy music
a chilly rush with giddy goosebumps ready
to rise, tiny hills of affection for the land

and the man beside you sharing it, his black and blue
clothes focusing the darkest threat of the afternoon
storm that approaches your kitchen windows while he simmers

sauce on the secondhand stove you bought last winter
when the hand-me-down from his parents gave out, no longer sautéed
a chicken breast or boiled a pot of rice.

This morning before the sky flattened, began its antiphonal
singing, the two of you at the public market searching bargains
tomatoes, huge bulbs of garlic, roasted later, perfuming

the room, cooling on their foil bed by the sink with its dishes.
Generous folds of blue and green on the table, a cloth
still creased with freshness, laundry humming in the dryer

downstairs, another hand-me-down from the family you've adopted,
their cares and concerns second only to your own, third
only to his, this man whose hands make food rich in color,

supporting this life you've chosen consciously, your pens
and pencils finally second to the energy of sustenance passed
between you, necessary as bread, nourishing as the milk

in its pitcher, awaiting dinner and talk and the rush of desire filling
you almost daily for this man whose somber clothes focus
the music of your life in this small house on this dirt road

where, finally, you sing the word committed in your bones.

Winter Break

by Tomi L. Wiley

Gray snow slit with traces of red mud crunches under my tires, and in the frosted pines red birds watch me with bright wary eyes. I smell biscuits, a startlingly warm balm in the cold air, and wood smoke from the house, even as I open my car door, but Jolie isn't there to greet me. Jolie, shivering beside the rusting mailbox pole at the end of the lane every time I come home from college since I left in the fall. Every weekend, without fail, her huge black eyes watery and bright, tail thumping in dry grass, in crisp leaves, in snow—as if she knows the moment I leave the dorm parking lot, and trots out to wait and watch, barking and bowing to each truck that passes and isn't mine.

“Jolie,” Diddy had spat, glaring at my puppy, as if her name was a bit of tobacco clinging to his lower lip. “What the hell kind of name is that?”

“It's French,” I had answered, not looking up from my library copy of *Against Nature*. “It means ‘pretty.’”

“Since when you speak French?” he'd asked, and the flimsy windowpanes chattered. “Since when you know enough to call what's got to be the ugliest dog in the county by some pretty French name?”

Now I knock snow off my boots, reach down and drag my fingertip through the deep grooves. Fortunately, heavy boots and baby doll dresses are on half the girls in my classes—pale throats bisected by dainty cameos on velvet ribbons—so my Brogans don't draw too much attention. A trip to the Goodwill was a success, but I know better than to wear any of those dresses home, or in this cold.

“Jolie,” I call, tapping one steel toe on the porch and looking around. “Jolie, where are you, girl?”

Momma steps out the front door, wiping her hands on a towel, her face drawn and tight like an apple doll's.

The one thing you must steer clear of are clichés, Professor Tracey insists. Use original language; don't regurgitate the phrases of the aged.

But my mother is such a cliché, I think.

“You're putting on weight,” Momma says, eyeing me. “Right glad the state's paying for that meal card.”

I bare my teeth and lean in to kiss her. “Hello, Momma.”

“Well,” she tucks her towel in the belt of her apron and reaches for my bag. “Come on in out the cold then.”

Inside, the house is barely warmer than the porch, even with the teeth of the woodstove burning orange. Momma takes my bag into my room, sets it on my bed, and returns to the stove. A huge black pot simmers, smelling of meat and tomatoes, the lid bouncing, agitated. She uses her towel to lift the lid, sniffs, and nods before turning back.

“Where's Diddy?”

I haven't gotten used to feeling so uncomfortable in my own home during these visits, and sitting in Big Daddy's blistered rocking chair is more of a chore each time. The floorboards moan, and between the slats I

see puppies and rabbits shuffling in the dirt, scuffling together for heat, standing on hind legs to paw the floor of the house.

“He’s out with Junior and Blast, rounding up that buck they saw last week.” Momma sits on an antique Victorian chair, rescued from the side of the highway, which would have been gorgeous if restored and in any other home besides this one. “Swore they know where it lives, but I can’t imagine how.”

I lean back in the chair and close my eyes. “Men,” I say.

I slit one eye and see Momma assessing me, her mouth a cold hard line. “Reckon you ain’t too good for stew now.”

“Momma, no, course not.” I sit up. “Where’s Jolie? She’s usually at the end of the lane when I come in.”

Momma stands and wipes her hands with the towel, her face turned toward the door. “That’ll be them, then. Come along, come help ’em unload.”

My mother opens the front door, and I hear the low familiar rumble and hiss of my uncle’s truck. The seat inside smells of beer and cigarettes, covered with rough horse blankets that are brutal on a young girl’s cheek. I stand in the doorway and watch my father heave himself from the passenger side, spit, and glare up at the front porch. My cousin Blast, nicknamed for his penchant for shoving bottle rockets in cat’s asses, leaps from the truck bed.

Momma stands at the steps, one hand on the porch rail, hip out, nearly cocky. “Well?”

Diddy spits again, head down. “Naw.”

Momma snickers and turns, lip curled up, and raises her eyebrows at me. The men move off to a cluster of trees beyond the truck to squat and drink and confer.

“Jolie!” I call, clomping down the steps. I move toward the little cluster of men, watching how they glance at one another, a slow smile bubbling on Blast’s pasty face. “Hey. Y’all seen Jolie?”

I hate how my accent and speech surface when I return home, how everything I try so hard to correct and mask in class is pulled away like a current from shore. I am painfully aware of the hard twang of my cadence, the lazy loss of vocabulary the farther I drive from campus, and I am even more aware of the biting shame this brings me.

“Jolie,” Blast repeats, taunting, slick. “You talkin’ bout that godawful black mutt what you brought in from school?”

Dread, cloying and hot, rises in my chest, blooms around my heart. I had been on my way back to the dorm from a disastrous freshman dance at the Student Baptist Center when I heard a low mewling cry from behind a dumpster. Flyers and pamphlets about date rape and alcohol were plastered around campus, and I almost didn’t take the time to find the source of the sound, afraid it was some poor girl having her soul ripped out and flung into the bushes. But that wasn’t the sound of intimate abuse, the muffled sobs of someone slipping away to a nice place in her mind; that was the sound of a wounded animal.

“Who are you?” I whispered, seeing her big black eyes, her wide head and thumping tail. “Oh, little girl . . . what happened?”

And just like that Jolie bounded into my life, wriggling and grateful. I hid her in my dorm room that night, feeding her Cheetos and bottled water from the vending machine downstairs, happy once more that my roommate was at sorority rush and didn't spend more than two nights a week in her own bed. I bathed Jolie in our suite's bathroom sink, kneading her slick black limbs with cold fingers, kissing her damp head. She trembled and moaned in her sleep, and I curled myself around her, humming, rubbing the tips of her ears, and whispering all night words I'd so longed to hear myself: you are good, you are beautiful, you mean everything to me.

"Brought that damn mutt in here as if we got enough for another mouth to feed," Diddy says now. "Liken we got more'n we even need, enough to go around."

I step closer to them, feeling my neck tighten, cords rising. "Where is she?"

On my way home with her, Jolie had bounced around my car, electric and drooling. I had been glad for the early chill, afraid if I left the windows down she would have simply leapt to a messy death. It was all I could do to keep my eyes off her, my hands on the wheel, so deliciously alive she was, thrilled innocence, licking my hand gripping the gearshift.

"She wasn't much for target practice, that's for sure," Junior sneers.

I focus on him, my palms itching. "What does that mean?"

Blast titters as my father spits, removes a wad of tobacco from his lip, tosses it into the woods. "Means she weren't no fun after a few weeks a being hungry," my father says. "You didn't leave food for the bitch, that's all."

"That's all," he says," Blast giggles.

I take several steps backward, the edges of my vision darkening. Without turning from them I scream, "Jolie! Jolie! Come here, girl!"

"Jolie! Jolie!" Blast trills, mocking.

"Shut your mouth," Junior snaps, grinning, pulling deep from a can of beer. "You don't speak French."

I turn and run. Momma is at the foot of the steps, her hands in that damned dishrag. At my pleading look, she says, "You might check out back."

The backyard is a rusted labyrinth of old cars, car parts, bicycles, toys, and anything else my father has traded for beer or moonshine money, won in bets or promised to get running again. Chains like red snakes trip me as I dart through the crumbling madness, the lost wages, the forgotten treasures. At the back is a row of metal dog crates and wire chicken coops. The smell slaps me before I round the last corner, and I can hear her moaning as my gait slows, my heart quickens.

She is a crust. A matted, befouled, broken creature huddled in snow and shit and blood. Her mouth is collapsed, her eyes swollen and wet. She is shaking. She is crying. I am on my knees.

"Jolie," I whisper, crawling closer, the stench more than I could take if it were any other being on earth. "My beautiful, my darling girl, my baby."

Her tail, obviously long broken, thumps and she shrieks, shrinks away.

Beside her cage is a derelict storage building with a rusted padlock. Hefting a tire iron, I'm inside in seconds. Toward the back, musty but dry and clean, is a stack of blankets. Despite her pain and fear, she allows me to pick her up once I have ripped the top of the cage from its metal base. I wrap the first blanket around her, gingerly lifting and wrapping another around her limp body, and she licks my blood from my fingertips.

The men don't say anything as I shift Jolie's body to my hip and open my car door. I lay her in the back seat, whispering in her ear. I leave her blood on my face as I approach them, and even Blast takes a step back.

I'm merely feet away when I snatch up a shovel propped against a tree. A few more steps, a swing, and my father is on his knees, his cheek split in a bloody line. Junior screams and I swing again, catching him in the throat. Blast ducks behind a tree, snow and leaves crunching beneath his feet as he disappears into the forest flanking our home.

"You," I move closer to my uncle, dragging the shovel behind me. Behind me I hear my father shuffle, and I turn, bringing the shovel down in a clear line into his skull. Once he's still, I turn back to my uncle. "With your after-supper walks and your flask of shine and your rides in the truck." With a flick of my wrist I flip the shovel blade and bring it down. "You should have killed me."

I wait until they are both still, red snowbursts haloing their heads, before dropping the shovel and walking out of the woods. I glance into my car on my way past and see Jolie sleeping, finally warm, but her quick shallow breath worries me. I stomp up the stairs and into the house, red mud clumped behind me.

"Good Lord, you're trackin' mud all over this house," Momma says from the stove. I pass her, grab my bag off the bed and walk back out. "Where you going? Where your daddy?"

I don't turn but put my hand on the threshold, hip out, almost cocky. "They said they'll be awhile yet." I turn halfway toward her, and smile. "Men," I say.

I move Jolie to the front seat beside me, nestling her in her towel, for the trip back to school. There is a vet's office on the way, I have friends studying the science who will be able to help, take her in, care for her. I'll visit until I can find my own place, one that accepts wounded animals. Jolie whimpers, and I move my hand so she can smell it. She rests her hands on my fingers, sighing.

"You are good," I whisper as we turn out of the lane and onto the highway, where huge trucks have slung gray snow to the roadside. Just beyond our drive, at the tree break into the woods, I catch a glimpse of the buck, huge and proud, his eyes sharp and his rack thick and reaching. I flip my hand gently, cupping Jolie's face. "You are good. You are beautiful. You mean everything to me."

Revelation

by Arnold Johnston

You never know when revelation will visit.
The short block between our apartment
On the drab corner of Kercheval
And Springle, above the Blue Ribbon
Tavern, with its smells of beer and grease,
And Bader's Drugstore past the vacant
Lot at Kercheval and Gray showed me
Something about myself one fall day.
My father had sent me out to buy—
Something—the
Detroit News,
aspirin,
Who knows what?—with a five-dollar bill
Tucked in my pocket. And I dawdled,
Thinking about birthdays. I was ten,
But I thought I couldn't wait to be
Nineteen, which seemed like the perfect age,
Because I knew it meant no more school,
Leaving me free to read any book
I wanted to.

 But when I arrived
On the mosaic tile of Bader's entry,
I paused and checked my pocket,
Then all the others. Empty, of course.
I turned and retraced my steps, lingered
In the vacant lot between Bader's
And home. I spent at least half an hour
Searching amid grass, weeds, and gravel,
Knowing that the money was long-lost.
Strangely, I felt a sense of freedom,
Poised between loss and retribution.
I even found myself whistling,
Shifting from one foot to another,
Realizing that this was somehow

What the future held in store, as time
Would give and take at no one's bidding.
And after a while I turned for home
Slow-walking toward what might come next.

First Date

by Phil Scarce

Six months had passed, but still Delores wondered if it was too soon. She knew that Walter would laugh at her as she fretted about things that didn't matter. She didn't need to rearrange the plastic fruit in the bowl on the dining room table, didn't have to change the towels in the guest bathroom. Mainly she didn't need to worry whether it had been long enough. Walter convinced Delores, in the months before he died, that we have an unlimited capacity to love. If she found someone, someday, it wouldn't mean that she loved Walter any less.

Delores believed it, but if she let go of Walter enough to embrace someone else, wouldn't she go through the same pain again, eventually? Delores created men and scenarios with men in her mind, and she imagined how she would react, how she would behave if one of them showed real interest in her. She embarrassed herself, getting carried away in her fantasies and the choices and crossroads she created with someone new, but she'd always bring herself back with thoughts of Walter laughing, in a way that said he would always tolerate her fretful nature.

"It's not even a date, really," Delores replied, now beyond talking to herself. She had conversations, arguments sometimes. She wondered if she was crazy, but she told herself that crazy people don't ask themselves whether they're crazy.

"It's not really a date when you plan to meet somebody someplace. It's not really a date when you drive separately and it's at two in the afternoon."

"It's a date when you agree to meet a man and go somewhere with him, Delores."

"Kiss my ass," she responded.

Then a moment later, she said, "I think you might be insane after all."

Delores slept fitfully Friday night. What's the train like? she wondered. Will there be lots of other people around? I hope there are lots of other people. Will he want to hold hands? Will the old rail car be air-conditioned?

"I hate to sweat."

Especially on a date. I told you, it's not a date.

By Saturday afternoon Delores was too tired to worry about it anymore. She was past caring and looked forward to having it over and done with. She wondered if he were thinking the same way, looking forward to the drive home alone more than anything else, and she caught herself hoping he genuinely wanted to spend the afternoon with her. She felt guilty about wishing it to be over. "Just have fun, you stupid old hen," she said.

The train was at the depot when Delores arrived, and he was there waiting for her. He smiled and approached the car, held the door for her as she got out. After hellos he showed her a commemorative book he'd bought in the depot, then asked her to forgive him for being so effusive about it. Inside the depot he

admitted he was a rail nut, had been all his life. He built a scale railroad in his garage and lost himself in it, had obsessed over it after his wife died. He dreamed about railroads and fantasized about working on the railroad, and he laughed at the idea, confessing it was a childhood dream he'd never outgrown.

He kept a diary of the rails he'd ridden, the crossings he'd recorded. He saw life through rail metaphors, strong couplings, keeping switches closed that might lead off the main line. And signal blocks along the way, showing green for the distance of a good run of life. Delores listened, fascinated, and promised him that he wasn't boring her. This isn't a date, she heard herself saying, and for a moment she feared she'd said it out loud.

He opened the book and told her all about the road they were about to travel. It was originally a canal route, he said. The canals were used to transport building materials into the interior and harvested crops on the return trip, and she listened to this man and his passion for the history of this place and wondered if he had loved his wife for listening to him the same way, tolerating this little boy still in love with railroads. He told her how the horses walked alongside, pulling the canal boat, and how the men walking the horses would release the harness from the tow line to pass the bridge, and reconnect it on the other side after the boat's momentum carried it through.

But the rails bought up the canal lines and the horse paths became rail beds for trains, and Delores wondered what became of the horses. Were they allowed to retire, grow old gracefully and die peacefully? She thought they'd earned the right, but she doubted that's how it happened. Sold out to a farmer for plow horses—had to keep plugging away no doubt, she thought. Probably slaughtered when they got too old. She laughed, glad she wasn't an old plow horse.

He said they'd sit on the right because they'd be able to see some of the old stone locks still in place along the canal route, next to the rail line. He explained how the locks raised or lowered the boat for the next part of the trip, and how fascinating he believed it was that these locks still existed at all, and how tight the stones used to build them still fit together. Delores lost herself in thought about how the stones must have been hammered and chipped and refined before they would go together so well, and how seeing a couple that went together so perfectly, it was easy to forget how much effort went in to making the fit just right. It didn't just happen, and once they were together, she was sure it took a lot of work to keep the seams tight.

He was pointing out the first lock but it passed before Delores focused on the right place, and she felt bad, like she had disappointed him. "You silly old bird, Delores," she said, for worrying about what he thought. She really was listening, truly interested, and she hoped he sensed how much she appreciated his effort, trying to give her a good time. But she lost herself again in the plight of the horses and the backbreaking work, getting those stones to nest up to each other so perfectly, just to have the next generation's train come along and zip by so fast they didn't even notice.

He explained the second half of the rail loop, how it was built so they could bring trains in, load them with lumber, and run them back east to the mills and factories that relied on them for raw materials. He talked about how many trains they kept on the loop, and how men came from all over to work the forest or the mills, the factories or, if they were lucky, a job on the rail line itself. It was a boom time for the area, but now

it had faded to an excursion train with a handful of people hardly able to imagine its rich history. The boom time had been the area's youth, Delores thought. Now it was holding onto a piece and hoping the school field trips that passed through would inspire some young person, or plant inside them some bit of appreciation for what had been, and who. But it's hard for a young person to understand that old things, and old people were once young and strong, too.

"Your mind is wandering, you old biddy," Delores said. "Pay attention." She hoped that her uh-huhs and little questions interjected here and there had been convincing enough that she cared about what he was saying, and she tried to appear interested when he pointed to something along the line, or to a picture in the book. He touched an old black and white photo and then pointed to the site, where whatever it was in the picture had once been, and if you look there you can see the supports for . . . something, he said, but it was a railroad term or a lumber industry term, and she didn't catch it exactly. "Just nod, Delores."

The railroad conductor approached in his period costume, and smiling passengers handed their tickets to him. He punched each ticket and returned it to them, a souvenir of their ride. The conductor reached Delores where she sat, and she passed her ticket to him. He punched it for her and asked whether she was enjoying the trip. "I was," she said, and in the fog of her daydream, the conductor's smile became the smile of the nurse, the nurse who cared so well for Delores, whom Delores resented for interrupting her dates throughout the day.

"Miss Delores, you need to be with me long enough to eat something, okay? You can't take your medicine without some food first, right?"

"I was enjoying myself so much."

"Were you riding your cruise boat again, Miss Delores?"

"No, I was . . . I was on a train, riding through a pretty little valley with lots of trees. And I was with a very nice man."

"I am sure you were, Miss Delores. Were you riding the train with your Walter?"

"No, Walter is gone."

"And you know why he's gone, right, Miss Delores? You know why you're here?"

"Walter died, and the judge said I had to come here and stay with you."

"Now why do you suppose the judge would say a thing like that?"

"Cause Walter was sleeping, and I soaked the bedroom carpet with kerosene, and I lit it under the door with a fireplace match."

"That's good, Miss Delores."

"And they said the smoke's what got him."

Delores paused, turned her head and looked again out the window, and she saw birch trees and falling leaves, and for a moment, she thought she saw snowflakes floating past as the train gently rocked along. He slid his hand under hers on the seat and smiled sweetly at her.

“But I made sure the cat was out first, before I closed the bedroom door. And that’s good, right?”

The nurse watched Delores swallow the last of her medicine, and said again, “That’s good, Miss Delores, that’s good.”

Obituary

by Peggy Culp

I died today. Or maybe yesterday. I am not sure.

My father, who died twelve years ago, rests beside me in the churchyard, barely six feet between us. I know he is aware of me. He must be. Perhaps he is silent because he expected my mother would be with him first. Perhaps he is silent because that is the only comfort he can offer.

I hold my thoughts close, like a warm lover.

Random remembrances and fresh regret spread over me, along with the sound of my mother snipping a lock of my hair. She places it in an envelope. It is blond, delicate, innocent. I keep the envelope long after the blondness and the sheen are gone, a reminder of my unvarnished self.

A loaf of bread just out of the oven sits on the faded green kitchen counter. It is proud of its redolence as it permeates my clothes and embarrasses me. I refuse to go to school because I am confident the boys will run after me like they would an ice cream truck.

A book of Bible stories, vivid with evangelical and disturbing detail. I am repelled and attracted by an illustration beside one story, people standing in their graves, hands uplifted to a light from above. Its horror I must embrace with peace if I am ever to be among them, my hands raised to heaven.

Leaves of pecan trees just outside my bedroom window rustle faintly. I am afraid the world will end while I am asleep. If it does, I imagine no sunrise. I will wait for night to lift. It will not. I will become cold, then colder until I am dead. No more playing with my dollhouse, no more smelling bacon frying in the morning, no more petting my kitty. But I am not sad about what will be gone from my life; my fear of a cold death overtakes all else.

I wake in the darkness to see the trees in a shower of orange embers and ash from our neighbor's house engulfed in flames. A spark alights on the wooden windowsill next to my bed. A new fear ignites.

We leave for our annual beach vacation. My father has filled a cardboard box with cans of stew and pears, our military-style rations for the week. The morning of the drive, the sky is pink, palmetto trees at the lower edges. The tart, sweet aroma of mimosa is underneath my fingernails and in my hair as I run over the hot sand toward the ocean. Against my will, a wave pulls me away from the shoreline, somersaults me underwater, sucks my breath away, deposits me harshly back to earth. Death has been too near me.

A punishing case of red measles turns me into an ugly, hurting, swollen child of the devil. I hide my bloated hands under the sheet. I hope they are not my hands but someone else's; I am nauseated at the sight of them. Feverish, I dream I am falling through thick clouds, rain, lightning. Nothing slows my fall, which lasts for hours.

On the weathered upright piano, ivory is missing on middle C and on F an octave above. My sister practices a short piece. Over and over, I hear the piece until I am humming it as I roll marbles, with names like "Reddy" and "Yellow Eye" on the coffee table in the next room. I leave my marble friends and go to

watch her hands on the keys, exactly which keys she touches and when. I push her gently off the piano bench and begin to play each note precisely, not fumbling. Stop, she says. That's not fair.

My sister's costume for her tap dance recital awes me, each sequin held by a thread my mother has sewn through its center and into the shiny material, bright red net and satin. I am honored to wear it when I am ten, but I loved the sequins more when I was eight. Do sequins tarnish?

I am sixteen, in bell-bottomed jeans and a black woolen sweater that belonged to my father while he was in the Navy during World War II. My grandmother pulls figs from the branches of a tree in her backyard, the fruit's ripeness offering up a cake-sweet fragrance each time she opens the burlap bag. I have never seen her shop for anything except groceries, yet she has countless soft, graceful-skirted dresses and flowing jackets. She is pretty today. I am content to be with her on this afternoon, a window of lucidity briefly open after days of unrelenting dementia. We'll wash them, put cream and sugar on them, she instructs. They are so good that way.

In less than two weeks, she is gone. I hold one of her dresses to my cheek, then fold it carefully and place it in a drawer with my pajamas and other soft things. That night as I fall asleep, I am visited by my dead father, a sick man even in death, oxygen tubes in his nostrils. I am disappointed in the afterlife.

I visit my sister who is fragile, unsteady, confused, at her nursing home that can be mistaken for a prison facility. She holds my hand. I kiss her forehead in preparation for leaving, but she will not release my hand. We make our way down the bright yellow linoleum in the hallway. We reach the outside door, but she is still anxious about releasing my hand, a tiny shake starting within her and moving into my body. I ask her to go with me. I see she does not know me. She drops her hand from mine.

A furious, cold voice. Expressionless green eyes, without years, gazing at me with equal fury. Every day, I make lists so I will not forget. In my dresser there is a string of pearls in a gray box lined with velvet. When I wear my pearls, I am safe; they are better than a St. Christopher's medal, better than a cross. Please make sure I am buried wearing them, I say to no one.

A solid knot of tissue swims through my blood, a pearl ever so slightly too big. My brain darkens and overflows. The taste of honeysuckle fills my mouth. Over my shoulder, a shadow disappears into a heavy theatre curtain. I know the reviews will not be positive. Not enough humor, the critics will say. Death is the biggest joke.

I hear a cough and see the fire of a lit match touch a cigarette in the darkness. Suddenly, I am calm. My father has found me. The memories stop. The regret stops. I hear, as if through a tightly shut door, the notes of a hymn soaring from a trumpet accompanied by a pipe organ.

Another soul has joined us here in the dirt. It is a baby, but we are not saddened.

She laughs.

A Gent, A Muse, A Wait: An Inexact Pantoum

by Christopher Stolle

stark symmetry for crimson slivers
bonded and bounded by bruised tongues:
threshold broken; each body quivers—
words unspoken caught inside lungs.

bonded and bounded by bruised tongues;
timid whispers drowned by dull screams—
words unspoken caught inside lungs:
ransomed omens for busted schemes.

timid whispers drowned by dull screams—
flushed from carnal cores and burrows;
fulfilled omens sacrificed for busted schemes—
toes curl and reflex; passion bends and furrows.

flushed from carnal cores and burrows—
simple movements turn into flustered motions.
toes curl and reflex; passion bends and furrows:
tender skin within skin—unquenched notions.

listen for each pulse to burn and resonate;
stark symmetry for crimson slivers
that crash, flutter, soar, sizzle, then detonate—
threshold broken; each body quivers.

Vigil

for significant others

by Ken Thomas

Hypervigilance, the assumption of heightened threat, is Max's world, our world now. I've triple-knotted the white canvas flaps open and don't care about the sunshine melting the ice in the tea or making my freckles multiply. Aunt Martha hovers like she wants to help out, but the heat keeps her fond of waiting tables. I'm fine if I can keep sweat out of my eyes—hence the bandana, the likes of which I rarely wear. This afternoon's exception is white with a mandala pattern printed so finely you can barely see it. The smells of hickory smoke, gelled pork fat, old potato salad, beer, and damp cigarette ash waft from the garbage cans outside the party tent door. Nearby is the folding table where I watch and work. We've almost had a whole family function without incident. Max has the handmade ice cream covered. Everything is fine.

Hours before the young cousins would get up the courage to ask for some of Uncle M's ice cream, I had corralled the three of them onto my back porch, where I found my brothers had taken it upon themselves to tap the beer kegs and make of their service an occasion to grumble at me because there would be no whiskey. I sent the pair for more ice. Then I faced my sister's kid and his two cousins from his father's side and said to them, "None of that like last time, guys. No fireworks, and we don't ask Uncle M about Afghanistan. Mess up, and I'll lock your phones in my hot car."

Big eyed and awed, they had nodded.

Max, his black golf shirt exactly the right amount of tight to show the man under it, digs his spatula into a half gallon of homemade, and with his tongue playing at his lower lip, finesses the curl of pale vanilla bean into a maple sugar waffle cone. Past belching and dwindling conversations at tables side-walling the party tent, between the squeaking joints of old folding chairs, I can barely make out what one of the cousins is saying. Our talk on the porch forgotten, they pry open my man's hell, unsure what else there is to say when someone like Max hands them ice cream.

"Uncle M, did you ever kill anybody?" says a mouth I can't see nor his comrades' staring whole blue and hazel eyes waiting for what's next.

Max's face pans white. He can't decide whether to scare the preadolescent boys witless or retreat to our basement in case firecrackers are next.

I have an instant headache from Gucci by Gucci, the almost drugstore scent my older sister, Mandy, wears. Mandy is called mother by the chief of cretins prodding my man. Her timing ever-impeccable, she lurks at the edge of my peripheral vision, far enough away that neither of us can whisper our contempt. Her attention bounces from watching her child to watching me.

I am bent, a yellow apron over new skinny jeans and a comfortable, beige tee with capped sleeves, cutting lemon wedges for the tea. It's hideous but the bandana does its job. As soon as I finish the tea, I'll need a case of Cokes, and Max will need a touch. I'm braced, focused because it's always the same with Mandy, and if I ignore her for long enough, she will eventually wander off in search of better sport. I'm okay.

Max's face is a mask as his lips form the words, *I handed out candy, all kinds of it*, and I'm filling blue solo cups with unsweetened tea, feeling almost serene. Disaster averted, I breathe. Aunt Martha wants to know where the Splenda is. Everything is fine.

Mandy shifts her weight from one hip to the other, and I see her blouse is polyester, done with a watermark print, resembling bluish cellophane seaweed. The palm of her hand makes a socket where rests her opposite elbow. Her red solo cup is held over the rim and hovers half full, wrist bent under her chin.

"I still don't see a ring," she says. She draws on her beer.

When I look up again, it's as if Mandy doesn't exist. Everything is still okay; Max sits at the back of the tent at the picnic table made with his own hands before he last deployed, deftly manning the ice cream operation. The towheaded cousins, gnawing their cones, saunter away from Max's window to the world, bored. Finished with his latest customers, Max leans forward, broad chest to the table's bull-nosed edge. With all the soda cases and the two coolers holding the homemade in half-gallon aluminum pails, there is the right amount of space for one to sit at that table, one plus his demons. Everything is fine.

Mandy, her presence still fouling my air, for some reason remains within earshot and out of arm's reach. I think about answering her shitty comment with something loud and clever because we've had our real talks, but for two reasons, I don't. The first reason is a matter of principle that you never follow a pig into the mud. The second thing is a man I have never seen before has Max boxed into his ice cream station, harassing him.

Whoever it is must have spent the better part of the afternoon at the kegs. His jeans are two days worn and his light blue Oxford is only tucked in front. One sleeve is rolled to the elbow and the other is a broadcloth pennant down his arm, its cuff to half the palm of the hand holding his red cup. Sawdust drinks the beer foam slopping. A cigarette burns between the fingers at the end of his naked arm. The man wants Max's attention.

Max leans past him looking to the end of the tent where I've let inside the brilliant May afternoon, where the family mills in and out with their draft beer, their iced tea and paper plates picnic-piled in mini pecan pies, marshmallow fruit salad, apple fritters a-la-mode. He tries waving the drunk off. The man leans left then right, determined to block Max's view and keeps saying he just has one question. He reminds me of a child teasing a caged tiger. Now he's laughing.

Max stands. He is taller and broader than his tormentor, could snap in two this twig fool. His face is cold stone on the man before his eye finds mine and he plants a foot on the table's bench seat, and for Christ's almighty fucking sake he is wearing his desert tans. My sister sounds farther away than she is. "He's not the same anymore," she says. "Max, I mean."

I dry my hands, buzzing with adrenaline. I'm fine. I can see everything; I'm fine. I'll intervene.

My sister, now right next to me, is piqued and tuts.

"Is he family?" I ask her.

She asks me which one I mean.

Max is pulling me off my sister, who is on the ground. I'm shaking all over. Her face has bloomed in the middle and coughs sawdust, and I'm shocked at how well the handful of her kinked bright copper hair locked in my tight white fist went with her cellophane print until seconds ago. Aunt Martha has my bandana, dabbing Mandy's nose blood away before it can drip into my eye. Everything is fine.

Market Street

by Elton Kelley

Fog is rolling in. Coming over the hills from the Pacific, gluing itself to the base of Coit Tower perched high atop a misty blanket. The tower's brilliant beam of light pierces deep into the night's cloudy sky, waiting in vain to be a flashlight to the heavens.

Dew condenses on the streetlamp above, its wetness dripping on my fedora as I wait on the corner of Market Street for the number 29 bus to take me home. Across the street, a McDonald's does a slow churn of business, its foot traffic likely down due to the seasonal fog and cool temperatures.

Peering down the street, looking for my ride and not seeing it, I decide I'm willing to forego the ride for the moment. There will be another if need be. Hopping between parked cars into the street almost devoid of traffic, I jaywalk diagonally across Market for a cup of hot joe to warm my soul.

On my return trip, I see him lying there on winter's cold, damp concrete somewhat fetal, his back against the brick and mortar of Virgin Records' five stories of music and video discs. Is he sleeping or passed out, or maybe even dead? I wonder if he has a bed, a dog, or a family who cares for him—or maybe wants to but he doesn't allow.

Scalding coffee steams a trail of vapors from the paper cup in my gloved hand. I pause momentarily, gazing down at his silhouetted figure. A hypodermic needle hangs stuck in his arm, a tourniquet snapped loose still dangles from above his elbow. He doesn't move. Tiny whiffs of moist vapor barely escape his gaping, toothless beard. I gather he's breathing, however shallow, but at least alive.

A filthy, crumpled paper protrudes from his pants pocket. Maybe it will tell something about him. I fetch the note and carefully unfurl the soiled message. A New York phone number with "sis" scribbled above. Thinking maybe she could offer some advice, I dial the number. A pre-recorded message tells me the number is disconnected and no longer in service. "Try again," I tell myself and desperately do. Repeatedly. And still again. All to no avail.

"Hey mister," I speak, not giving up and getting no response. My Oxford nudges his foot. I'm not gonna touch him, I think. God only knows what kind of disease or bugs he might be full of. Breath-snatching whiffs of urine and feces slap my nose. Holding my kerchief over my nostril, I yell this time, "Hey mister! You okay?" Still no movement. No answer.

Like a right and proper city boy, I turn without concern, making my way back to my bus stop. Alone, standing there, I can still vaguely see his shadowed form in the darkness. A certain deathlike something emanates from his corpse-ish body. Reaching hesitantly to the inside pocket of my overcoat once more and finding my cell, I dial 911 to report what seems should be a medical emergency. Maybe it's not. I should let things be, just go on my way. It's not my concern. I did try to help after all, I convince myself.

Without waiting, sirens wail through the fogginess. First responders, the FDSF and SFPD, then the bone box all make their way from unknown points, surrounding to converge on the hapless soul. People who are paid to give a shit for those who won't. Pity, my conscience says. I take a sip of my temperate java, its savory vapors roil about my lips.

I board my bus, paying \$2 to ride a mile and three quarters up the hill to Safeway at Noe.

The Hummingbird

by Samuel E. Matteson

I still hear the sound echoing through the valley. The moan of the diesel-electric locomotive's horn reverberates its melancholy diatonic harmony, Doppler shifting slowly a quarter tone as the train rumbles past me, even three miles and half a century away from where I sit drinking coffee on the deck on a Saturday morning. I came here to the brow of Lookout Mountain, Alabama, for the view and the quiet and also got in the bargain a memory that I had misplaced. I stood again by the rails at Ft. Payne yesterday and realized, I have been here before. I roared by here in the dark nearly two score and ten years ago.

Back in Texas, my adopted home, returned from my Alabama vacation, I sit at the red zebra-striped cross bar and listen to the clang of the alarm bell shouting, "Make way! Make way! Here comes the BNSF; (it used to be he shouted for the GM&O, or the Santa Fe, or the Southern Pacific); he is high-balling with a hundred car load! He is master of this road. Make way!" The freight wagons blur past me, flexing the steel ribbons in cut time: "tick-tick-a-tick-tick . . . hold your breath . . . tick-tick-a-tick-tick . . . wait again . . . tick-tick-a-tick-tick." The dual trucks of the heavy cars come on in eye-aching sweeps that will make you sick to follow them too long with your gaze. You lose count. Here they come anyway, down the track with four axles, eight wheels, drumming the iron joints as they pass until the last car—it used to be a caboose but no more—trucks over the road with a sudden final ellipsis: tick-tick-a . . ." as if to say, "to be continued . . ."

It shocks me to see the rails flex so and the railroad slag-gray bed give way so under the weight; they are not as unbending and permanent as I thought before. They had only seemed so when I stood on them as a child. I used to walk with a lad's feet—high-wire style with my arms extended, North and South—along the vacated tracks, shiny in the Gulf Coast sun and polished by the touch of rolling stock. The rails felt cold to my toes even on a summer day.

The Gulf, Mobile and Ohio—the GM&O—rails tracked barely two hundred yards from my bedroom window in Birdville in Mobile, Alabama, where I lay dreaming when I was seven. The rails were always shiny on top even if they had turned iron-rust brown and oil black beneath. The rails were polished like silver plate but were pounded harder by hourly locomotive engines and endless rolling stock that ran from the docks of Mobile Bay or that rumbled from the paper mills of Pritchard or that chugged from the depot at Brookley Field. Roaring eastward they came with pulp logs from the hills of Mississippi or with cattle from Texas or produce from distant California. Flying westward, they could be destined for New Orleans or farther west. The timbre of the horn bending its note as the locomotive blared past my neighborhood was just as much a part of the ambiance of the projects as the chirruping of the gray-brown English sparrows that sat on the chain-link fence and exploded at the rush of air from the speeding engine. So common was the night passage that if it were late, something inside of you was uneasy.

There was a fence, of course, a vain attempt to keep children and stray animals from the danger of the tracks. It was as ineffective as Mother's dire and irrational warning: "If y'all get hit by a train, Ah'll skin you alive." We inevitably found a hole where the barrier had parted and we slipped through. Breathlessly we

caressed the glistening rails; they felt cool to the touch. We put our ear to the steel to listen for the far off music but heard nothing. We strode with giant steps from tie to tie without even saying “Mother, May I?” Once we left a pebble on the rail to see what great weight and speed would do to it, whether it would crush it or send it flying. We wished for a penny that we hoped the great engine would squash flat. We never saw a flattened Lincoln, and we never found the stone after the train arrived. Nor did we stay long on the tracks. The danger made our hearts race and our heads dizzy. Too much adventure will drain your strength, you know. Soon we clambered again across the shallow ditch and back through the slit in the fence, weary but proud of our bravado. Then minutes later, we stared in wonder while we hung with our tender and dirty fingers locked into the chain link as the GM&O Hummingbird flew past us. We laughed and cried simultaneously in the blast of her passage. We looked down the tracks to where the rails came together in an arrow that pointed over the horizon to unseen wonders beyond. We tried without success to learn the Native American art of capnomancy, but we were powerless to predict or see the future from the smoke that billowed upward or drifted our way after the giant zoomed by. We could see neither what lay ahead for us nor for the beauty that was the Hummingbird.

The Hummingbird! She was a marvel of sleek aluminum aerodynamics, the epitome of modern, twentieth-century transportation. This was the future of rail passenger service, we were sure, even without the benefit of prophesy; she was a shining arrow that, even when poised at the platform, seemed only momentarily arrested from her trajectory, like a glimpse of a bird in flight, like a hummingbird hovering an instant at an azalea bloom before she zips almost invisibly to another stop. I imagined that the gleaming apparition did not actually roll on mundane wheels as other terrestrial conveyances did. I was sure it flew inches above the banal earth in clouds of diesel exhaust as we had seen our fathers’ *Popular Mechanics* describe the future in colorful halftone images. She glided effortlessly to infinite destinations. She went there, and the Hummingbird, I knew, could take you there and in grand style, if you but had a ticket.

Trains are deliberate even when they idle. The rails always lead to some end, some destination chosen with serious intent. Yet there is a romance of the iron road that inexplicably persists in Lionel models of HO gauge and narrow and standard gauge refurbished antique full-size trains. The romance persists despite the twenty-first century expediency of air travel and the ubiquity of Eisenhower’s innovation, the interstate highway system. Maybe it is because in the air the earth is superfluous and the landscape distant. On the train you are in the landscape and part of the place where you are at that moment. The airplane is a cold isolation. Not so the train. On the other hand, in an automobile you experience the underside of democracy, the dog-eat-dog of internal-combustion-engine-driven competition. Gone is the gentility and deference of the train. I dreamed of riding the train every time I saw her blaze down the rails beyond the fence. Once only as a child, did I travel by rail to a distant station. It was a magical, memorable, and disturbing adventure.

In the summer of 1955, my family relocated temporarily to New Jersey to permit my father to train in advanced aircraft maintenance at the Wright-Patterson aircraft company in Brunswick. I, at last, had a ticket to ride the shining dream. I was so caught up in the excitement that I barely noticed how we came to the station at the foot of Government Street, near Bankhead Tunnel. The station was cavernous. The loudspeaker

crackled as some disembodied voice boomed through the marble station, “Train 36 departing track three for . . .” then followed a reverberating interminable slur of city names that was indecipherable to my ear, followed by “Aaaaaaaall-ah-bort!” chanted in a long glissando, first down and then up the scale, ending in a sharp staccato high note. I worried we would not be on the right train because we could not understand the man. But I need not worry, Dad had everything in hand.

I heard Mother say, “Lew, we could use a Red Cap.” He nodded, then waved to a black man near the door that led to the platform; I saw that he was wearing a blue gabardine jacket and a red cap with a shield above its bill.

“These bags, sir? Which train?”

Dad nodded toward the ground where our luggage sat and showed him the tickets. The Red Cap piled the bags onto a two-wheeled cart, charged off out the door, and after turning left, strode down the platform with the hand truck, passing beneath the windows of an idling train. We formed a small procession worthy of Mardi Gras: Red Cap with Dad limping his polio-canter behind, Mother with Cindy and Dale in tow and I tagging after, my head swiveling left and right to see it all as we exited the doors and rushed down the paved walkway beside the track. We passed up several brilliantly polished aerodynamic cars until we came to one labeled COACH. Dad showed our tickets to a man who wore a stiff black hat that looked like a short piece of stove pipe. On the front of the pipe a shiny oval was imprinted: CONDUCTOR. He stood beside a small stool at the bottom of a set of stairs that he invited us to ascend with a wave of his hand and a cheerful, “Welcome aboard. Watch your step, please.”

I was so excited that I felt a painful urgency when we boarded and would have asked to visit the lavatory had I not seen a sign on the door as we passed: TOILET. PLEASE DO NOT USE WHILE TRAIN IS IN THE STATION. Later, I would understand better the policy as I flushed the toilet and saw through the opening the rail bed beneath the car roaring by under me. I remembered how I had walked the rails in a place very much like that which we were passing, and I resolved not to think too much more about the sanitary systems of railroad cars.

Earlier, as I had entered the car, I was delighted to find that the train exceeded my expectations. The seats were wide and long, at least for my small frame, and they reclined, which provoked Mother to a reprimand, “Sammy! Please leave the chair alone.”

“Yes’m,” I dutifully replied but ached to exercise the reclining mechanism once more. I watched the car porter move purposefully up and down the car, assisting passengers in securing bags in the overhead racks. I admired the smiling black men in their crisp uniforms and smart caps. And I envied them a little. They get to ride the train every day and without a ticket, I thought. At seven I did not understand the nature of work, nor did the importance of station in society occur to me.

Soon, the conductor shouted, “All-aboard!” And I saw him wave his arm dramatically as he stepped up into the companion way between the cars and disappear. I faintly perceived more than heard the rumble of the diesel rev up like a weight lifter inhaling noisily before a great exertion, then began a seconds’ long chain of squeaks and thumps as the extended train tightened itself like a giant muscle, each car pulling on the coupling of the one that followed until our turn arrived and our coach lurched forward. The acceleration

pushed my head back into my seat, pressing my burr-cut hair against the starched white headrest cover. In that moment I felt the power of the engine transmitted to and through our car and into me; I sensed the inexorable impetus of her majesty, the Hummingbird, flowing into the train. We were on our way.

The city flowed past my window. Between the buildings and across the seven tracks, I stole glimpses of the tidal flats north of the causeway. But soon I lost sight of the water as the track left the banks and turned inland. The tracks that went west and east fell away one by one until a single pair of rails slashed through the wispy pines. The land rose in orange and pale yellow hills and we climbed through the countryside away from the Gulf. I saw the barber-pole arm of the barrier go down across a county road and heard the clanging warning bell ring once before the scene flashed across my window and once again as my eyes met the eyes of a child in the seat of a green Ford pickup truck waiting on the road. Then he receded rearward out of sight. It was too fast for me to wave, but not too quickly for me to read the admiration and wonder in his face at the sight of the mighty beast that carried me into the twilight. His look held a feeling I knew well. It was the same urgent longing Tom Sawyer felt as described by his creator, “There comes a time in every rightly constructed boy’s life when he has a raging desire to go somewhere and dig for hidden treasure.” I was going somewhere, but I felt that I had already found hidden treasure. I was the traveler. I was the king or at least her majesty’s consort. “Make way! Make way for His Majesty, King Sammy!” my imagination shouted silently.

I looked out the window, my nose pressed firmly against the glass. Fields appeared under the reddening sky—rows of cotton and corn and tobacco, all summer green growing darker in the dimming light. I marveled at the wonder of how objects in the distance crept slowly across the window while those that were close to the right-of-way flashed into view and then into the past in an instant. I noted it well but was powerless to explain the fact. Ultimately, I grew to accept it was so, but I never ceased to be astonished at the prodigy of perspective.

We had embarked after an early supper in our kitchen at home, but Mother magically produced a snack of sandwiches: peanut butter and Bama grape jelly with a banana for dessert. I kept glancing to the window as the light outside failed. The lights in the farm houses were coming on. If you were lucky, you would look and, at the very instant that you passed, you would see the light wink bright yellow. Somehow it made you feel closer to the families who lived there, as if they were your neighbors. I entertained myself making up stories about the lives of the boys who lived there where the lights came on. I hoped that they were happy, but I did not know. I hoped that someday they too would be as lucky as me and take a trip on a train. Night came down in all seriousness, and the glare of the light within the coach obliterated the stars. There was no moon that I could see. If there had been, it would have run with us and arched overhead while we sped through the night. I only saw an apparition of myself when I stared at the window. I looked like a ghost, all blurry and semi-transparent. I was dozing by the time the swaying train slowed for Birmingham. All was blackness but for the steel mills that threw up a red Vulcan glow into the inky sky. Sleep, uncomfortable sleep, but sleep nonetheless, overcame me and my eyelids came down like the roll blinds in my bedroom at home.

In the night, the dark night two hours before dawn, the tireless engine dragged the sleeping cars through Wills Valley far north of Birmingham between the grand corrugations of Sand and Lookout Mountains, the

beginning or end—depending on your destination—of the Appalachians. But the sight was lost on me. The looming rocks were invisible in the darkness as were the people and their history of struggle. We slowed for Chattanooga only long enough for me to wipe sleep from my eyes and readjust the position of my pillow-arm, missing my chance at laughing that we were now the Chattanooga Choo-choo. We were well into Tennessee when the sun began to wake me.

I awoke stiff and sore. I smelled the scent of stale sweat. I tasted the earthiness of old peanuts. I looked about me in the dim gray light of the young morning. My sister and brother still lay half slumped in their chairs, still curled in the seat bottom. Dad was snoring but Mother looked across the space between us and smiled. She mouthed, “Good morning, Sammy,” then put her finger to her lips to remind me to be quiet. She seemed foreshortened, smaller than I remembered her, her form shrunk by the way she regarded me from her reclining position with her head lifted to look down the length of her body over her feet. I turned from her to look out the window and drew in my breath. The sight almost made me forget the discomfort of the night. Our train coursed through the clouds, tracing the ridges and leaping across deep valleys on breath-snatching trestles.

I have constructed in my mind many visions of the arrival in heaven of a soul, but the sight that I beheld through that window rivals my best imaginings. The ancient Appalachians below were just beginning to emerge from the uncertainty and obscurity of the fog. The clouds hung low in the coves, painted by the receding night a pale blue, like smoke. The knobs stood out like islands in a milky sea, and the misty tops of the clouds far below rippled with undulations as if flowing from a gigantic canyon waterfall. “These must be the Smokies,” I said to myself. Years later I learned of my childhood misidentification of the Cumberland Plateau, but the sight nevertheless seemed a fitting reward for the discomfort of the night, and it made me smile even as I sat quietly and said nothing more.

If the ride had terminated there, I would have been a rich young man, but not a wise one. It continued on, with mile after mile of green and tan lines that blurred across the window. The vibration and swaying of the floor never stopped, as if the life of the world were throbbing below my feet. An hour in the life of a child is a significant fraction of his attention and a day seems an unending sentence. My sister and brother and I grew annoyed at the purgatory of sitting to which we were consigned, and we became cross. The monotonous beauty of the rural countryside lost its allure, and we quarreled over imagined affronts and provocative looks until Mother pleaded with Dad to do something.

“Let’s go to the dining car for some breakfast,” he suggested.

“Can we, Daddy?” we enthusiastically exclaimed.

I saw Dad inquire of the porter, who motioned toward the rear of the train with his finger. We five proceeded toward the rear, walking carefully through the compartment until we came to the door. Dad opened it to reveal an exhilarating spectacle that made my siblings cling tighter to his hands. The companionway that connected the car to the one it towed rattled and shook and flexed under foot. Stairs like those we ascended when boarded the evening before went down on either side, but scissor gates barred the way to the whirring landscape beyond. I looked down to a textured aluminum bridge that led from one car to the next, and I

quickly stepped over the oscillating joint. It felt like a small act of bravery. I reached up and held out my hand to Mother, who smiled nervously but accepted my offer without comment. We repeated the bravura circus performance four more times before arriving at the dining car.

We sat at a table covered with a linen cloth, Dale on Dad's lap. Another man, as dark skinned as any I had ever seen but with teeth as white as his coat, smiled and took our order. "Wheaties with milk for the children. Coffee and toast for the Missus and me."

"Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes, that will do it. Thanks."

"Very well," he replied and departed.

In a few minutes he returned bearing a large tray balanced on his shoulder. He distributed the bowls of flaked cereal and cups of steaming coffee. He turned to me and said, "Milk, sir?"

I did not mean to ignore him, only I had never had a grown man call me sir before. Mother answered for me. "Yes, thank you, he would like milk now."

It always embarrassed me for her to answer for me, but I said nothing but "Uh . . . thanks." Out the window the land flew by without hesitation, and the scene gradually changed.

The rest of the day we passed playing I Spy and Tick-Tac-Toe and collecting letters to complete the alphabet from signs we saw on the right of way. We were passing through cities now. The gaps between the towns and cities grew smaller and smaller until the countryside was lost in a continuous strip of habitation along the route. We penetrated a city of square buildings constructed of painted brick. Rusty fire escapes zigzagged down their sides. I glimpsed a boy about my age playing on one of the metal ladders fifty yards from the track, a story up. He shocked me. The incongruity of his play disturbed me: his skin was pale but spangled with constellations of golden freckles; over his carrot-red hair he had pressed down a toy crimson Indian war bonnet to just above his eyes; in his hands he clutched a short toy bow and suction-cup tipped arrow that he aimed at an unseen playmate below; and from his lips hung a lighted cigarette that he puffed and sent up small clouds like smoke signals. I stared at him as we passed. He ignored me until he flung the cigarette butt toward the train with a jaded glare. The butt tumbled end over end through the air, writing a graceful parabolic curlicue in the empty space between us. I longed for the countryside again. I longed for something that I could not articulate nor really understand. The power of his image has stayed with me for decades; even as the rest of the trip passed over the horizon without tracing a memory.

The dual image of the great smoking mountains and the petty smoking child Indian chief supplanted over time all the other memories of that first awe-inspiring trip. The details intermingle, blurring like all the scenes that flashed past the window, melding into one electric amalgam of marvelous travel. Once I flew on rails—privileged, purposeful, and fast; that is all I really recall with clarity. It is enough. Enough to fill my heart with emotion again at the barricade when the freight train lumbers past the clanging bell at the crossing or when I pause at the store window to see the model train zip around its oval track.

As I look on, I mourn the demise of widespread rail passenger service in the United States, not so much for any personal inconvenience I experience from the empty schedule, but rather for the illogical reason of

the passing of one more tangible monument to my own childhood. Yet, though the GM&O is gone, subsumed in a merger years ago, and the Hummingbird has vanished, as well, I persist—as do my memories, and that must suffice.

Trains seem a natural enough conveyance, not as favored or economical these days as before. But there is something beyond Nature that still stirs in me when the engineer drags the whistle lanyard and the horns call out to me to join them on their eternal journey. It still beckons me to destinations unknown, and it fills me once again with memories of a raging desire I once knew.

Afterlife

by Katie Hamblen

Some vacate their shells suddenly while others
fade by fractions. I'm not certain which is easier
yet, but I observed my grandmothers
take these opposite ways into
whatever's next.

My conclusion: going
gradually might be better for a
slow learner like me.

To be jolted into the afterlife
following brief illness or accident seems
too abrupt. My consciousness
wouldn't upload correctly. I need time
to adjust to the idea of transition.

As my last act of control, I want to go
into god by inches. The grandmother who left slow—
I saw her do this. Little bits at a time
she shed flesh and mind. Slipping off
small portions as she
became the light.

Hide the Baby

by Vickie Harden

I had a dream about you, my mother four lives ago.
I was a bird perched on a limb above you, humming and watching you silently wail.
Blood dripping, your body beating the drum of pain. But you stood upright.
Expelling the remains as you nuzzled life, breathing warmth onto her face.

I was perched on the branch of the tree. The earth beneath me mixing mud and blood,
Taking in the nourishment from your DNA. Pushing it through its roots and veins.
Traveling to the branch as I sat there, watching you

Tearing a piece of fabric from your dress— No, not the bottom marred up in mud and horse mess.
Swaddling hope, still smelling of inside you; and what you fear is a reminder that your kind will live on.
Even the tree knows you better than I do. Even the earth feels you more than I can.
My humming stops. Your eyes search for them, watching for hooves stumbling through the brush.

You walk barefoot, stabbing cold on sharp stones stinging every step.
A rescinding and expanding, letting go of afterbirth tangled in fear.
Opening the hole of hopelessness just enough to see the mountains ahead
Reminding you of the wild trails and worn paths you were forced to leave behind.

Their limp fortitude scaffold on horseback with those pale, skinny arms of justice,
Tipping the scale with their guns pointed at you, the one who birthed and walked with strength
In staying, in being beyond their attempts to keep a thumb just tight enough to suffocate your freedom.

Hide the baby; whispers came from the wind.
Hide the baby beneath your breast and let her nest in your warmth.
I flew away knowing the trail had no end.

Blusin: A Story Within a Story in One Act

by John Purugganan

Lights up

(It's half past noon at Shady Grove Retirement Home. Longtime resident Michael Flanagan turns and invites us into his room.)

FLANAGAN

Come on in. Michael Flanagan, pleased to meet you. Go on and have a seat. You're welcome. Though I gotta say, I don't know what in blue heaven you kids is thinking, showing up here year after year. Just when I think I've finally seen the last of you, I got another group of snot-noses a-crowding my room. Don't you know this here shithole's a convalescent home? By God, you college brats are an embarrassment to idiots. Promise me you will not multiply except in mathematics. You geniuses know what that smell is? Old folks, lots of 'em, creating that aromatic bouquet of excrement and ammonified diaper. You telling me you ain't got no place better to go? . . . Yes yes, I know I know, ya wanna hear the story, but me telling it won't make it any more true. A true story's the truth no matter who's telling it, and I know you've already heard it from whoever the heck sent you here.

What's that you say? . . . Ah hogwash. Don't need me to make it more true—just want me to make it real. That's the same dang difference. You're the reason they won't let donkeys go to school—nobody likes a smartass, son. But all right, I'm gonna tell it once more and that's it. I mean it this time—you tell your friends. Tell 'em the old bastard's done told the story for the last time. You hear me? Then don't forget it.

Okay, the year was 1957. I was a senior in high school, in a too-small-for-a-stoplight town known as Kenai, Alaska. It was midmorning in Miss Larson's art class. She was different from other teachers, Miss Larson, and not just because she was prettier than the first day of spring—long golden curls, green eyes big as the moon. No, Miss Larson had a way of giving you her un-dee-vided attention, like what you had to say was the one thing she'd been waiting her whole life just to hear. And she was full of surprises, but never nothing like on that day. No sir, not even close. With ten minutes left in class, in walked ole Tommy Prichard. He was a sophomore. Kid had the world by the balls and didn't even know it, girls pining after him left and right. But there was something sad about him. Could never put my finger on it, but it was there, even in his smile, like a secret sorrow or something.

Now ole Tommy showing up at the end of class like that didn't mean he was late, not exactly. See, he hadn't set foot in that classroom since the beginning of the semester. And here he was, moseyin' on in like he hadn't missed a day. He goes straight to where his easel stood and sits down on the stool. This was in the

row in front of me, just to the left, which is significant because it gave me a full view of what was about to happen. Tommy reached over and took out his pencil drawing of a Greek fisherman, still right there in the table stand drawer where he left it. Picture looked just like the photograph on the *National Geographic* cover he got it from—old guy a-wearing a traditional navy blue Greek cap with the fancy embroidered band. Tommy'd even captured the kindness in the tired eyes on that weather-worn face with the salt-and-pepper stubble, and he'd done did it all in one sitting.

So I'm a-sitting there looking at Tommy sitting there looking at his drawing, and Elizabeth Baker saunters over from the utility sink, drying a tiny detail brush on an old rag. Beth was a homely sort—at a glance. She wore functional handmade dresses that didn't hide her blossoming femininity, and her incredibly light brown hair was always neatly tied in an expertly woven French braid. Folks never paid her much attention, but I had a keen eye and could see she was a dream gal just a-waiting to happen. Beth's easel was right there beside Tommy's, just the table stand between 'em, and in a single breath and a-simmering with an excitement that had nothing to do with Tommy, she goes, "Hiya Tommy, I'm almost finished!" She didn't waste a second on him and touched the tip of the tiny brush to the creamsicle orange on her palette, and as she moved in to highlight the sunrise on the horizon of a velvety green meadow, I could see ole Tommy's face get slapped with a smack of surprise at how advanced Beth's painting was.

You see, when the two'd sat side by side at the beginning of the semester, it was obvious by the drawing of what Beth *said* was a dog, that unlike Tommy, ole Beth did not possess any God-given talent—or so it seemed. This beautiful meadow she'd created, where you could almost feel the gentle breeze a-blowing soft breaths through the slow-swaying magenta wildflowers, it left ole Tommy dumbfounded as a boy could be. His slack-jaw was still stuck open when Mrs. Larson came up on him and goes, "Pretty impressive, huh?"

"Yes, ma'am," Tommy agreed.

Miss Larson placed a lovely hand on Tommy's shoulder and told him about dedication and hard work paying off. She started to tell him something else, but I saw her hesitate, then change her mind, and then she gathered Tommy's mane off his neck and thoughtfully ran it hand-under-hand over her palms. She told him it hadn't escaped her notice that he hadn't been to class in months. Tommy muttered, "Oh, um, I um uh . . ."

Miss Larson goes, "It's all right, Tommy. I know exactly where you've been when you're supposed to be in here. Right across the hall, she told him, in the gym shooting basketball." Said she checked on him every day, just to make sure he was all right.

"Oh," was all Tommy managed to say. "Yes."

“Oh,” Miss Larson softly agreed. Then she goes, “I’ve been waiting for this day, waiting for you to come in so I could tell you I didn’t drop you from the class roster, and that I’m not going to fail you, but there is a condition.”

Tommy goes, “What?”

Miss Larson lifted his chin with her fingertips and made him look into her eyes and she goes, “That you remember this: people are not special, Tommy. People are just people, and all of us, every single one of us is important. Now talent, talent is special, it’s a gift,” she told him. “But having a gift doesn’t make you any more special than anyone else, because you didn’t do anything to earn it; you were born with it.”

Tommy goes, “Oh.”

And Miss Larson goes, “And do you wanna know what, if you waste your gift?”

Tommy goes, “What?”

Miss Larson goes, “Shame on you, Tommy Prichard,” like her heart was breaking. “Just shame on anyone who would waste their gift.” Then she goes, “Do you understand, Tommy?” Tommy guessed he did. Then Miss Larson turned on that smile that could cure cancer and tapped Tommy’s nose with her finger and goes, “Good.” And then she asked him to please excuse her and Beth. And then she turns to Beth and goes, “Beth honey, are you ready?”

Ole Beth was about to burst and squealed so high I thought my glasses might crack. While Miss Larson was talking to Tommy, Beth’d taken her painting down off the easel and had it propped up on a milk crate, leaning against the table stand. Miss Larson took hold of Beth’s hand and together they stepped right *inside* Beth’s painting. I mean literally. They stepped *into* the painting. One moment they was both standing there in the classroom and in the next instant they was standing in that lush green meadow. On another plane, in another world. I couldn’t believe what my eyes was seeing as Miss Larson’s golden curls was a-flowing in the breeze.

Ole Tommy didn’t seem the least bit surprised. All he did was cry out, “Wait! I wanna go too!” But Miss Larson and Beth just kept a-walking. Tommy looked at me and I looked at him, and then I looked around the classroom and didn’t see a single face a-looking back, like nobody’d noticed a dang thing. And then Tommy tried to climb inside the painting himself and found he couldn’t. “Wait!” he hollered even louder. “Lemme go with you!”

Miss Larson turns and goes, “You will never be able to feel the magic unless you dare to open your heart, Tommy.” And with that she turned away and did not look back.

“Wait!” Tommy cried again, this time for real, tears and all. “Tell me what that means! I don’t know what that means.” But Miss Larson was a-laughing and a-chasing after Beth, who was off and running through the tall grass, and I looked around again, and sure enough, all that commotion hadn’t turned a single head.

Tommy stood there staring after ’em till Beth and Miss Larson wasn’t nothing in the distance. Tommy didn’t even bother to wipe the tears off his face when he turned and looked right through me and walked out without saying a word.

I just sat there waiting to see what was gonna happen next. Finally, about half an hour later, I could hear ’em both giggling, coming closer, and then they just popped up and stepped out of the painting and back into the classroom. The sight of Beth took my breath away—never knew that was a real thing till it happened to me. But there she was, more beautiful than a storybook princess. Her fair skin was literally glowing, illuminated by no apparent source. Free of the braids, her light brown hair was a glorious cascade, long waves laced with a delicate string of tiny white flowers, the likes of which I ain’t never seen before or since. And her Cupid’s bow lips looked like they’d been glossed with raspberries. Miss Larson too was aglow, she wore a crown of ferns over her golden curls and she was prettier than ever. She gave me a berry-juice smile and a wink and then announced, “All right class, we only have ten minutes left, so let’s start cleaning up.”

Ten minutes? The heck she—sure enough, clock said not a minute had passed since ole Tommy’d entered the classroom. I turned back, and Beth’s braids were back in place, no string of tiny flowers, no band of ferns on Miss Larson’s crown, and they both looked the same as always. I wondered if I’d imagined the whole thing, but then Beth moved her painting back to the easel, and Miss Larson picked up Tommy’s drawing. It was right there on the table stand where he’d left it. Miss Larson put it back inside the drawer.

That’s Tommy’s drawing right there, hanging on the wall. Signed by T. Prichard, 1957. He never came back for it. I found it in the same drawer at the end of the next semester and I kept it all these years. I often wonder whatever happened to ole Tommy. If he ever got a chance to realize what Miss Larson kept trying to tell him. I did, for a brief moment in my life, but when I got the call about the accident, well, a part of me just closed. But at least I had a moment, and I just hope ole Tommy was able to open up—to another person, to his art, to the environment, to a pet, heck, to anything a person can open up to. Because when ya dare to open your heart, your very soul is let free, and suddenly you’re connected with all of humanity, all life, and you’re in a place where anything is possible, anything at all, and it truly is magical. Look-it there, tickle bumps on my arm just speaking the words. There’s power in words, my friends. Be mindful of your words.

What's that you say? . . . Who told you there was a song? . . . Mm-mm-mm. Sneak one drink before noon and now there's a song. You know the name? . . . The title . . . Yeah, that's it. Who wrote it? . . . No, not me. What's that? . . . No, not Joni Mitchell, but good guess. That'll get you one verse and then it's sayonara.

(He clears his throat.) And it was Janis Ian, by the way. Poor girl learned the truth at seventeen. Okay, this one's for Lily.

(He sings:) When the evening's done / I'll tidy up the room / I'll turn the covers down / while gazing at the moon / I'll pray to go quite mad / In living long ago / when she and I were one / so very long ago / Pass the tea and sympathy for the gold ole days are dead / Let's drink a toast to those who most survived the life they've led / It's a long long time till morning / plays tasted on the dawn / I'll not write another line / for my true love is gone. (End singing.) I can still hear one of you rugrats a-breathing. Oh, it's you, smartass. Do you lack the good grace of your friends or are you just too dense to take a hint?

(smartass speaks from where he sits — front row center in the audience.)

SMARTASS

You said you wondered whatever happened to ole Tommy Prichard.

FLANAGAN

I suppose you're gonna catch me up.

SMARTASS

I'm his grandson. My father is Tommy Prichard, junior.

FLANAGAN

You really are a smartass, aren't ya, boy? The genuine article. Wiseass of the first order.

SMARTASS

No, sir. You told the story of Miss Larson and Beth and Tommy to my dad, Tommy junior. You told him he was the spitting image of my grandfather, Tommy Prichard, senior.

FLANAGAN

That boy looked just like him—I thought I was seeing a ghost. Made me think of that day and remember the magic. It's like this, smartass. I stopped believing in anything when they told me my Lily, my fiance'd been killed in a crack-up with a mean old Mack out on I-Five. Then damn near twenty years ago that boy

walked right in here and told me to tell him a story, like he was daring me to. You wanna story? I told him. I got a story for ya, you little son of a gun. I'd never told it to anyone, heck who'd believe it? Well you can bet your socks that boy did. I could tell by the look in his eyes that he knew every word was the God's-honest truth. But his name wasn't Tommy Prichard, junior or senior, said it was Blusin.

SMARTASS

No, Dad told you his name was Blue *Son*. That was the nickname my grandmother gave him because he always seemed to have the blues.

FLANAGAN

A secret sorrow. And you're a mighty clever boy, aren't ya, son?

SMARTASS

Before grandfather passed away, he told my dad about the magic, about Miss Larson and Beth and going into that painting.

FLANAGAN

Yeah, you almost had me going for a second there, smartass.

SMARTASS

My name is Michael, sir. Same as you, and same as someone else you know.

FLANAGAN

It's bad luck messing with an old man, boy.

SMARTASS

My dad thought grandfather was messing with him too. Grandfather told him that if he didn't believe him, he could just go and ask Beth for himself. But there's no record of Elizabeth Baker after she was in high school. Records show she was in fact in Miss Larson's art class at Kenai High School in 1957, graduated two years later, but after that, there's no record of her. *Anywhere*. She had no brothers or sisters.

FLANAGAN

That's true enough.

SMARTASS

Her father had died when she was little—

FLANAGAN

That's true too.

SMARTASS

And her mother passed away the same year Beth graduated from high school.

FLANAGAN

I did not know that. I'm right sorry to hear it. So I don't guess there would've been a missing persons report filed for a certain Eliz-a-beth Baker.

SMARTASS

No, sir. Not in Kenai, Alaska, anyway.

FLANAGAN

I have a sneaking suspicion ole Beth went to live in one of her paintings, in a land she created on canvas. Fact I feel it in my bones.

SMARTASS

That's what Dad thinks.

FLANAGAN

Does he now?

SMARTASS

Yes, sir. I do too. But dad didn't believe any of it until you told him the exact same story Grandfather told him. Grandfather never knew your last name, said you were two grades ahead, and records show there were two students named Michael in Miss Larson's class with Tommy Prichard and Elizabeth Baker. And both Michaels graduated the same year.

FLANAGAN

Yeah, me and Bruelard both, we used to call him Brewsky.

SMARTASS

Dad tracked down Michael Bruelard first. Bruelard didn't even remember Beth, much less her magic painting. Then Dad found you and Grandfather's drawing, right here, two hours away from Humbolt University, where he was a student and where he now teaches.

FLANAGAN

How come he never told me who he was?

SMARTASS

Dad said he tried to. He wanted to tell you everything. But he said you ran him right off after you told your story and wouldn't give him a chance.

FLANAGAN

Yup, I've been running 'em off ever since. I suppose he's the one been sending the college brats all these years.

SMARTASS

And students from Del Arte, where he's a member. Though it started with his college buddies, and the story's been getting passed around ever since. You and your story have become a campus legend.

FLANAGAN

Well I'll be a monkey's uncle. Don't that just beat all?

SMARTASS

Yes, sir. I believe it does.

FLANAGAN

Michael Prichard, grandson of ole Tommy, would you be so kind to sit with an old man a spell?

PRICHARD

I'd be honored, sir.

(Prichard goes over and sits on the bed beside Flanagan. Flanagan gives him a nod. Prichard looks around the room, his eyes settle on the drawing of the Greek fisherman.)

The End

Snippets

by Christopher Stolle

I.

I am a French horn:
a foreigner among
brass and pomp.

But I wish I were
a glockenspiel in Munich.

II.

I am a chameleon:
a rainbow hidden
beneath my skin.

But I wish I were
a swan on the Seine.

III.

I am a Valkyrie:
a judge among
benevolence and fear.

But I wish I were
a Siren in Mykonos.

IV.

I am a thunderstorm:
a symphony caught
within my throat.

But I wish I were
a sunrise on the Mississippi.

V.

I am a Hoosier:
a fisherman among
sailors and pirates.

But I wish I were
a stargazer
a cowboy
a train engineer
a baseball player
a softness
around your heart.

Lakeside

by Lynn White

When I was a child Lakeside
was my favorite family outing.
I loved the freshness of the cool air,
the gray bleakness of the water
and the windblown beach
that seemed to go on forever.
I would roll up my pants
and race my sister to the water's edge.
We'd dare each other into the water.
We knew it would be cold
too cold to let it wet much of us,
too cold to stay wet for long
but we loved the comfort of the thick towels
that would wrap us round like blankets
afterwards.
We loved it like a perversion.
We loved it all.
I'm sitting there now
all these years later
perversely
overwhelmed
and overdressed.
I hadn't reckoned on global warming,
hadn't expected to see people swimming
in the warm blue water,
lying on the beach
in the sunshine,
hadn't expected that
I would be
so overwhelmed
and so overdressed.

Athens of the South

by Rachel Swartzell

Take the right at the I-40 split
pass the rickety, paint stripped crosses
on the highway, three on the right
and six on the left, with their sun
dried, life sucked flowers
wilting into the ashes
of their memories, those gone
but never forgotten. After
two hours and a hundred miles later
ride out the Cook's elbow to the
rest stop and take a piss
before you trudge another
two hours on the straightway
to Music City. Say a
hello to Nash for me.
Kick up the dust
in your scuffed ostrich skin,
tip your hat up to the
neon cowboy. Take a walk
down Bridgestone and
boogie into Wannabee's for
a coke and toke. When
you get to the end
of the street, you'll
find me at the end of
the line of country dreamers.

Contributors

Fred Arroyo is the author of *Western Avenue and Other Fictions*, shortlisted for the 2014 William Saroyan International Prize for Writing, and *The Region of Lost Names*, a finalist for the 2008 Premio Aztlán Prize. A recipient of an Individual Artist Program Grant from the Indiana Arts Commission, Fred's fiction is included in the Library of Congress series "Spotlight on U.S. Hispanic Writers." Fred has published widely in a variety of literary journals, and is included in the anthologies *Camino del Sol: Fifteen Years of Latina and Latino Writing* and *The Colors of Nature: Essays on Culture, Identity and the Natural World*. His new book, tentatively titled *Sown in Earth: Essays on Memory, Place, and Writing*, is forthcoming in the spring of 2020. Fred is at work on a book of short fictions, *The Book of Manuels*, and a collection of poetry, *Before Birches Blue*. Fred is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Middle Tennessee State University.

Peggy Culp is a graduate of the University of South Carolina and Vanderbilt University. In her retirement, after over 25 years of employment at Vanderbilt, she enjoys playing music and writing. Her ukulele performance of "Blue Suede Shoes" has astounded dozens up and down the East Coast.

Katie Hamblen left behind a past life as a lawyer to stay at home with her twins and read and write poetry whenever possible. She'll be continuing her poetry career when she begins the MFA program at Western Kentucky University this fall.

Vickie Harden, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of social work at Middle Tennessee State University. Dr. Harden calls on experiences from social work practice to inspire her creative work. Creative writing, particularly poetry, is one platform of expression she uses to explore human struggles, and to celebrate strength, resilience and dignity in overcoming injustice.

Heather Hickox is a writer living in Nashville, Tennessee. She is mother to a wonderful daughter, Hannah. Heather is a graduate of Middle Tennessee State University, with several publications of both poetry and short fiction in MTSU's *Collage: a Journal of Creative Expression*, *Kaleidoscope: Turns of Prose and Poetry*, and *40 Days Around the World: a Digital Arts Festival*. Heather is currently working on her first chapbook, *Mitochondrial Eve*, which will be self-published in 2019.

Arnold Johnston lives in Kalamazoo and South Haven, Michigan. His poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and translations have appeared widely in literary journals and anthologies. His plays, and others written in collaboration with his wife, Deborah Ann Percy, have won over 150 productions, as well as numerous awards and publications across the country and internationally; and they've written, co-written, edited, or translated over twenty books. Arnie's latest projects are *Where We're Going*, *Where We've Been*, a full-length poetry collection forthcoming from FutureCycle Press, and *Swept Away*, a novel to be published by Caffeinated Press. He is a

member of the Dramatists Guild, Poets & Writers, the Associated Writing Programs, and the American Literary Translators Association.

Elton Kelley is a computer engineer from Central California. He has been a student in Zoe Mullery's Wednesday night creative writing class at San Quentin prison since January 2019.

Brian Kerr (a.k.a. Seven Scott), incarcerated since 1994, began writing in 2004 as a way to open his mind to a much larger world. For the past fifteen years he's met with modest publishing success for his short stories and poetry. His work has appeared in a number of outlets, varying from literary journals (*Lynx Eye*, *Coal City Review*), magazines (*Storyteller*, *American Dissident*) and the annual prisoner writing anthology published by the University of Michigan's English Department through its Prison Creative Arts Project, among others. In spite of his confinement, his aim in writing always has been to throw his own voice beyond the bars and walls in hopes of finding readers seeking an intelligent, eclectic perspective of High Art, or that which always comprises one of two things: a Study of or a Reflection of True Life. He has submitted his work to *SHIFT* precisely because it believes in giving new and emerging writers a chance to share their visions with a discerning and devoted readership.

Kay Lindsey, originally a painter, also enjoys collaborations with artists in other disciplines, musicians, printmakers, photographers, book artists, a metalsmith, ceramist and cellist among them. Her poem "The Origin of Applause" is a permanently installed public art work at the Cannon Center for the Performing Arts in Memphis, Tennessee. Her work has appeared in *The Bamboo Muse*, *Sculptural Pursuit*, *Hot Air Quarterly*, *Beyond the Frontier*, *River Poems*, *Hawaii Review*, *Borders: Texas Poetry Review*, *Wolf Head Quarterly*, *Earth's Daughters*, and *Catalyst*. Recently her poetry was included in two exhibitions, the One House project of ArtWatch, DC and From the Mountains, to the Ocean, a project of the Maryland State Arts Council. This fall a very early poem is due for publication in French for a feminist anthology. A native of Washington, D.C., she lives in Maryland and is currently trying her hand at the lyric essay and a series of collages.

Jennifer Maloney is a poet, playwright, and author, and the current president of Just Poets, Inc., a literary organization based in Rochester, New York. Jennifer's work has been published in *Aaduna.org*, *The Pangolin Review*, and the current edition of *Memoryhouse Magazine*. She's been collected in two volumes of the *Poets Speak . . . While We Still Can* series, edited by John Roche and Jules Nyquist and published by Beatlick Press and Jules Poetry Playhouse; in *Missing Persons: Reflections on Dementia*, edited by Deborah Coy and published by Beatlick Press; and in *Women Speak, Portraits, Poetry and Prose of the Feminine Experience*, collected by artist Nancy L. Smith and printed and bound by Art Bookbindery. Jennifer began writing again in 2016 after nearly twenty years of silence. She is grateful to have found her voice again.

Samuel E. Matteson is a rare bird himself, a child of the South who grew to manhood to become an industrial scientist and professor of physics, but who never lost his love of story and language. Recently retired from academia, he is free to pursue a third career as a writer of fiction and creative nonfiction. The contribution is an excerpt from a collection of other similar reminiscences of the 1950s and '60s Lower Alabama, called "Sassafras Tea and Fried Oysters." Matteson, with Carolyn, his wife of fifty years, divides his time between a home near Nashville, Tennessee, and his retreat among the mountains of the Sangre de Cristo range in Colorado.

Colleen Powderly began writing poetry in 1997. Early poems reflected her childhood in the deep South and youth in the Midwest. Those poems eventually formed the basis for her book, *Split* (FootHills Publishing, 2009). More recent work has focused on stories from the working class, particularly from women's lives. Her work has appeared in *Palo Alto Review*, *RiverSedge*, *The California Quarterly*, *Fox Cry Review*, *The HazMat Review*, *Malala: Poems for Malala Yousefzai*, *The Centrifugal Eye*, and *Steel Toe Review*. Colleen supported her poetry habit by working as a chemical dependency counselor before leaving the workforce in 2010. She now tries to live poetically, write dangerously, and dream impractically of living in Great Britain. She keeps writing poems because she simply cannot stop.

John Purugganan is a writer and editor who has been incarcerated since 1989 in the California prison system. His play "Let's Keep Dancing" received a developmental reading by New York's prestigious Public Theater in 2018, was a prizewinner in the first annual Arts in Correction Playwriting Contest, and is currently being adapted into a radio play by The Public Theatre. His op-ed, "The future of corrections is rehabilitation, not punishment . . ." was published in *The Sacramento Bee* [on September 15, 2019](#). John's essay "Life Without Parole: The Shocking Reality" was the winning essay of its category at The Roundtable on the Future of Justice Policy hosted by The Square One Project, co-hosted by Merritt College and the Columbia University Justice Lab. His novel, *Where Do The Children Play*, a cautionary tale about parental abdication, is available for publication. You can write to: John Purugganan, E-71364 PBSP, D 10-208, PO Box 7500, Crescent City, CA 95532. Or visit the web site at: <https://www.robertmoulthrop.com/john-purugganan>

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