



Wiregrass

2013 LITERARY AND ARTS JOURNAL



Cover art: AFTER DEGAS - Raven Hudson

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Wiregrass 2013 Literary and Arts Journal

Featuring the writing and artwork of East Georgia State College's
students, staff & faculty.

Editors: Abran Cruz & Julie Victoria Scott
Faculty Advisor: S. D. Lavender

Thanks to: Raven Hudson, Alan Brasher, Valerie L. Czerny, Mark Dallas,
Desmal Purcell & Armond Boudreaux



Lauren Bragg

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Holdin' You

I may never amount to nothing,
No one may know my name.
I may not have a fancy house,
No fortune and no Fame.
I may not have much money,
A dollar maybe two,
But everything I could desire,
I hold when I'm holdin' you.

I could have a house of gold
Up on a mountain high.
I could look down in the valley
And see the river passin' by.
The water could be crystal clear,
And the sky it could be blue,
But all its beauty would be gone
If I wasn't holdin' you.

My favorite place isn't in my room,
Sitting all alone.
My favorite place isn't the place
That I once called home.
It isn't up in the mountains
Or by the ocean blue.
My favorite place in the world
Is right here holdin' you.

My trouble seems so little.
My cares all melt away.
The worries of tomorrow,
The mistakes of yesterday.
It makes me feel much better
About everything I do.
I find happiness I can't explain
When I'm holdin' you.

I may die tomorrow
Or maybe years from now.
I really don't know when,
And I really don't know how.
I may always try and fail
In everything I do,
But I won't even care at all
If I die a holdin' you.

— *Aaron Tanner*



Sherri Brantley

Sweet Emotion

It's a funny thing, the way they work; you don't even notice what they do to you.

And not a soul is sure whether or not to trust them.

It seems there must, there has to be a balance.

Trust them too much, results in pain.

Trust them too little; we become machines, cold and lifeless.

Neither option seems preferable, in all honesty,

And how are we to find that medium?

We never discover the in-between

Experimentation; humanly, we first choose to test the trust.

Trust once; give it all...Heart in their hands,

They slip, accidentally. They leave, impossibly

Or drop it, intentionally. It affects you all the same.

Lesson learned. You say, "never again..."

And lay those first few stones to the wall you continuously build for the remainder of your life

Trust again, slowly, cautiously, you swear, no repeats...

You eventually, after a matter of time,

Allow them to overstep those stones to that other side of your trust: The vulnerable side.

You don't see the weapons they conceal behind their back: Weapons of sheer destruction

Because you've convinced yourself you've been careful, you wouldn't make the same mistakes,

Staring them dead in the eyes, believing every word.

"Close your eyes," they say... Hesitation, followed by submission

And you wait, until that startling crash.

Open your eyes, everything destroyed, smugness on their face,

They turn to leave, and you finally see all they really were.

Frozen you stand... What now?

Attempt regaining yourself; attain even more stones, bricks,

Anything.

Focus on it: on your wall.

You desire no part in this world's coldness.

Build, build, all around you

With the exception of a small opening, just in case

You still cling to an ounce of hope; you have no clue why,

But there's no trust at all.

Somehow, some way, another squeezes in, you don't know how...

Unless...

It could only be physical; you're longing to feel that warmth

Because among all that, all of the destruction and construction,

You have become cold; you have morphed into that machine

They enter only physically; another machine, another robot.

You use each other. Isn't that the purpose of a machine?

To be used...

You just don't care when you realize it makes no difference, you close your entrance altogether

They will all leave anyway. What's the point? You're stuck there

Alone.

Our emotions all work by default

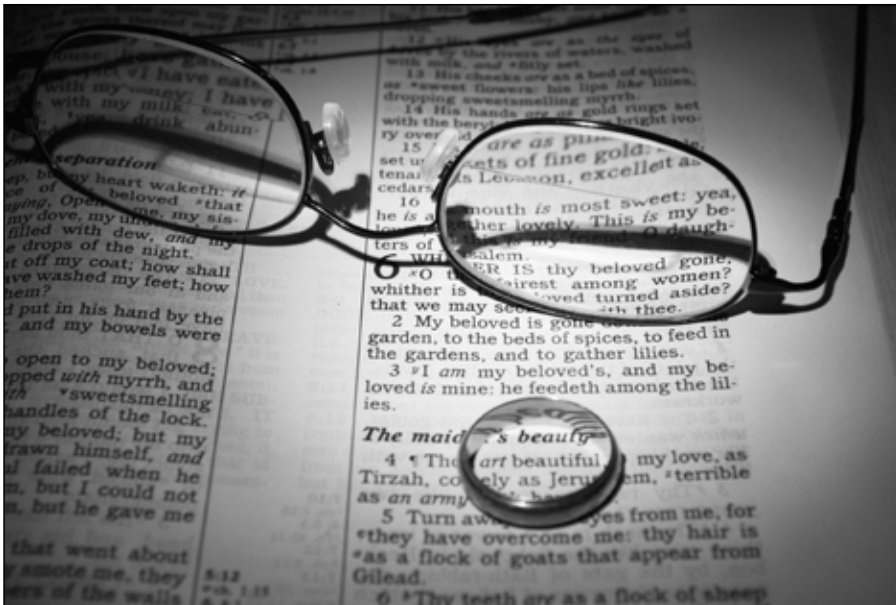
...sweet emotion

— *Megan Mimbs Parrish*

Foreword to a Commonplace Book

Quotes, anecdotes, excerpts, and musings
From people who
Think and know more than I,
Imagine further than I,
And believe higher than I.
To inspire, incite, and provoke thought.
If literature can stir the mind,
Then let these words stoke the fires in the soul,
That creativity,
Art,
And free thinking
Will live on.

— Todd R. Olsen



Abstract of Ira - Linda Whitaker

Creepy Poem #13

Lightning pricks the ghostly air
Setting fire to wood and hair
Screaming teeth in howling night
Shiny shadows wet with light
Lonely darkness, walk beside
Seeping lust where love has died
Chalky stale of sulking bones
Tendons creaking breeding moans
Vapor spews her gothic tongue
Heaving bits of rotted lung
Cold November's draping death
Leaves a smile on your last breath

— *Eric Wruck*

Rhythm and Rhyme

We finally learn how to work out the rhyme,
And we see to move on and not worry for time.
We learn how to smile, how to laugh, how to give,
And for the first time we find out how to live.
Your life was not meant just to live in the past.
For the future will come and
you'll live there at last.

The song that you sing will live in the wind,
And will be sung forever, from here to the end.
So sing your song out to me, sing it loud and clear.
Sing it loud enough so those not listening can hear.
Sing it for the birds, sing it for the trees,
Sing it for the wind and the sand and the seas.
Life is too short, yet days are too long.
It's time for you to live your life
by living your own song.

— *Savannah Parker*

The Beast Within

This perfect façade, the illusion you have built,
starts to rust away and you begin to wilt.
The pressure begins to gather and accumulate,
And this begins to seal your fate.

Resentment, rage you hide inside,
Hating the feeling, you cannot deny.
Sweltering and Burning it eats you up
Till no longer contained —
You finally erupt.

A red haze clouds your eyes,
You feel a part of you come alive.
The beast within has been turned loose.
It has escaped from its controlling noose,
Clawing and fighting all in its path
Until the spent rage-
Leaves you with the aftermath.

Shaking and shivering, you cannot hide.
The beast within for now has died.

— *Katie Nobles*



Olivia Norman

Suicide

As I lay alone, tears run down my cheeks.
It hurts so bad I can barely sleep.
There are times I'll think my pain would end,
But when nightfall comes my sorrow plagues again.
I wish I can just stop my tears.
My only salvation is blanketed in fear.
Fear could pause a cautious mind;
However, despair could fire desperate desires.

— *Mikhail Lavon Arnold*

Living a List (for Mark Dallas)

It should have come to me by 43,
the virtue of an ordered life, made
of ordered days, made of ordered
minutes. Planning is the secret

to success, and lists are both act
and product of planning. Lists,
like scriptures, train our minds
to the virtue of necessary tasks.

But such scriptures can be deadly
traps, blinders privileging progress
over peripheral beauty, misleading
us to a supposed higher ground.

— *Alan Brasher*



Isolation - Kimberly Page

I Heard Stevens Cursing Hemingway

(sung to the tune of "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus")

I heard Stevens cursing Hemingway
On a blue and rainy Key West night.
 Poor Wally was fifty-six,
And Ernie knew some boxing tricks.
 The poet was half in the bag,
So Papa popped him some lovely licks

Then I saw Stevens slugging Hemingway.
 What fun to see two modernists fight!
 In a puddle he did land,
With a broken spirit and a broken hand.
Yes, I became a post-modernist that night!

— *S.D. Lavender*

The Day that Freedom Died

In years to come the books will tell
Of what will then be the past,
Of all the tears and heartache
And the shadows that were cast.

Of how Lady Liberty shed bitter tears
As she watched freedom die,
And every true American son
Hung his head to cry.

The checks were all unchecked,
The balances all to one side,
"We the people" was overlooked,
And democracy cast aside.

Many were blinded by eloquent speech
Full of hypocrisy and lies.
Freedom was slowly dying
And no one heard its cries.

So in years to come when books are read,
Friend, think it not so strange
That it says the time of Freedom's death
was now,
And it all began with "Change."

— *Aaron Tanner*

Homecoming

A train station is something like a church, Ted thought as he looked at the tall, arched windows that pierced the wall. The sheer size of the building inspired reverence. But it was a reverence marred by the dissonance between past greatness and present decay. Evidence of decline was everywhere. Soft light, diffused by dirt and neglect, streamed through each window and cast pale rectangles on the grimy marble floor. Large chandeliers hung from an impossible height and swayed gently—almost imperceptibly like oriental censers in a world broken down. The leather seats that had once been quite elegant were now crazed with age and use, and black tape snaked across the cushions that had torn. Here too was Ozymandias cast down to the dust — civic greatness passing with no more moment than a bad meal or perhaps a bad dream — but lingering somehow like a memory that could not be shaken, an experience that passes with time but leaves faint, indelible scars.

The stillness of this cathedral was broken by the passage of strangers, heels striking the hard surface, snatches of conversation, the clicking wheels of the suitcases women pulled behind them, the squeals of children, the shriek of sudden surprise. A phalanx of vending machines glared like baleful idols along the near wall, their steady whirr and hum a savage murmured prayer. Scattered here and there was a promiscuous cross section of humanity: a woman staring vacantly and drinking from a plastic bottle, a teenager mesmerized by his cell phone and oblivious to all else, an angular form in a cheap rumpled suit, dark hair tousled, leaning forward — hands on knees — as indefinite as the dark chiaroscuro of the incipient beard on his face; and an old couple, the thin husband wearing a shapeless hat, his cane resting against his knee; his ample wife wearing khaki pants and a flowery blouse. Ted's eyes rested on the elderly couple. Jack Spratt and his wife, Ted thought to himself, half surprised that he could dredge up a memory from nursery school. He wondered if they were oil and water like his parents, and the thought pained him. He waited and noted a troop of feral boys eating up time by making innumerable trips to the vending machines. And as he observed the denizens of this cavernous space, an occasional sad casualty of modern life would cage an anonymous citizen for small change, sometimes fawning, sometimes bolder and if bolder would ask for something larger — like a wraith reified by recent success.

Ted was restless and turned to his uncle. "When will the train come?" he asked for the second time. But the boy knew quite well that the train was on time and could be expected in forty minutes. He dreaded but yearned for its arrival, and the time weighed heavily upon him. His mother would not come and had urged him not to go, but the boy insisted and since he was not yet old enough to drive, John, his uncle, had offered to take him. The uncle replied and looked at him with an equal measure of sadness and kindness, his uncle now playing the role his father always played: kind, strong, loving in his own way but somewhat awkward at times, the awkwardness precipitated by long absences or by the silent thoughts he could not share with his son. But the uncle understood, and the boy understood, and the resentment he sometimes felt against his parents was slowly being washed away by a growing adult understanding. The boy knew he had to meet his father this time and in this way. He had never missed a homecoming. To do so now would be a betrayal—a failure. He could not fail his father.

The uncle looked at his nephew and thought he might break the tension and make the waiting easier.

“Do you remember the time your father took you to Rainbow Woods?”

“You mean the time that Mom looked at Dad and couldn’t stop laughing?”

“You were very young and didn’t realize it at the time, but Rainbow Woods was what you call a put and take pond. The people who owned the place stocked the pond with fish and practically tied the fish to the line. You caught a lot of fish that day and it was getting to be quite expensive and your dad was trying to get you to stop without ruining the day. He was trying to appear serene about the whole thing, but your father just couldn’t be serene about anything. He didn’t have what you’d call a poker face. Your mother was watching him and couldn’t keep from laughing. She never laughed so hard in her life.”

The boy paused and then replied.

“I remember. I was really young at the time, and I guess I didn’t get it. I thought people were just being weird--we did have some good times there though.”

“Remember those and hang on to the love.”

His uncle paused and then continued.

“Hey, do you remember that crazy dog you used to have?”

“You mean Skip,” the boy replied.

“That’s the one. Your dad always wanted a bird dog, so he ended up with the Skipper — a bird dog that would run from the sound of guns.”

The boy laughed and turned to his uncle.

“I loved that dog. He ran so fast his feet never touched the ground.”

“Your dad did too --- even though he bought an expensive hunting dog that couldn’t hunt.”

“We had some good times together with that dog, but I remember how dad was when he got a good look at that crazy, cross-eyed pup.”

“But your dad didn’t stay mad long. We all used to crack up just watching that old hound.”

“I remember. That dog was a mess, wasn’t he?”

“Sure was.”

A brief smile flickered on the boy’s face, but soon faded and his mood became somber again. Concerned, his uncle continued his attempt to lift the boy’s spirits.

“Ted, I read a newspaper story about a rare brain-eating amoeba...”

John waited and then continued.

"Did you know a person can put himself in danger just by swimming in a lake?"

"Where did you read that?"

"Oh, you know me. I've discovered the Internet in a big way in my old age."

The uncle was in his early forties, had an athletic build, and only his iron gray hair betrayed his age. The boy did not see the intended humor, and so the uncle continued.

"Say, Teddy, I think you'd be ok."

"Why's that?"

"Well, if it's only your brain, I don't think it would matter much."

"That is so lame. Speak for yourself."

"Yeah, I guess it was, but I made you laugh, didn't I?"

"Yeah, it was just so dumb. Sometimes I laugh because things are dumb."

"If you understand that the world is dumb, you can enjoy what life throws at you."

"I dunno. I guess that's right."

The boy laughed, and the time passed a little quicker. His uncle was easy to like, and they had always been close.

The boy stood and walked slowly to the nearest vending machine, made a perfunctory survey of the rows of cheap candy and sweets, the row of crackers filled with Cheez, the forlorn peanuts, the neon cheese curls, the dross of modern food science. He came. He saw. He conquered. And he made his selection. He had crossed the Rubicon, but he didn't really know why. He wasn't really hungry, he thought as he walked back to his seat and took his place next to his uncle.

The two were an unlikely pair: Ted tall, awkward in everything he said and did — but on the cusp of adolescence, so the awkwardness would soon leave him---just as his boyishness would soon leave him; John, comfortable in his own skin and retaining a certain boyishness — calm, unflappable, in many ways more youthful than his young charge; John in faded denim pants, an equally faded t-shirt bearing the faint imprint *Hearst Castle — California*, wearing a battered baseball cap, and scuffed and wounded shoes; Ted wearing a new polo shirt, crisp new pants, and boat shoes rather than the old tennis shoes his uncle usually favored.

Ted would probably never know the freedom that John had known. He held a tight rein upon himself. John was a tumbleweed. His tumbling had cost him a wife and had played havoc with several relationships. But he could not war against his nature, and he would not change. His construction job took him all over the country, and he never seemed to stay in one place for very long. But he always made the effort to keep in touch with family and called on a regular basis.

A man and his wife walked to the bank of seats across from them and took their places. The man put down his coat and unfolded the newspaper he carried under his arm, allowing Ted a brief glimpse of the headline: ETHICS PROBE ROCKS CONGRESS. The wife unburdened herself of her coat and spent some time rifling through a large shopping bag emblazoned with the words ALL AMERICA STORES. Beneath these words were the vibrant red, white and blue of the American flag. The irony! I guess the country really is for sale, Ted thought. Ted was approaching the dawn of young adulthood, a time when universal innocence is transformed into universal cynicism, when what was formerly seen as true and good is seen as suspect and tainted by corruption and folly. He smiled a sour, sardonic smile.

“You know, Ted, sometimes all we have to hold onto is love.”

Ted was startled by his uncle’s words, for he had been lost in his thoughts — woolgathering his father would have said if he had been there to observe his son. Ted turned to face him and nodded. His uncle did not continue because it was clear that his nephew would not or could not respond. Sometimes words do not help, his uncle thought. Both sat in silence for some time. People came and went, and the time weighed heavily upon them.

“Why didn’t you become a marine, John?”

The boy looked at his uncle and awaited his reply. The uncle looked startled and paused to frame his response. I’m speaking to a younger version of my brother, John thought. The boy was the image of his father — the same sandy hair, the same lean face, the same directness.

“Well, son, we do what we can. We serve the way we can. A soldier’s life is a hard one, son. It is more than the uniform, and the day a soldier puts on a uniform, he changes his life and the lives of everyone he knows.”

The man stopped when the boy appeared satisfied. It was just as well, for age brings gray hair but not unimpeachable wisdom, and the man knew his poor words were not enough. John felt pompous, and he knew that he had nothing to offer his nephew but a few shopworn platitudes — standard clichés a stranger could provide.

The boy had never given the matter much thought and assumed that he would be following in his father’s footsteps. His choice had seemed preordained. It had seemed so right. When he was younger, everything was in harness, and the sun seemed to run a steady course — not so close to the earth but no so far away either.

The candy was cloying and waxy, and each sugary bolus was hard to swallow. He threw the wrapper into a nearby ashtray reeking of stale tobacco and littered with butts which protruded from the sand like unexploded artillery shells. Swallowing the last of the candy, the boy broke the silence.

“Why do parents fight?”

The boy remembered the sweetness of each homecoming and the bitterness of the inevitable fight. It had been that way as long as he could remember — the battle and then the truce. And after some brief peace, the conflict would surface again. John turned to face his nephew and spoke as one adult to another.

"Oh, I know it hasn't been easy — and I'm sure it's hard to be the only child. They fought because they were two strong people who had different ideas about what was important. Your mother had to raise you by herself for much of the time because your father was deployed to some God forsaken backwater for so much of the time. And, Teddy, God love you, you haven't always made it easy for her."

"Mom can be a real pain sometimes."

"Yes, she can. But she always did the best she could. Just like your father did the best he could. Your mother is a strong woman."

"But the crying. Sometimes she would cry for no reason at all."

"Oh, she had reasons. Do you remember the time she came home and found you drunk?"

"Yeah, I'll never do that again."

"There you were eating vanilla wafers and drinking vodka like some kid drinking Kool-Aid."

"Yeah, that was really stupid. I promised her that I would never make her cry again."

"Yes, I think you have kept your promise pretty well because Ruth is pretty proud of you."

"She is?"

"Yes, and Glen too."

"Did they tell you?"

"Every time I talked to Ruth or Glen they would always tell me how proud they were — and how you've grown up. They always loved you, Ted."

"I just thought she was unhappy with me"

"No, son, they have always loved you."

"Sometime I wish I had been a better son."

"You have been a better son."

"I guess. Sometimes I just feel — alone — like they never understood me."

"Everybody feels like that," his uncle replied. "I'm sure your mom and dad have felt like that."

"Have you ever felt that way?" Ted asked.

"I'm not excluding myself, Ted. You have to love people as they are because when you lose someone, you can never get that person back. Your parents knew that. In spite of the fights, they always loved each other. Have you ever noticed the way they would look at you?"

“Yeah, I have noticed that. Mom seems to have this soft look when she looks at me. And Dad is different too.”

“I told you, son. Love is precious, and when you lose a loved one, you can never get that love back.”

“That’s why I wanted to come.”

“I know that, Ted. That’s what this trip is really all about, isn’t it son — trying to hold on?”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I know it, Ted. You hang on to the love as long as you can. Hang on to the love and forget all the rest.”

There passed a barrage of announcement and then silence — a brief cacophony and then a silent truce. People came and went, and the second hand on the large antique clock perched above the ticket counter swept to its point of beginning again and again. Ted eased back in his seat and stretched his long legs out in front of him, and after a time the announced arrival of his father’s train echoed through the waiting area. The boy remembered the many homecomings — the bitter with the sweet. It had not been easy to find when his father would be arriving. In this the military yielded few details — just as his father yielded few details even for the most important things. But the boy had persisted.

He and his uncle walked closer to the gate as passengers streamed from the train. Occasionally a passenger would be greeted by a wife, a mother, a sister, a brother, a friend, or a son. Others walked steadily ahead, eyes fixed on some future destination. He saw some marines who must have been from his father’s unit, for they wore the familiar badges and insignia and had the same confident bearing his father always had. He wondered if these men knew his father. This homecoming had a timeless quality, and all of the many homecomings merged into one. It was all so familiar. And yet this time it would be different.

His father was not among them, and they waited until they were directed to another section. This too was familiar, a part of the direction and indirection, the brusque phrase and the circumlocution of military life. And then there was the familiar ritual. Hurry up and wait. Hurry up and wait. His father had often noted the phenomenon. Hurry up and wait. The phrase was so very true that it had a raw, incantory power. He had often heard his father remark about the inconsistencies of a military life, and it seemed to Ted that military life and civilian life were not so very different. They walked some distance from the passenger cars and waited for a time at the appointed place — a place from public view. Father and all of the men like him have been pushed into a forgotten corner, the boy thought. At one point such a thought would have seemed inconceivable. But such were the days of innocence.

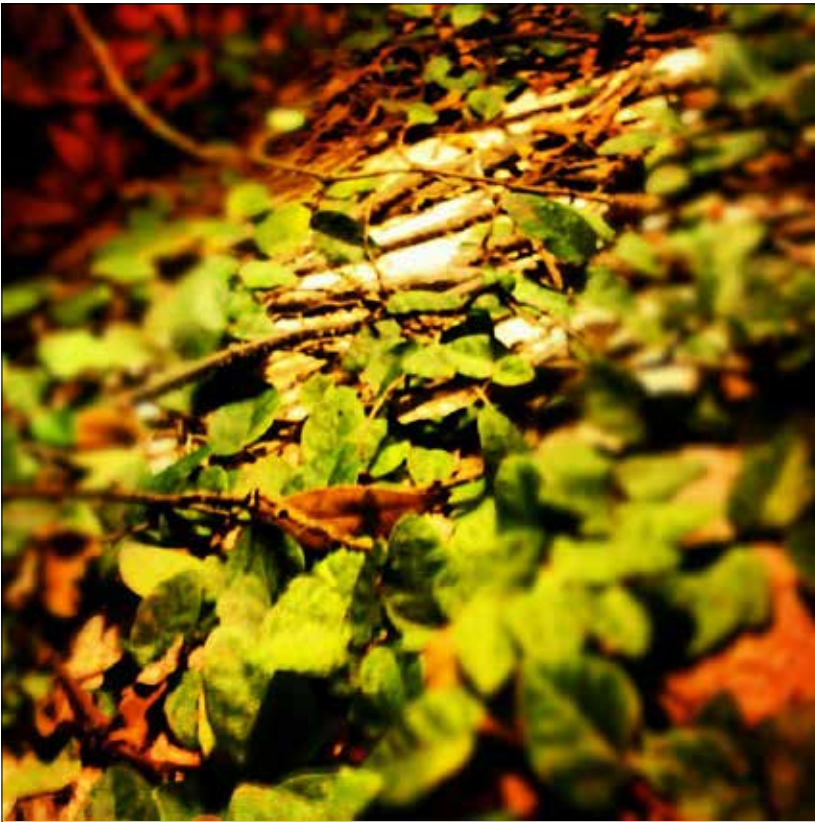
And then the door of one of the freight cars abruptly parted. The door stood open, the curtain was raised, and the drama was about to begin. Workers trundled a ramp next to the yawning maw, and after a brief time, the suite of tragedies began.

Silvery beetles spilled from the darkness as one, by one, by one the silver boxes slid gently down the ramp, each one gingerly received by workmen at the base, each casket rumbling along the metal rollers on the ramp until it struck the metal detent at the end of its journey, metal striking metal. Rumble, click. Rumble click. Rumble click. The memory of that peculiar rhythm would probably never fade. Each plangent sound was as regular as the ticking of a clock. Each casket was sorted and sent to a different destination, to a different family — all so regimented, so mechanical — the exit so brief. There are so many, the boy thought — and knew then what his uncle had tried to say — and knew then the insufficiency of words.

— *Kenneth Homer*



Linda Whitaker



FOREST - Sherri Brantley

The Eleventh Annual Emily Pestana-Mason Memorial Poetry Contest



*This year's judge, **Mark Dallas**, established the Emily Pestana-Mason Poetry Contest in 2003, in honor of Dr. Pestana-Mason, fellow poet and Humanities Division colleague. Before retiring last December, he taught English and reading at East Georgia State College for over twenty years and was a faculty advisor to Wiregrass for fourteen years. His poetry has been published in a number of literary journals.*

Mark Dallas has chosen “**The Art of Agony**” for First Place because “it conveys so much meaning in just a few words — and even more with multiple readings. At its heart, the extended metaphor addresses the ironic link between negative emotions and artistic creation.”

For Second Place, Mark selected “**Sailing Through Dreams**,” saying, “it is packed with well executed sound devices (rhyme, meter, assonance, alliteration) that pull the reader into a soothing, musical lullaby, suitable for a child or an adult.”

In Third Place is “**For He Who May Come After Me**” with its “wonderful imagery rendered by a voice that is loving, yes, but also a voice of detached wisdom. The poet cares more for his lover’s happiness than for his own.”

The Art of Agony

Tears fall
Embarrassingly fast.
Alas! Inspiration is born.

Acrylics greedily taken
From a dusty nook.
Horsehair drowns
In a cool bath.

Creativity strikes!
Colors run wild.
Warm streaks —
A chaotic hand roughly
Paints the scene.
Blues and greens,
Obliviously chosen,
Stain the anger.
The mirror foreshadows:

Tears fall
Painfully slow.
Peace is a blank canvas.

— *Allison Clemons*

SECOND PLACE POEM

Sailing Through Dreams

Lay in your bed and close your eyes.
Let's sail away on trackless skies.
Snuggle your covers, pull them up tight.
We'll sail on waves of soft moonlight.
The stars all around, the ground far below.
The whispers of wind push us on soft and slow.
Through dreamland we sail, destination morning.
We keep sailing on to sunlight's adorning.
The wind blows softly, the bed's gentle sway.
Then sunlight peaks through and the night fades away.
Lay in your bed and close your eyes.
Let's sail away on trackless skies.

— *Savannah Parker*



Blur - Raven Hudson

THIRD PLACE POEM

For He Who May Come After Me

I wish nothing more
Than to be the only man she ever loves;
But if you're reading this then
Somehow that must not have worked out.
So from one man to another,
Please read this through,
Both for me and for you.
Make sure you take her to Venice,
She's always wanted to go there.
Walk her down the streets holding her hand.
Kiss her in public —
Often, but not just for show.
Buy her flowers on the weekends.
(Tiger lilies are her favorite)
When it's late at night, gently blow on her
neck
Then quietly laugh in her ear;
She loves that.

She thinks she doesn't like her ears,
But even if she says she doesn't
She loves for you to tuck her hair behind
them.
Visit coffee shops and bistros,
Even though she won't finish what she
orders;
Just save it for days at home together.
Don't be alarmed that she sees ghosts.
(Really, don't we all?)
Make the gifts you give her because
Time is worth more than money.
She never really wanted too much of either,
Just enough.
And if mine is cut short,
You may need to know these things
To pick up where I left off.

— *Ben Mimbs*

My Reply

Scattered before me is many a questioning face; together their eyes ask, "Why?"
Looking at one, then another, I give an answer; but to their common question I don't reply.

My acts inspired sobs in you for whom I cared.
I later cringed at wrongs I had no cause to bear.
While I reflected when sad or drunk dry,
My loner nights were filled with screams and cries.
Once I overcame the guilt and shame of our troubles shared,
I treasured those bonds that again grew fair.

That first goes to my sister and mother, seated at my side; yet still all mouth: "Why?"
Next I address the preacher and an enemy, an answer for both; and to all, still no reply.

The chilled sweats and uneasiness remained when you had gone,
Of what had lain behind us, in front or even beyond.
I would never admit it out of spite,
That what you taught was the truth behind my knuckles of white.
Since then, not many scares came along
Because with each one's passing I became of them more fond.

Earthy aroma fills the air and given are glad glints; united, the question remains, "Why?"
What follows has regards to bosses and peers; the thirsty curiosity gets no reply.

Some moments I wore in front of you cheeks redder than roses,
Others, my head hung so low that pride was impossible to show.
Wants and desire for pointless things used to arise,
Such as for what I could flaunt or taunt before your eyes.
But my ego's false swellings were few in doses
And, as a result, my petty displays did inevitably slow.

Stares come at me now from to and fro; my manners attacked in concert by "Why?"
Both my father and best friend deserve the upcoming explanation; my guard is no reply.

I drew fists against you in defense of my behaviors;
Many of my hours were passed behind bars, then on paper.
Doors slammed and my teeth grinded; we were always ready to fight;
My violent ways always drove us from each others' sight.
Time went by and had cooled most of the embers
Save for one: my everlasting temper.

Beautiful tunes drown the sound of inquiry; anxious looks beg all the more: "Why?"
I make clear to my wife and old flames the succeeding answer; to the solicitors, no reply.

I shared my bed with some of you for fun, yet I felt for certain other ones;
Without meaning, some in this room laid beside me under the sun.
Sweetest were girls that left me no ties,
Harshest were women who wouldn't have my lies.
Trial by fire, I was burned and taught the best of lessons
By my wife's love: it is true and gold, and second to none.

Pictures of memories are laid all around me; these too, upon greeting me, ask "Why?"
Enthralled, I recognize my children and others close to me; the photos receive no reply.

To good music I danced in the presence of your warm gazes at noon;
I savored those seconds when our stomachs and spirits flew.
Friends too, you helped spend my better times,
Those beautiful feelings only evidenced in my rhymes.
And kids, the simple power in your laughter brought to me soon
The greatest pride, smiles, boasts, and toasts that I ever knew.

Harmony is found now, with all given single answers; unattended until the end is "Why?"
Concerned and puzzled they wonder at my means and ends; finally, here is my reply.

I did what I wanted and needed to survive,
My actions lead me to both joy and strife.
Reflection has helped me find the faults in my stride,
I thank everyone but credit only one as my guide.
My passionate ways held sway and kept me alive.
You had say, but it was mine and not yours; I lived my life.

— *Abran Cruz*

The Critical Thinking Short Story Contest was created to honor the creative use of written language, recognizing that creativity in all its many forms is an important part of critical thinking.

Dr. Armond Boudreaux, an Assistant Professor of English at East Georgia State College, judged the entrants. He earned a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Mississippi and has published fiction, reviews, and literary criticism.

Dr. Boudreaux says, "I chose Steven's story, 'A Fall for Life,' for first place for several reasons. The plot is interesting and fairly original. On the sentence level, the writing is clean and easy to read. Perhaps more importantly, however, the story shows readers the world through a critical eye, a writer's eye. Nowhere is this more evident than when the protagonist visits Hong Kong and Paris, which strike him for being so unlike their popular depictions in films."

"I chose Savannah's magical story 'An Unfinished Book' for second place because of the clarity of its language and the sheer imaginativeness of its plot. Like Steven's story, it operates within the conventions of certain popular genres — fantasy, magical realism — but it employs those conventions in a way that feels fresh. Because of the story's thoughtfulness and comfort both operating in and critically reflecting on its genre, 'An Unfinished Book' delivers some unexpected delights with material that in the hands of a less skilled writer would seem merely familiar."

A Fall for Life

— Steven Brantley

The test tube fell, shattering on the floor and spattering its contents in every direction. He instinctively hit the biohazard button, as he was trained to do in any lab emergency. When the alarm sounded, the sprinkler system turned on, flooding the room. He almost laughed aloud at the irony—the fact that he was protecting himself against something that was harmless, something that may, in fact, be helpful.

"Let's call it a day, Sal," said his assistant over the intercom in her eager-to-get-away voice.

"Sounds like a good idea. Send the helpbot in here to clean this mess up, and tell it to take the other samples out of vira-freeze storage."

"Sure thing, honey."

"Sari, how many times do I have to ask you to stop calling me that? I have a wife, remember?"

"Yeah, well, I've got a bioengineering exam next week."

"What does that have to do with anything?" he said, squinting his eyes in confusion.

"I thought we were naming things we could cheat on." The sound of her laughter was cut short by the release of the intercom button.

Sal shook his head and went to the washroom to change clothes and dry off. Sari rushed by him, heading for the door. *Probably late for some orgy*, he thought. She looked rather peculiar in her lab coat. Her wavy, long locks of blonde hair flowed midway down her back. A most perfect specimen in every way, she was visually stunning. Although he held a double doctorate in neuroscience and chemical engineering, this girl was quite the paradox to him. In all of his years of school and traveling around the world, he had never seen a Barbie with brains.

He picked up the towel and paused. He decided that he would shower — though that task had already been done for him in the lab. This was his time to think; most of his best ideas spawned from this end-of-the-workday shower. However, this time, he didn't need to generate a new idea. He was already working on a project that would make all of the others seem like mere trivial games. Now, he would reflect for a change.

The warm water poured down on his head. He thought of the many particles falling down upon his body. His eyes closed, and he was instantly transported to his home as a child.

The door flew open, and the boy was greeted by his mother, who was fixing dinner.

"How was your test, Sal?"

"I MADE A NINETY-FIVE!" said the child in rage. "The dumb teacher asked if the Indians were the first to live in America. The answer was false, but she said it was true. The Native Americans were first. Columbus screwed up. And I had it right! She argued with me, but she's an idiot!"

"It's alright son; you did good," his mom said in an attempt to comfort him. She always encouraged him, even when he wanted her to just let him be mad or sad. The woman who looked about forty-five was only in her mid-thirties. Although she was rather practiced at smiling to show her interest in others, her defeated eyes showed all. Sal knew that her submissive personality led to her full-time occupation of housewife. He grunted and went into the living room to see his dad.

A man — or what was left of a man — sat in a lounge chair watching television with a blank stare on his worn and unshaved face. His mustache was graying along with his sideburns. The retreating hairline was in a furious battle with the grayness. The man ran his fingers through his little bit of hair and looked over and saw his son staring at his head.

"It all falls out eventually."

His son just gave a polite smile and sat down on the couch.

"Everything falls," his dad said.

Sal just ignored his father and continued to watch the television. Such meaningless rants were common of his dad after the war. His dad suffered from post-traumatic stress and many other mental ailments. The man turned the volume down on the TV.

"We were holding the city. They were hitting us with everything they had. Our men

dropped like flies. The rebels prepared for a final charge; it was like something they did in the Medieval times — a group of barbarians running at you with full force. Our main gunner on the Humvee was hit.” The man’s voice rose in excitement. “So I jump up there. As the rebels make their way over the hill, I plow them down, all of them.” He became silent for a moment and looked over at Sal. His voice had now lost its excitement and was now more of an eerie tone, “Some fall so others live, but everything ends up falling sometime.”

The boy’s mother rushed into the room, evidently overhearing the conversation. She covered his ears and hurriedly walked him to his room.

Maybe Dad wasn’t as crazy as I thought. The water continued to pour down on him. There is so much truth in what he was saying. He got out of the shower and dressed.

On his bus ride home, he saw an old man on the streets dragging an emaciated dog by the leash. As the bus slowed to a stop at the red light, the man gave the dog a swift kick in the ribs as if to hurry it up. The dog let out a high-pitched yelp. Sal, easily angered by such acts of cruelty, tensed up and clenched his fists. He moved to rise from his seat, yet he stopped himself. He knew that this would only last a little longer, this violence. That was the only thought that soothed him.

At home, his wife welcomed him with her plastic smile—he realized, now, the similarities between it and that of his mother’s, and he returned the favor with a brief kiss. The headline news was on the television. The reporters were talking about the recent spacewarp drive that allowed ships to travel faster than the speed of light. People would soon have colonies on many different solar systems — one day possibly spreading to other galaxies. It was amazing how such an invention could be created within thirty years of World War III, still a rebuilding period.

“Ready for our trip, honey?” he said.

“Can we go to Russia too?”

“We don’t have time for that. We only have three days.”

“Can’t your assistant take care of things for a little longer?”

“Not that long.”

She sighed, sat down with the helpbot, and folded clothes.

He walked through the house and shut himself up in his office. The walls were soundproofed; he was alone to do what he wished. He sat down at his desk, took out a bottle of champagne, and drank. And he thought.

The pain, the suffering; it will all be over soon. People cause so much harm. They once lived with the world. Now, they live from it. A parasite that feeds on life — they are the boot on the delicate flame of Nature, the blind in a world of sight. And worse, they should know it! They should know that they cause nothing but harm. They just refuse to accept it. So I will make them. I will cure violence. The world will live in harmony once again!

He slept.

The next day, Sal finished the final tests. His masterpiece was ready.

“We did it!” Sari ran into the lab and planted a kiss on Sal. He was caught up in the moment and didn’t really care. He eventually pushed her away to prepare the inhalation tube.

“Are you ready?”

“Sure,” she said nervously.

“The cure to evil, the cure to violence, all in just one dose of this medicine!”

They smiled and inhaled the gas.

Hong Kong and Paris were not as the couple had expected. The cities weren’t quite as they were made out to be in the movies. The boots still kicked and smothered. Yet, he shook the hands of everyone that he saw. He hugged and kissed everyone that he had a conversation with. He was spreading his love for mankind.

On the third and final day of the trip, Sal slipped out of their London hotel room in the morning to visit a nearby park. He strolled down the curvy, cobblestone pathway looking at the large trees and listening to the songs of the many birds. He strayed from the path and took off his shoes. He had to feel the green grass on his feet. Sal looked around at what he had saved and smiled.

The happy moment was cut short as his gut wrenched with pain. It felt as if someone had grabbed his organs with a powerful, bear-like grip and began to twist. He fell to his knees, yelling at the top of his lungs. The tiny blood vessels in his widely open eyes began to swell and burst one by one. He coughed up blood on the bystanders who had come to help him. The man collapsed on his stomach and managed to open his eyes for one last glimpse of the grass—the grass for which he was the first of many to fall. And they fell.



Running Rain - Raven Hudson

An Unfinished Book

— Savannah Parker

“Never leave an unfinished book open at night.” That was what Scarlet’s grandfather had always told her. When she would ask why he would say, “Some advice does not need explaining, it simply needs to be heeded.”

All her life Scarlet had wondered why he told her this, but her grandfather had been a writer since long before time had ever considered her creation, and she knew better than to go against any of his writing advice.

One evening she sat in the attic writing a story. She was about half way through writing the fourth chapter.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m almost finished.”

“Scarlet!” her mother called from down stairs. “It’s time for supper!”

“But mom,” Scarlet called back. “I’m almost done with this chapter.”

“Don’t ‘But mom’ me. Just get down here and get ready for supper.”

Frustrated, Scarlet put down her pencil and got up. She looked down at the still open book that lay on her desk. She thought for a moment about closing it, but stopped. “I’ll be back up here in a few minutes,” she said to herself and left the room.

After supper Scarlet began to get a bad headache and asked her mother for an aspirin.

“Why?” her mom asked. “What’s wrong?”

“I just have a headache,” Scarlet answered.

“You’ve probably just been writing too long in that dark attic,” her dad told her.

Scarlet nodded and took the aspirin. “I’m just going to go lay down on the sofa.”

As she lay down, Scarlet heard the phone ring. She could hear her dad answer it. Just before she dozed off she heard her father say, “Yes, Dad. Scarlet is fine. She said that she had a headache, but I guess she’s okay. Why do you ask?” It was her grandfather.

“I wonder why he’s asking about me,” she thought and then drifted off to sleep.

Scarlet awoke to her mom gently shaking her. “You need to go on to your bed, Scarlet.”

“Okay,” Scarlet got up and drug herself to her room. She changed into her pajamas and started to climb into bed when she heard a loud crashing noise in the attic. She was suddenly wide awake and staring at the ceiling above her.

She climbed out of bed and went down the hall to the door that led to the attic. As she got farther down the hall she began to hear what sounded like rain in the house. She slowly ascended the stairs. The floor creaked loudly with every step.

By the time she got to the top of the stairs she could hear that there was not only rain in the attic, but what sounded like a storm in the middle of the ocean.

Her hand was shaking as she reached for the door knob. She walked into the room and saw that the noise of the rain was coming from the book.

She walked over to the book. Instead of words she saw a picture of a ship in a storm. The picture began to move, and the last line that she had written was repeated back to her. "The storm raged with fury, but none could match the rage that was within Captain Caranova as he swung the wheel hard trying to keep the ship under his own control instead of being lost in the belly of the sea."

A gust of wind blew at her from behind, pushing her forward. She tried to step away from the book, but it seemed that something reached from within the book and pulled her into it. She felt the stinging rain on her face as she was pulled into this new and dangerous world. She felt a hard surface beneath her and realized that she was on the deck of a ship. She looked around. Dirty, angry pirates moved about the deck securing sails and life lines.

"Who are you?" came a harsh, gravelly voice from behind her.

She knew that voice, though she had never actually heard it. She turned around and saw the man that she had considered to be the best villain that she had ever created: Captain Caranova, a fierce towering man, whose cruelty she had brought to life with her own words.

"Who are you?" he growled once more.

"Scarlet," she answered, her voice shaking.

"And how, Scarlet did you come to be aboard my ship?"

"I....I," she stammered, "I don't know. I was writing this story and I left the book open, but my grandfather...."

"Silence!" Caranova barked. "What do you mean, you were writing this story?"

"This is just a book," she said. "I wrote you. You're Captain Caranova, the most dangerous pirate to sail the seas."

Caranova smirked. "You wrote me, huh?"

Scarlet swallowed hard. "Yes."

"You seem to be nothing but a foul little stowaway to me," he growled. Scarlet then heard a line that she herself had written into this character repeated back to her: "I do not tolerate stowaways on board this ship. Anyone on board my ship without my say so is to be killed."

Scarlet backed up until her back was against the rail of the ship. She looked around for any way out of this nightmare, but there was none. Suddenly a man flew down from the crow's nest and landed in front of her. She knew this man as well. It was the hero of the story, Tyrus Delvega. She even remembered the exact line that made it were he was able to fly:

"After Tyrus learned the songs of the dryads and nymphs they gave him the gift of flight."

He caught her around the waist and flew back into the crow's nest. Caranova swore loudly from below and yelled for his men to climb up after them.

Tyrus turned to face her. He fixed her with his dark brown eyes.

"Is it true?" he demanded.

"What?" she asked.

"That you are a writer and this is just some story that you wrote? Is it true?"

"Yes, I didn't mean to come here. I should have listened to Grandfather."

"Stop rambling," he huffed. "Do you not realize what kind of situation you're in?"

"Yes I do. I wrote this story."

"So, if you're the writer then why can you not control anything that's going on? If you created all this, myself and Caranova included, why can't you just come and go as you please?"

"I don't know," Scarlet told him. "All I know is that I should've closed the book before."

"Well, it seems there's only one solution," he told her. "You have to close the book."

"How?" she asked. "How can I close a book when I'm inside of it?"

"You must return to the place where you entered this world," he answered.

She looked down to the deck at Caranova. "But Caranova was fixing to kill me."

"You arrived on the ship down there, so there must be a way for you to return from the deck," He grabbed her by the wrist and they flew back to the deck.

They landed on the deck right where Scarlet had first come into the world. Caranova stormed down from the helm to where they were standing.

"So, Scarlet." Caranova fixed her with his terrible gaze. "I see you are in league with this imposter. I might have guessed as much." Caranova took a step toward Tyrus, but stopped when he drew his sword. "Why are the two of you here? Answer me truthfully and your death will be less painful."

Scarlet knew why Tyrus was there. He was a stowaway, trying to get to a land across the sea, but there really was no explanation for why she was there.

"I'm here by accident, as is she," Tyrus told him. "Advance one more step and I just might cause another accident simply because I feel like it."

"You don't frighten me boy." Caranova drew his own sword and lunged at said boy with extraordinary force. Tyrus parried the blow and pushed Caranova backward.

Many of the other pirates joined the fight, slashing wildly at Scarlet as well as Tyrus. Scarlet tried to dodge every blow, but found it quite hard to do so. She grabbed part of a broken barrel off the deck to defend herself with. The young girl soon found herself with the starboard rail behind her and a gang of ruthless pirates in front of her.

Tyrus flew over and landed beside her. He fought hard against a man who had the mind to kill them both. Scarlet swung her piece of wood hard, catching the man on the back of the head, while Tyrus kicked him in the chest, sending him sliding backwards across the deck.

"This was not a good idea," Scarlet said. "We can't fight all of them."

"What did you want to do, surrender?" he asked as he threw another man back.

"No, but there has to be something we can do."

"Well," he said, giving her a sideways look, "I'm open to suggestions."

Suddenly, something caught her eye. There was a small patch of light about the size of her fist hanging in the air near where she had first come onto the ship.

"There!" She pointed. "That has to be the way out."

"Well then, let's get you out of this book before we're both killed."

Suddenly, Captain Caranova stepped in between her and the light. "Book?" He asked. "What do you mean, 'Get you out of this book'?"

Her mind searched for an answer. There was nothing she could say that he would believe.

Caranova reached out and grabbed Tyrus. He put his sword to the young man's throat and held it tight. "Speak quickly, and tell me what devilry you are into, or I'll kill him."

Scarlet looked at the patch of light, then at Tyrus. He was the hero of the story. At least she had planned for him to be. She looked at the light once more. It was getting smaller. She had to get to it before it went away completely.

"Forget about me, Scarlet," Tyrus told her. "Once you get out of the book, you can change all of this."

Caranova tightened his grip on the young man. "Shut up boy," he hissed.

Scarlet stood frozen. She had created these two men she could not just stand there and watch them kill each other.

"Speak child!" The captain glared at her for a long moment.

"I'm the only one who can change your story, so you best do what I tell you, Caranova."

The captain laughed out loud, but as he did his grip on Tyrus loosened. Tyrus quickly elbowed the large man in the ribs and threw him to the side. He then grabbed Scarlet by the wrist and thrust her toward the light.

She looked into the light and she could see the attic. She looked back at Tyrus, but just as

she did, Caranova reached up and grabbed her by the ankle. She screamed as he pulled her over. She fell hard. The ship lurched, sending her rolling across the deck.

The captain got back to his feet and came at Scarlet, his sword drawn.

Tyrus ran over and tackled him. The two men thrashed about, fighting their way around the deck, soon finding themselves in front of Scarlet once again. Tyrus managed to get back to his feet. He kicked the large man in the face, knocking him out, then got up and stepped on his chest to keep him from getting back up. He then helped Scarlet back to her feet. He looked deep into her eyes and nodded.

“Go,” he whispered. “Finish the story.”

She ran toward the light. It was almost completely gone. She quickly reached through and felt a hand grab hers. It firmly gripped her hand and pulled her back into her own world. She lay on the floor, soaking wet, gasping for breath. Looking up, she noticed the person who had pulled her back was her grandfather. She stood up, feeling ashamed, as if she had completely disobeyed him.

Instead of scolding her, he just nodded toward the book. She walked over and saw that the book, besides being slightly damp, now had her part written in it.

He walked over and put his arm around her shoulder. “Stories can write themselves if you’re not careful.”

She looked up at him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do it.”

He just smiled and nodded, then gently closed the book.



Kimberly Page

Ode to Unconventional Love

Two hearts beat in unison, intertwined
by the ties of pure, raw love,
but are separated by emotionless distance.

Both hearts race in anticipation of teasing caresses
that never come, but are simulated by
phantom feelings that flutter across sensitive skin.

Mouths fall slightly slack, ready for passion's
tender kiss, but have yet to meet
the tangled dance of tongues and juncture of lips.

Arms ache to be wrapped around
true love's embodiment,
but only meet empty air and lonely truth.

Bodies, tuned by mental connection to each other's
needs, long to be pressed
together to feel the warmth of sensual embrace.

The night's silence and cold breath chills the soul
and makes the miles seem even
farther in the dark, solitude of an unfilled bed.

Each half of love's puzzle clings to pillow,
pretending that it is what is most desired —
to be entangled with the body of love;
however, only loneliness is received.

— *Selby Cody*



Kristin Cook



Linda Whitaker

Will You?

CHARACTERS:

WILLIAM KERR: 28 years old; blond hair; blue eyes

MADELINE CRUZ: 27 years old; petite; brown hair; brown eyes

CHRISTIAN ELLIOTT: 28 years old; brown hair; brown eyes

ANDREA JOHNSON: 26 years old; tall; red hair; green eyes

Scene I

(William and Christian are sitting in an airplane.)

WILLIAM: So, do you think Madeline will say yes?

CHRISTIAN: Dude, of course she will. Why wouldn't she?

WILLIAM: I don't know. I'm just nervous about asking her, I guess.

CHRISTIAN: You mean to tell me that you're more concerned about asking Madeline to marry you than jumping out of this plane?

WILLIAM: Well, jumping out of this plane is all a part of the plan.

CHRISTIAN: Will, if she says no, what will you do?

WILLIAM: Crash and burn. Hopefully, after I land.

CHRISTIAN: What possessed us to decide to skydive anyway?

WILLIAM: I seem to recall a heavy amount of alcohol and my plan to propose to Madeline. We shouldn't have mixed the two.

CHRISTIAN: Well we did, and here we are.

(As the plane begins to make its way to the drop zone, the two start to tremble with fear. They stand up and prepare to dive.)

CHRISTIAN: Here we go. This is it.

WILLIAM: I don't know which I'm more nervous about: the jump or Madeline.

CHRISTIAN: What did she say when you told her we were jumping today?

WILLIAM: Well, you see, I didn't actually tell her about this.

CHRISTIAN: What? Were you drinking again when you decided this? Were you drinking without me?

WILLIAM: Dude, priorities. But no I wasn't drinking when this occurred to me. I just want her to be really surprised.

CHRISTIAN: Nothing's more surprising than your boyfriend falling out of the sky, and then asking you to be his wife. So, don't worry I think you have that covered.

WILLIAM: Well, we have a few more minutes before we have to go. You go first to make sure that Madeline is watching the sky when I dive.

CHRISTIAN: Sure thing. *(As Christian approaches the opening of the plane, he turns to face William.)*

CHRISTIAN: I'll see you at the bottom and catch you on the flip side. *(He jumps. William is left alone on the plane. He prepares to leap but hesitates.)*

WILLIAM: I really hope Madeline finds this as romantic as it seems in my head. Okay, I've got the ring, and it's safe and secure. That would be just my luck. I land on target, meet Madeline, and as I drop to my knee, I realize that it's gone and must have lost it sometime on the way down. Don't be nervous. She's dated you for three years. There is no need to worry about her answer. I love her, and she loves me. It's almost as if...Oh right, I have to jump! *(He leaps forward.)*

Scene II

(Madeline and Andrea are at a BBQ booth at the town festival.)

ANDREA: I cannot believe that we almost didn't get to help out at the booth today.

MADELINE: I know! Who would have thought that the festival officials would have needed a certificate to prove that we were supposed to be here?

ANDREA: That one man was a real ass about it too.

MADELINE: He was just another old man trying to show his dominance to the younger staff members.

ANDREA: Does that mean he has to be an ass?

MADELINE: It's usually a requirement.

ANDREA: Anyway, have you heard from Christian or William today?

MADELINE: William said that he was headed out of town to run some errands. I haven't heard from Christian. I would think you would have talked to him though.

ANDREA: What is that supposed to mean?

MADELINE: You know exactly what it means. You two have made sickening, goo-goo eyes at each other ever since you met. It's been about three months, and every time we all hang out, you two get closer and closer.

ANDREA: That doesn't mean anything.

MADELINE: Are you as oblivious to the obvious as you seem to be?

ANDREA: No comment.

MADELINE: That's what I thought.

ANDREA: You're the one to talk. I truly believe that William is going to pop the question any

day now.

MADELINE: I don't know.

ANDREA: You're kidding me right? I mean the guy is crazy for you. He probably had the ring picked out only months into dating you.

MADELINE: That's not creepy at all.

ANDREA: Between you two, no, it's not.

MADELINE: Whatever.

ANDREA: Are you ready to go outside and watch the divers?

MADELINE: I'll never understand what causes grown individuals to jump out of a flying plane just for the sake of an audience's attention.

ANDREA: Is that a yes?

MADELINE: Absolutely.

Scene III

(A crowd has gathered near the divers' target to see the spectacle. Madeline and Andrea stand outside the BBQ booth to watch.)

ANDREA: Who do you think is jumping this year?

MADELINE: My best guess is some local psycho.

ANDREA: Well that sure lowers the possibilities.

MADELINE: There goes the first one. *(She points skyward.)*

ANDREA: I wonder what people think on the way down.

MADELINE: How about, "Please let the parachute open, please let the parachute open!"?

ANDREA: That would be too obvious.

MADELINE: Don't even get me started on things being obvious.

ANDREA: Oh my gosh! Is that who I think it is?

MADELINE: Yes, I'm talking about Christian.

ANDREA: No! Look up!

MADELINE: What the hell? Christian?

(Christian lands on target and walks towards Madeline and Andrea.)

CHRISTIAN: I'm glad to see you guys made it to the festival.

ANDREA: What were you thinking? You could have died.

MADLINE: Where's William?

CHRISTIAN: How should I know? By the way, I'm fine. Thanks for asking.

MADLINE: I'm sorry. I'm glad you're okay. It's just that where one of you is, the other can't be far away.

CHRISTIAN: He's fine. He's right behind me.

ANDREA: Is that William there?

MADLINE: Why is he so far away? He isn't going to land on target.

CHRISTIAN: I don't understand. He should have jumped already.

ANDREA: Where is he headed?

Scene IV

(The three of them stand staring in shock)

CHRISTIAN: He's way off target. He's headed for the trees! He was right behind me. I could have sworn he jumped right after me.

ANDREA: It's not your fault. What could have distracted him, causing him to jump too late?

CHRISTIAN: Uh...no idea. I have no idea.

MADLINE: Who cares? The important thing is that he lands safely. Why was he jumping anyway?

CHRISTIAN: I have no idea. He talked me into it. I thought that it was just for the hell of it.

ANDREA: Yeah, sure it was.

MADLINE: I'm fixing to go in there myself and look for him.

ANDREA: You can't. The cops told us to stay in the gate. They don't want to risk losing anyone else.

CHRISTIAN: Don't worry, Madeline. I'm sure he'll be fine.

MADLINE: This is all your fault.

ANDREA: Madeline!

MADLINE: You should have talked him out of this, but like always, you followed his lead.

CHRISTIAN: That's not fair. You don't know —

MADLINE: Don't know what, Christian?

CHRISTIAN: You don't know what you're talking about.

ANDREA: Guys! Just calm down. Both of you. The paramedics are bringing him out now.

Scene V

(Two Paramedics enter bearing William on a stretcher)

MADELINE: Are you okay?

WILLIAM: No offense, Babe, but that's a hell of a question.

CHRISTIAN: Still making jokes?

ANDREA: You're crazy! You know that right?

WILLIAM: I've only been told a time or two.

MADELINE: Honestly, what were you thinking? You could have been killed.

WILLIAM: But I wasn't. The docs say that I only have some scratches and a mild concussion from hitting one of the branches.

ANDREA: Why didn't you jump sooner?

CHRISTIAN: Yeah, man. What was on your mind so much to distract you?

WILLIAM: Guys, can you give me a minute? *(Christian and Andrea walk away)*

WILLIAM: Madeline.

MADELINE: What is it?

WILLIAM: Look I know I messed up. I shouldn't have done something so stupid, especially without talking to you first about it. But I wanted this to be special.

MADELINE: What? The festival?

WILLIAM: Just hear me out. I should have realized that something could have gone wrong. Hell, it did go wrong. I should have known with my luck that it would. But the point is that I wanted you to be surprised. I thought this was the perfect way to do this.

MADELINE: Do what?

WILLIAM: Madeline, will you marry me?

MADELINE: Wha...What?

WILLIAM: I had this whole plan. I was going to land on target, and when you realized that it was me, I was going to ask you in front of everyone. Obviously, that didn't go as smoothly as I was hoping. I realize that this is a hell of a time to ask.

MADELINE: Yes.

WILLIAM: Really?

MADELINE: Yes, really.

WILLIAM: I thought it was the best idea at the time. Even Christian said the plan was pretty solid.

MADELINE: Christian knew what you were up to?

WILLIAM: Yeah, why?

MADELINE: I have to do something. I'll be right back. *(She walks over to Andrea and Christian.)*

MADELINE: I'm sorry, Christian.

CHRISTIAN: It's okay.

MADELINE: No, it's not. I shouldn't have vented out my anger and fear towards you. I really am sorry.

CHRISTIAN: I'll forgive you, but only if you said yes.

ANDREA: Yes to what?

MADELINE: Christian didn't tell you?

CHRISTIAN: I was working up to it.

ANDREA: Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?

MADELINE: William proposed.

ANDREA: I knew he would! You have to show me the ring.

MADELINE: He hasn't given it to me yet.

ANDREA: Then you got nothing.

MADELINE: Andrea!

ANDREA: I only kid. You know me. But get your ass back over there. *(Madeline returns to William.)*

WILLIAM: What was all that about?

MADELINE: I needed to apologize to Christian. I acted really stupid when you jumped.

WILLIAM: I was really stupid to jump.

MADELINE: No argument here.

WILLIAM: I have something I need to give you. *(William pulls out a white gold ring with single, heart shaped diamond in the center from his pocket.)*

MADELINE: It's beautiful.

WILLIAM: Not as beautiful as you. *(Andrea and Christian approach the couple.)*

CHRISTIAN: Well, I say that we follow you to the hospital, and after all of this, we just hang out at my house.

ANDREA: Sounds like a good plan. There's nothing like hanging out with friends and your boyfriend.

MADLINE: Do what? Did you finally get together?

CHRISTIAN: Yeah. I asked her while William was giving you the ring.

WILLIAM: It's about time.

(Black out.)

— *Amber Amerson*

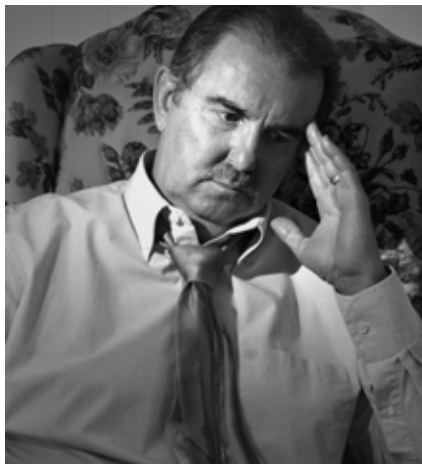


Corri Batten

Process of the Actor

The stage is dark,
Cold,
Relentless.
Those who act, subjugate themselves to the harsh mistress.
I take the Stand with Heart in hand,
Hiding beneath my mask.
A single light,
Searing,
Exposing.
I see the twilight gazes of those who judge me,
Holding their breath,
Waiting for me to slip.
They know my lines, know my part, how I should be!
How I will be.
The eyes cry out!
They must sate their hunger!
I WILL BE THEIR SACRIFICE!
I resist.
Every fiber screams in horror, but the searing photons shrink me down.
I fear all my secrets.
KNOWN!
I scream! Swinging at invisible demons that only I can see!
Then, as all hope seems lost the attack ends.
And as the limelight dries my tears and I give one final kiss goodbye to who I once was,
What I once was,
I straighten
And realize I'm acting again.

— *Matthew Hobbs*



Linda Whitaker

Kentucky Windage

Here's my backyard step-daddy moonshiner
And his mama-wife my mom

In her ragamuffin morning clothes, letting that smoke snake-coil
And smolder in her hand like dirty, wavy baby doll hair.

I like how she's got one chicken-leg propped upon the tree stump,
Chest arm-crossed like she wasn't about to be told.

Or like she was cold. But it's summer, and she's disgusted,
Looking at her man like it ain't rained in months,

The sewer's rank yellow breath
All up in her face and neck. A whole mess of backjaw words

Wrestling under her tongue. When you look at her
With a little Kentucky windage, she's fifty-six going on sixteen.

If she's the brains of this operation, he's the beauty:
Shirtless with suspenders lifting a couple quarts of corn liquor.

The hot air tastes like locust bark on his lips, but he's got it made
In the shade of a dogwood floating over the groundhog still

Rigged with ripped out hoses and an exhaust pipe
From the driveway-truck.

Like someone really was trying to heat the whole of the outside.
He side glances that neighbor-spying-neighbor,

Who one day clatter-packed over a crate full of Mason jars.
Next day, he's hush-talking the phone-cop.

— *Chris Mattingly*

Price

“You want something?” Fight! The voice of reason,
echoing throughout my core,
Beating, Breaking, Striking away hopeless transgressions,
Walls that inhibit my own humanity.
Weighted chains can be taken away,
But is it worth the price you pay?
Broken Flesh, Salty tears, as my heart beats slower.
Hopeless, I remain.

Zero sum propositions to the populace, leading the
hopeless, guiding the foolish — directly to bullets of envy.

The price of war outweighed the gain of my child’s first tears,
Or my own, brushing against my love’s golden band.

The price was my life, The gain: freedom —
Or just bloody paper, or dusty golden rocks in the desert?

— *Nacharvius Edquelle Byrd*



Red Cross - Sherri Brantley

Lonely

Do we like to watch them suffer?

Do we not see the hurt in their eyes,

But only that they're not cool enough,

Have no Mustangs or big houses,

Dress so strangely, and

Wear black jackets every single day

With hood-covered scars?

When will we understand and include them,

Stop worrying what others may think,

Accept that it's okay to be different, and

Then use our power to change a life?

Or will we always turn away?

—*Julie Victoria Scott*

Leap

Stop.
For a flash let me take you,
To a place you thought you'd never go.
Now, sure this place-this fictional place-
could be anywhere in the world,
Anywhere in the universe:
The bottom of the sea.
The tops of trees.
The meadow behind your house.
The happy place in your heart.
Let me take you to a city-a nameless city-not
on the map.
When you get there climb the tallest
skyscraper you see.
Climb it to the highest tippy top,
Touch the clouds
Now pause.
Look around-
See the world beneath you?
The tiny cars?
The tiny people?
With their tiny heads and tiny hands and
their tiny little lives?
Zoom out.
Feel the city.
Hear its heartbeat?
The thump of life coursing through the veins,
the streets.
And connect.

This.
This is what you are part of.
This living,
Breathing,
Organism we call everyday life.
Together we make it.
We make the being like cells make your body.
As they make you who you are,
You make life what life is.
You.
It's all you.
Now you're standing here, arms out stretched
as if to give the world a hug.
What do you do?
Do you fly and soar like a bird?
High and mighty, above everyone everything,
else?
Do you sink like a rock in a lake?
Sitting there.
Collecting moss, just trying to fade from the
world?
Or do you play the masterful chameleon?
Ever changing like the weather?
So here you are, standing on the precipice of
your life.
What happens next?
Don't look at me, I just brought you here.
The choice is yours.
Now leap.

— *Matthew Hobbs*

Modern Madness

I must find the right combination of medication
So that I may balance on my mind's razor's edge
Between insanity and the proper perception of reality
While peeling back the head of my eardrum
To pour in the deliciously depressing tones of Type O Negative
And savor their flavorful words in its cylinder
As songs beat minutes away.

*Sincerely Yours,
Modern Hyde (AKA The Mad Man)*



What a Ride - Curtis Clemons



Linda Whitaker

Twenty Point Buck

CHARACTERS:

FRED: *Mid-twenties to early thirties*

LEROY: *Same age, best friends with Fred, in love with Annabelle Jenkins*

ANNABELLE JENKINS: *Same age, Leroy's girlfriend*

MR. JENKINS: *Annabelle's father*

(It's 5:00 pm on a Friday and Fred is waiting for his buddy Leroy, in the woods to go deer hunting)

FRED: *(looks at his watch)* Where is he? What's taking him so long?

(Enter Leroy, all in an uproar)

LEROY: Fred! Fred!

FRED: What's the matter with you? You were supposed to be out here an hour ago.

LEROY: Fred, I need your help, buddy! I mean, I really need your help.

FRED: What in the world have you gone and done now?

LEROY: Nothing. What you mean?

FRED: Any time you need my help that bad, you done got yourself into some kind of fix and I have to bail your butt out.

LEROY: Oh no, it ain't nothing like that. We need to kill a twenty point buck tonight.

FRED: A twenty point? Why a twenty point?

LEROY: A twenty point buck is the key to the heart of my true love.

FRED: How is a twenty pointer the key to a woman's heart?

LEROY: Well, Fred, I'll tell you. You know Annabelle Jenkins don't you?

FRED: Yes.

LEROY: She lives on Bear Trap Lane.

FRED: Yeah, I know who she is.

LEROY: She lives there with her parents, and I go to see her in the evenings.

FRED: Yes, Leroy, I know —

LEROY: She's real pretty with long blond hair.

FRED: For the five hundredth time, I know who she is!

LEROY: Yeah, anyway, I went over to see her last night. When I got there I heard her and her mamma and daddy talking. Now I knew her daddy always liked me okay. I heard him say,

"Yeah, old Leroy seems like a great feller. What's it gonna take?" Then I heard Annabelle say, "Twenty point buck, on his birthday." Tomorrow is my birthday, Fred! If I'm gonna win her heart, we gotta find and shoot a twenty point buck tonight!

FRED: Are you sure that's what she said?

LEROY: Yeah, I heard it from her own mouth.

FRED: Did you go in and ask her?

LEROY: There was no need. The only way I'll ever win her heart is to take her a twenty point buck.

FRED: You're doing it again.

LEROY: Doing what?

FRED: Pulling me into your mess! Last time it was the bass fishing contest. Instead of fishing in the lake we've been fishing in since we were kids, you decided to go raid Old Man Wilkerson's pond, and me, like a dumb ass, went with you.

LEROY: How was I supposed to know that his bass was like pets to him?

FRED: That didn't matter. We wound up going to jail for three days for trespassing.

LEROY: Well, that was different.

FRED: Oh yeah, don't even get me started on the time we went on the biggest coon contest. You couldn't find no coons in the woods, so you, Mr. Genius, decided to go shooting at coons on people's porches. I had to bail you out of jail that time.

LEROY: This time we keep it all legal. We're hunting in the same woods we've always hunted in. Come on. I need you to help me out. There won't be no going to jail or nothing like that this time.

FRED: (*sighing*) Alright, let's go see what we can find.

(*Later, in the deer stand*)

FRED: (*whispering*) Look. There's a five point about thirty yards off to the left.

LEROY: (*whispering*) No. It ain't good enough. It ain't no twenty.

FRED: Look, there's four does over there. Good eating.

LEROY: Ain't none of them twenty pointers.

FRED: Have you lost your mind? I can just shoot one of them for me and then we'll wait and see if there's a twenty point later.

LEROY: If you shoot one of those, you'll scare off every other deer in these woods.

FRED: You know, I'm pretty sure you'll have Annabelle's heart whether you bring her a twenty point buck or not.

LEROY: I heard her say that it was gonna take a twenty point buck.

FRED: Are you sure that's what she said?

LEROY: Fred, I may be a lot of things, but I ain't deaf.
(*pause*)

FRED: (*pointing as if at deer, sarcastically*) Hey, Leroy. Don't shoot. I've only seen thirty deer pass us since we got here.

LEROY: Ain't none of 'em twenty pointers.

FRED: (*as if to his other friends*) Guess what fellas? We hunted for several hours the other night. (*pretending to be someone else*) What, there weren't any deer? (*back to himself*) Oh there was plenty of deer out there, but Leroy wanted to shoot a twenty point buck to win Annabelle Jenkins' heart. Ain't no meat in the freezer, but her heart belongs to Leroy. (*done with the fake conversation*) I can just hear it now; can't you, Leroy?

LEROY: Look, I would do this for *you*.

FRED: What? Let thirty deer walk by and not even get a shot off?

LEROY: Come on now. If I want to win Annabelle's heart I have to —

FRED: I know. You have to kill her twenty point buck. You've said that about three hundred times.

LEROY: Well, Mr. Smartass, if your girlfriend said that it took a twenty point buck to win her heart wouldn't you like to do what it took?

FRED: My girlfriend usually don't ask for deer. She likes it when I bring her flowers or just a hug.

LEROY: Well, Annabelle's different. She likes the simpler stuff.

FRED: Simpler huh? That explains why she likes you. (*looking up*) It's getting late. I reckon I better get on home. I'm tired and hungry.

LEROY: Yeah. You're right. I'm tired and hungry too. I don't guess there's any twenty pointer out here.

FRED: Don't worry, Leroy. I'm sure Annabelle loves you whether you bring her a twenty point buck or not.

LEROY: You think so?

FRED: Shoot yeah. You're a good guy. Ain't the smartest guy all the time, but you got a good heart.

LEROY: Yeah, I reckon so. Let's get going.

(*Leroy jerks to attention*)

FRED: What is it?

LEROY: I can't leave these woods tonight without a twenty pointer.

FRED: Have you lost your mind? It's illegal to shoot deer after dark. And besides, there ain't no twenty pointers out here.

LEROY: I can't disappoint her. Tomorrow is my birthday, and I won't have another chance.

FRED: Look, I'm through getting in trouble cause you mess up. I ain't gonna go to jail for night hunting and you—

(they both look around as if they hear something)

LEROY: What was that?

FRED: Probably one of those deer we saw earlier.

LEROY: Give me your spotlight.

FRED: I ain't shining my spotlight into the woods. It's illegal to shine for deer.

LEROY: Just give me the light.

(Fred hands him the light. Leroy shines it in the direction they were looking.)

Leroy: *(awestruck)* There it is, Fred.

FRED: You gotta be kidding me.

LEROY: It's the twenty point buck!

FRED: *(counting the points)* One, two, three..... yep, it's a twenty pointer!

LEROY: Give me your rifle.

FRED: No. We can't shoot a deer in the dark. What if there is a game warden out here? I ain't going to jail cause of you no more.

LEROY: Give me the gun. *(takes the gun and fires it)* I hit him.

FRED: He's running away!

LEROY: Oh no you don't. Get back here, you rascal!

(Leroy takes out after the deer. "Shoot to Kill," by AC/DC, plays in the background. Fred stands holding the spotlight listening to the sound of Leroy screaming, sticks breaking, and the deer bellowing)

FRED: That moron's gonna get himself killed.

(Leroy comes out of the woods dragging the deer)

LEROY: Yee haw! I got him!

FRED: Yeah, I reckon you did. Now let's get out of here before we get caught.

LEROY: Alright, I want to take this deer to Annabelle's house right now.

FRED: It's two in the morning.

LEROY: As long as I can get it to her before eight because that's the time that I was born. So, it won't be my birthday officially until then. Will you come with me, Fred?

FRED: Sure.

(Later, at Annabelle's house. Leroy knocks on the door. Enter Mr. Jenkins)

LEROY: Good morning Mr. Jenkins.

MR. JENKINS: Well, good morning, Leroy.

LEROY: I gotta see Annabelle right quick like.

MR. JENKINS: Alright, hold your horses. She'll be right here.

(Exit Mr. Jenkins. Enter Annabelle)

LEROY: Hey, Annabelle. I have something here for you.

ANNABELLE: What in the world happened to your face?

LEROY: It's battle scars from the battle I fought to win the key to your heart.

ANNABELLE: Ohhhhkay and what's that?

LEROY: Come to the back of my truck and I'll show you.

ANNABELLE: *(follows him)* Alright. Hey, Fred.

Fred: Hey, Annabelle.

LEROY: Look. I got what it takes to win your heart. A twenty point buck.

ANNABELLE: Awwww, that's so sweet. But you didn't have to shoot a buck to win my heart. It's already yours.

FRED: See.

LEROY: Yeah, but I thought —

ANNABELLE: Leroy, I love you with or without a buck. *(hugs him)* Oh, by the way, I got you something for your birthday.

LEROY: Oh, just knowing that you love me is the best gift ever.

ANNABELLE: Well, at least look at it.

LEROY: Okay.

(Annabelle hands him a small box)

LEROY: Wow, a new watch. Thank you.

ANNABELLE: Yep. It cost me twenty four bucks. I had to borrow the money from Mamma and Daddy, but you're a great guy, and you're worth it.

— Roscoe Parker



Don't Bug Me - Curtis Clemons

Blues Man

So hot
That even angels sweat
So cold
The hearts in the bluesman's song
So raw
The notes that hang in the air
Like cigarette smoke
In a poor man's bar.

Over the clink
Of glasses at the bar
Over the murmuring crowd
Over the sounds of whiskey
And release
The bluesman stands his ground

He taps his foot on the heart pine floor
And digs down deep into his soul

His clothes are worn
But his music shines
Like the sweat upon his brow

Cicadas throb in the delta night
And music purls from his battered guitar
Currents of woe
Of sorrow
Of pain
Songs like a stifled sob

The walls are bare
And the ceiling rough
In this naked ark
And oilcloth covers original sins

The weight of the world
Presses down this night
The air is heavy
As sour souls exhale

The bluesman sings
His sad, sad songs
The rhythm staggers
Like a drunk

And miseries mount
Like the soiled dollar bills
In the Mason jar
So old
So new
So blue
So true

— *Kenneth Homer*

2014

The swing on the front porch of the old mansion silently swayed in the late afternoon breeze. Even for the country, it was unusually quiet. On a good day, the chatter of the animals could be heard, but today was different. Nothing stirred, except for Nova. The air seemed to hold the possibility of an early autumn. The leaves were beginning to change and fall to the ground. This used to be her favorite time of the year. At one time, Halloween had been her favorite holiday, but now she no longer saw the fun in it.

She ambled across the field, headed toward the mansion. Her pace was significantly slower than it once was, and she hated the idea of moving altogether because of it. There were plenty of changes that had taken place that had caused her to question her own existence. Her beautiful blonde hair had almost completely fallen out. She had never been able to tan, but before, she could at least have felt when she was sunburned. When she got the opportunity to see her reflection, she didn't recognize the girl who stared back at her. On the bright side, she now had a reason to truly dislike her breasts. Scratches covered her chest, and through her ripped shirt, she could make out the dingy, dirty skin underneath. For about the thousandth time, she replayed her last day of vivid memory through her mind.

Everything was normal on the day everything changed. Some news reports talked of odd attacks on the innocent while others spoke of strange behavior from relatively peaceful animals. Her parents had taken all the necessary precautions to prevent anything from happening to her or her brother.

Nova still didn't quite understand it all. She thought she had done all the right things, and more importantly, had believed all the right things. Yet, here she was. Unbelievably hungry all the time, never tired or sleepy, but just as alive in her mind as the day she was born. She had seen others like her occasionally but had steered clear of them. They were too terrifying to look at, let alone join them on whatever journey they considered themselves on.

At least, that's how she saw her situation. If she actually thought about what was really happening to her, she would go insane. She was so lonely all the time. For the last week, she had traveled west just searching. Every now and then a car would pass and she would stick out her thumb for a ride, but she never succeeded.

She had lost count of how many days had passed. In fact, she didn't know if it even mattered anymore. Images of the leaves changing and falling to ground flashed through her mind. She didn't know if these were distant memories or events she had seen recently.

So when she saw the child, she was startled, which was something she never thought would happen again. The child was a boy, no more than four years old. Even though her senses had grown dull from lack of use and all that she had been through, she could see him quite well. However, what stood out the most was his smell.

He smelled familiar. It was really odd because she had no idea who this boy was, but the familiarity of his scent made her crave his companionship. It had been so long since she

had felt the touch of anything or anyone. She had been so lonely, and this child signified everything she had been searching for since she was exiled from her loved ones.

The boy looked at her curiously. His eyes were wide with what seemed to be fear. He was so innocent. It wasn't hard to tell. His skin was smooth, but it seemed to have too much exposure to the sun for a child so young. He began to slowly walk backward out of Nova's reach. It wasn't until he began to back away that she realized that she was reaching out for him. She had been so alone that the possibility of feeling the soft skin of this child on hers was overpowering all of her other thoughts. She was so close. She reached out and was so close to feeling his blonde hair slip through her fingers. Then, the thunder crashed.

It frightened the child so badly that he ran away. As Nova started to chase after him, another clap of thunder sounded. Pain seeped its way through her mind. As she fell to the ground, her eyes remained on the child, who had now ran into the arms of his mother. He was crying into her shoulder while she looked on at Nova with nothing but absolute disgust in her eyes. Everything started to go black, but Nova would not let her eyes move from the mother and child.

At one time, she wanted exactly what she saw in front of her. She wanted the safety and the warmth of another person. At one time, she had that. Her eyes began to close, and she felt nothing anymore. There was no loneliness, no isolation, nothing.

As the family gathered around the dead body, there was relief in the looks of all. The mother gave a great sigh and held her child tighter, closer. The father held his gun in his hand, still aiming at the girl's face. He was proud. He had shot her between the eyes, just like he had always wanted to kill one of them.

Who "them" really were, no one really knew. How could anyone explain the living dead? No one in this family knew why the world had collapsed around them. All they knew by now was survival. This one had been so near their child. They felt ashamed for having come so close to losing him. The monstrosity had to die.

They looked down at the decomposing body of the once beautiful girl. The mother thought that it was too bad that this girl had become one of the enemy. The father just saw her as another notch on his belt of kills. He was proud of what he had done, and he knew that he would brag about his shot whenever they found more survivors. The child stared at the girl. He was too young to realize that this death was, to his family, a necessity. He was too innocent to understand that the death of this creature, whatever it was, was still the ending of a life.

— *Amber Amerson*



Armond Boudreaux

The Anniversary Dress

Windshield wipers squeak in protest as raindrops beat the top of the old Chevrolet, bouncing gingerly onto the blacktop. Moments ago slivers of the moon could be seen just barely through thickening clouds, but the weather, much like the mood, has changed. Pop music is blasting from the outdated car stereo, something about the hands of time. The lyrics are practically a mirror image of the woman's thoughts. As the tempo of the song increases, so does her speed, and before long the couple is sitting in front of their red brick house, the one with matching shutters and newly-manicured lawn.

"If you will wait just a second, baby, I'm coming to help you out."

Chance stumbles around to the driver's side of the vehicle, opening the door with one hand and steadying himself on the car's top with the other. Not moved by this chivalry, she pushes him aside and darts toward the front door, dropping her bag onto the maple table in the foyer and using freshly painted toes to slip new and uncomfortable shoes from her small feet. Katherine glances at the wall where a make-shift shrine to their marriage and family hangs. Wedding photos, their son's class pictures and vacation mementos exhibit happier times, before tragedy struck and changed all their lives forever. Chance's clean, wholesome good looks still catch her eye each time she looks at the display. She sighs in exasperation and wipes tears from her cheeks as she glances down at the deep, dark wine stain spreading across the front of her new dress. The bottle of Bordeaux was a gift from her friends, owners of the restaurant, and meant to be an enhancement to the special night. Sadly, things quickly soured like grapes, and the wine soon became a weapon.

Crossing over to the window, she peeks out between the slats in the blinds and wonders what he could possibly be doing outside in the rain. Married for thirteen years, she knows it is a waste of time to stand around and contemplate his actions; she would be better off trying to count the stars during a storm. She thinks about how things weren't always like this, before the economy hit rock bottom and the wreck happened.

Chance and his twin brother, Charlie, were in a horrific car accident and only one of them survived. The officers working the scene that evening put into the report that the men were out drinking when the driver, Chance, fell asleep at the wheel and lost control of the vehicle. It took several hours to locate Charlie's body, but it was too late. He had not been wearing a seat belt and was ejected on impact, something that haunted her husband with every waking moment.

Katherine sighs as she remembers that terrible night and eases up the carpeted stairs, hearing the gentle click of the doorknob down below. She can hear him fumbling around on the wall for the light switch, muttering obscenities. He calls out to her as she braces herself for the brewing storm. No matter how many times she tells herself that Chance needs help, that he really does love her, she is never quite prepared for the pain his words and actions bring.

"Honey, I'm sorry," he slurs. "You know me, always causing accidents."

She takes a long look in the mirror atop the antique oak dresser, the one with silver hardware on its drawers and family secrets buried deep within the old, stained wood. The piece was part of a wedding gift from her grandmother, a hopeless romantic. Katherine wonders how many times she has stood at this dresser and cried, wonders if her ancestors ever wept on it, too. A shadowy image has begun to show itself across her face, not quite a bruise just yet, but almost. Tonight it was her cheek, last week, both eyes.

“Please let me in. You know that I am sorry. I don’t know what to do anymore. Please, I just want to be around you.”

She jolts back to the present as she hears her husband’s cries, and he continues to call out to her as he tries to push open the door to their bedroom. She turns the lock to keep him out. The flimsy door is a weak security measure, but it will have to do.

“Just stop it,” she says, her voice barely more than a whisper. “You’re going to wake the kids.”

Their three children, ages three and eight, are sleeping just a few feet down the hall. The sitter, Amy, had dashed out the back door the moment she heard the Matthews couple come in. Katherine had trained the young girl to never ask questions, even if things were obviously wrong. Having worked for them for a while and witnessing such nights before, the teen girl knew it was best to leave the pair alone and come back for her pay in the morning.

“I love you and want to make it up to you,” Chance slurs. “You know you are my world. Please say you aren’t mad at me, that everything is okay. I need you to tell me that everything is going to be alright.”

“Everything is fine,” she replies with a slight quiver in her gentle voice, not quite sure if she believes her words herself. “I’m just going to check on the kids to make sure they’re all okay then I am going to bed. I have work tomorrow.”

“That’s never mattered before! When we were out to dinner, all you wanted to do was talk. Now I need to talk and no one will listen. Why won’t you listen to me?”

When he gets like this, she doesn’t know what to say or do. It hurts that she cannot help her husband get past the pain so things could go back to the way they used to be. She waits to open the door until she hears him stumble back downstairs. She eases down the hallway to check on her children, the sole reason she maintains the marriage. The three-year-old twin girls, Allie and Allyah, are curled together tightly in one bed. Their snug embrace makes the pair appear almost as one, and Katherine reminisces back to the night they were born — two tiny, crying bundles born six minutes apart and two months early. It was as if their premature entrance into the world was a sign of everything that had been, as well as all the struggles yet to come. Katherine tucks a fuzzy pink blanket tightly around the sleeping duo and leaves the nursery adorned with daisies to check on their older brother, Jackson. He is in the room next door, writhing about under the sports-themed quilt as if in the midst of a terrible dream. She places her hand upon his cheek to soothe him as he cries out from a nightmare.

He weeps into the pillow, still sleeping, and the mother gathers her frightened son into her arms, not just to comfort the child but to comfort herself as well. It is nights like these she wishes she were strong and brave, but she is neither, and she knows it. She cradles the boy tightly and asks herself if his nightmares are her fault. As a loving mother, she cannot stomach the thought of ever doing anything to cause her child pain.

From the moment he was born, Katherine has always held a special place in her heart for Jack, not because he was the first-born, but because he truly deserved it. Even though he is only eight years old, much of that time has been spent under the strict scrutiny of his troubled father. Scolded for misplaced toys and soiled t-shirts, the boy learned from a very early age that disappointment and failure were frowned upon in the Matthews household. The boy reciprocated the love for his mother in that he was always trying to protect her, especially when his father would lose control. She sighs as she remembers the time Chance missed a promotion opportunity at work. Coincidentally, the young boy had gotten into trouble that day at school, and his father waited patiently for him at the end of the drive, as if the child had been the one to get the position instead of a sixteen-year veteran of the company. Katherine tried to intervene when the punishment did not fit the crime; in the end, it was proven the child had done nothing wrong, but an apology did not come.

Katherine places the sleeping child back onto the bed, kissing him tenderly on the forehead on the way out. She recalls the numerous times the bad thing had happened and she had let Chance get away with it. When people would see the marks and ask how they got there, she either made excuses or told outright lies. Now that she has a family, she knows she can't keep doing that. Her children are affected, too.

"I just don't know what to do about it anymore. I wish he were dead. I hate him." Katherine continues to whisper her thoughts to her son; it seems she always has to keep things bottled up inside and it feels nice to let it out, if only for a brief moment. Suddenly, she feels the firm grasp of her husband's hand clutch her left shoulder.

"Don't hate it, love. Don't hate me," he says in a drunken voice. "Nothing is so bad you have to feel hatred."

"That's not what I meant," Katherine says, her lower lip trembling.

"You're not supposed to say things you don't mean. Trust me, I know, because I used to say I hated Charlie, but I loved him with all my heart. Oh God, how I love him and miss him." He whimpers softly, tracing his finger gently along her jawline.

"Not tonight, please." She pleads with her husband for just one night of peace in their home. Katherine frees herself from his grip and turns toward the bedroom the couple has shared for more than a decade. She weeps softly as she begins to remove her jewelry. Taking a glance at the wedding ring on her left hand, she considers how something so small and seemingly so simple could symbolize so much. Hot tears mix with the drink on her dress, once beautiful but now ruined beyond repair. She catches a glimpse of her face in the mirror and is appalled by her own reflection. A deep, dark bruise has begun to present itself; it is eerily similar to the stain marking the exquisite gown she'd so carefully chosen for their anniversary dinner.

She hears her son cry out once more in his sleep and steps over to the nightstand to retrieve her 25-caliber handgun. The weapon is cool in her hand, the steel both unnerving and reassuring at the same time. She continues to finger the metal for a few minutes, knowing what she is about to do but lacking the ability to care or stop.

Katherine straightens the front of her dress one last time and wipes her eyes, heading downstairs where her husband has finally succumbed to intoxication and passed out on the black leather sofa. She watches him sleep for a few minutes, a pained expression on his handsome face. She recalls all the good times they'd had together, the simple life they had shared in the beginning. In that tender moment, she is able to forget all the awful things of the night. She makes a promise to herself to help the man she loves overcome his demons.

She ascends the stairs to return the pistol to her room for safe-keeping. Her pledge was the kind of commitment her grandmother had in mind when she passed those heirlooms down as a wedding gift; she knew the most important thing in life is family. Katherine vows to do everything in her power to keep her little family together, despite a few bumps and bruises along the way. She knows deep down inside her heart that's exactly what Charlie would have wanted for them all.

— *Cindy R. Marsh*



Armond Boudreaux

Les Affamés Café

“Why do you have to do this to yourself?” he asked, looking across the table at the once lovely woman he used to know so well. Her long, auburn hair looked thin and wiry now. The face he used to look at for hours, now gaunt and tired, had aged significantly. There were lines on her face and on her pale, transparent skin hidden beneath baggy clothes worn to hide her shame. Empty, lackluster, and looking like death, her eyes told a truth that anyone who cared could see.

He had invited her to come to a noisy little French café on the west side of town. He didn’t really know yet what he had hoped to accomplish. He had doubted she would even show up. A waitress appeared to take their drink order, momentarily breaking the conversation.

Alone again, the woman sighed, rolling her eyes, “There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m just stressed.”

“Come on, Kat. You and I both know that isn’t the only problem.”

“I think it is. I have no other problems, only areas in which I’m taking care of myself the way I think I should.”

He watched as her eyes shifted nervously, glancing at all the nearby people. The place was a little busy, but he was thankful for the background noise.

“Even if you don’t,” she said after a pause, giving him a sad look. She tugged at the sleeves of her oversized shirt. They hadn’t always been this big, but she couldn’t see it the way he saw it. All she could see was the number on the label of the clothes.

“I just don’t understand this obsession,” he said softly, knowing that a raised voice would spook her. “You’re fine the way you are--the way you were. Why must you kill yourself?” In a way, she was like a skittish wild animal, always on alert and worrying about attacks. He couldn’t help but wonder how it got so bad so quickly.

“Jeez, John. Chill out. I’m fine. Nothing is wrong. I don’t have a death wish.” She had made quotation marks in the air around those last two words. Someone beside them laughed loudly, and Kat cringed, shrinking further down in her seat. “Did we have to come to such a crowded place?”

“If everything is so fine and dandy, why are you so jumpy? Why are your clothes so big? Why do you hide?” He sat up, staring, interrogating her with his eyes. She looked down at her hands, twirling her fingers. Right away, he noticed her retreating inside again and cursed to himself. Wading in dangerous waters, he needed to be careful or he’d lose her again.

“My clothes fit fine,” she said, almost whispering. Her eyes fell to her lap where her hands fidgeted, pulling at a loose string from her shirt. Then, she sat up and spat out, “Why does the way I dress concern you?” Back and ready to fight now, she threw up her walls, guarding herself.

He sighed, knowing he had probably lost her. “It doesn’t. You are what concerns me —

the way you treat yourself. It's not healthy."

"There. Is. Nothing. Wrong. With. Me!" she yelled from across the table, getting closer to his face with each word. She went pale with panic as she realized just how close she had gotten to him. "Honestly, I don't understand why it concerns you so damn much what I do or don't do. Look at any magazine. I'm perfect in the eyes of the world." The surrounding people gave them nervous glances, and she realized how loud she had gotten. "Sorry," she mumbled softly as her face turned red. Sitting back in her seat, slowly exhaling through her dry, cracked lips, her shoulders fell in defeat.

"Because I love you, Kat," said John. "I always have, and I always will. When you do this to yourself, you do it to me too. I suffer just as much as you do, even if it is in a different way. Why can't you see how beautiful you are? You're destroying yourself, but it's not just you that's going down. It's killing me too."

Her jaw dropped. "I'm not doing anything wrong, especially since the world tells me that this is the way to be — that this is desirable!" She motioned to her body.

"Well, you are wrong. It isn't natural." John felt tears rising, but he withheld, not wanting to seem weak in front of her. He couldn't understand what possessed her to think this way, and it frustrated him so badly that he was unable to see into her mind.

"How do you know what's natural? Do you live or think like me?" Someone brushed against her back while trying to leave, interrupting her. Her eyes widened but she recovered quickly. "Whatever the hell I'm doing can't be killing you. You aren't me. Get off your damned judgmental high horse and leave me the hell alone!" Her face was red with exacerbation.

As if on cue, the waitress timidly stepped up and broke the tension by asking what they'd like for lunch. "I'll have the soupe du jour, please. What will you be having, Kat?"

"I'm not hungry. Nothing for me, please." John narrowed his eyes at her. "Fine! Give me a salad, I guess." He knew she'd not touch the food like she hadn't even touched the water she'd ordered.

"Kat, why? Please, just tell me why you do this?"

Heavy tears rolled down her cheeks like a depleted waterfall coming back to life after a drought. "I don't know, John. It's just the way I am. It's the way I've been for a long time. It hurts that you think about me this way. It makes me feel like I'm not good enough. Why are you trying to fix me? I'm not broken."

"Oh, my sweet angel... You're so badly broken, but blind to it all. Please, I'm asking one last time; realize what is going on. Take my word when I say there's something wrong. It's like you're looking into a funhouse mirror or something. I can't watch you kill yourself anymore!"

Looking up at him, she asked, "What do you want me to do then?" Pushing back the sleeves of her oversized shirt and setting her arms on the table, she reached across the table and caught his hand with hers, squeezing it.

"Get help. Let me take you somewhere where they know what to do." He held her bony hand,

tracing his thumb along the loose, fragile skin. "I need you. I need you to be you again. I need us to be us again. Please, I'm begging you. Do this for us. Do this for you."

"Can't you just try?" she pleaded. "I don't need any help other than yours."

"I'm completely lost as to how to fix you, my love," he admitted, ashamed that the situation was past any normal person's ability.

She sat quietly and pulled her hands back into her lap. In his mind, everything was starting to click. He felt like a fifty pound weight had landed on his chest.

"Okay, fine," she said. "I'm fine... no, we're fine. I'll do whatever you want." But John could see her eyes betray her words, knowing, finally, the devastating truth.

— *Selby Cody*



African Tribute - Raven Hudson

Too Little, Too Late

CHARACTERS:

PATRICK: A simple, sweet, and yet shy individual with a crush on the GIRL.

PIB: The assertive and logical counterpart to PATRICK, who encourages him to be mature.

GIRL: A prissy young woman.

SCENE 1

(All the scenes take place in a cafeteria)

PIB: Whoa, hey Patrick, there's that girl your'e in love with up there at the checkout counter.

PATRICK1: Huh? Oh yeah, I see her.

PIB: So what's your plan?

PATRICK: What do you mean?

PIB: I mean your plan of action; are you going to do something this go around? Last time you just sat around like a bump on a log.

PATRICK: No I didn't!

PIB: Yes you did. You sat there twiddling your thumbs and said, "She'll recognize me, she's been here before," only to have her walk out the door without even a passing glance.

PATRICK: So? I was trying not to be too forward.

PIB: Oh please, you weren't even facing forward.

PATRICK: Ugh, whatever.

PIB: No, literally, you weren't facing forward; you had your back to her the whole time while watching *Law and Order*. Ha-ha, you were a nervous wreck.

PATRICK: Don't be so mean, and besides, she looked my way and could've noticed me.

PIB: Yeah, either you or your shirt tag sticking up because you wore the thing inside out.

PATRICK: Look who's talking.

PIB: Oh shut-up. So what are you going to do this time?

PATRICK: ... uh.

PIB: Oh my gosh, grow a backbone and make a move! I told you, you have to be more assertive about what you want. Chicks *like* that.

PATRICK: You've never had a girlfriend, so how do you know what chicks like?

PIB: I know this much: they'd rather be with a man who asserts himself than a wimp who wears shirts incorrectly.

PATRICK: Oh, shut-up.

PIB: I just might if you take action! Act! Do it, or I'll do it for you.

PATRICK: NO!! Alright, I will.

PIB: You will?

PATRICK: Yup.

PIB: You'll what?

PATRICK: Take action.

PIB: Really?

PATRICK: Yup, watch.

(The girl leaves the counter and walks past.)

PIB: What was that?!

PATRICK: You didn't see it?

PIB: See what? See the girl walk right past you?

PATRICK: We locked eyes.

PIB: Oh my Go- that was your big plan?

PATRICK: Yup.

PIB : You're a pansy.

PATRICK: Am not!

PIB: I can't wait to tell John and Tim about this-- how Mr. Nosepicker was too afraid to ask out the girl he likes.

PATRICK: Hey!

PIB: What?

PATRICK: *Law and Order's* on.

PIB: Ugh.

SCENE 2

PIB: Hey, there she is again. She's up here earlier this week. Are you actually going to approach her now, or just hope she ogles your funny-looking face again? Hah!

PATRICK: Yours isn't much better looking.

PIB: Oh, shut-up.

PATRICK: Ha-ha.

PIB: So how about it? Will you introduce yourself and ask for a date, or will I have to take the initiative for you?

PATRICK: Like the time you “took initiative” with the coffee pot and burned the roof of your mouth?

PIB: That’s it. I’m asking her.

PATRICK: NO WAIT!! I’ll do it myself.

PIB: Do you seriously mean it?

PATRICK: Yup.

PIB: Then I’ll bear witness to your triumph. Go for it!

(Patrick gets up, walks half-way to the checkout counter, then turns and goes into the restroom.)

PIB: What was that?!

PATRICK: I have to pee.

PIB: Oh BS!

PATRICK: Hey, you know I got a bad pee muscle; the doctor said so. Getting nervous makes me wiz.

PIB: Okay, for one genius, it’s called a bladder. For two, that last bit was absolutely fabricated.

PATRICK: Take your big words and shove ‘em; let me enjoy my wiz.

PIB: Alright Wiz King, urinate while your dream girl walks out the door.

PATRICK: Harsh much?

PIB: Like I said before, you will never get a date with her if you don’t make a move. And you certainly can’t rely on high hopes of her asking you out. Be a man and take charge!

PATRICK: Hey cut me some slack; I got up this time; give me some credit for that.

PIB: Whatever, pansy.

SCENE 3

PIB: There she is, right on time, walking up to the checkout counter. Alright, wait for the word. Ready ... and ... Now! Sweep her off her feet!

PATRICK: ‘Ya know, that’s a long, scary walk away. Maybe I should just invite her over to have a seat and chat instead.

PIB: You know what Patrick, that’s it! I can’t leave this in your hands anymore, I’m going in.

PATRICK: NO!! Please, I’m begging you! I swear that I’ll —

PIB: Nah-uh, you've used up all your mulligans. Patrick, how long do you think this girl is going to keep coming here? You're wasting time like you always do. You constantly procrastinate.

PATRICK: I know, but I'm trying to do better.

PIB: And here's your chance! Besides, look at it this way: being dumb and an extreme wuss, you won't hold yourself morally responsible for anything that happens, will you?

PATRICK: Hey, I may be dumb and a big wuss but ... wait, what else did you say?

PIB: I rest my case. But my point is that you need to MAKE A MOVE! Get up, go over there and let her know who you are. Heck, take it to the next level and ask her out. That'll show you got guts, and aren't a pansy. No girl wants to date a pansy. So grow a spine! It's your time to shine!

PATRICK: You know what? You're right. I'm gonna do it!

(PATRICK walks over to the girl.)

PATRICK : Excuse me miss, but I couldn't help but notice that you come here often. I always enjoy seeing you and would like to know if you'd be interested in maybe getting coffee together some time. Say, Thursday at lunchtime next?

GIRL: Are you kidding me?

PATRICK : I'm sorry?

GIRL: The only reason I stop by this place is to visit my brother. On top of that, I don't know who you are; you didn't even give me your name. And it's not like I didn't hear you talking to yourself just a minute ago, or the past dozen times I've been here.

PATRICK : Um, well, we all have our little quirks.

GIRL: Oh please. Sure folks have quirks, but people like you have problems. You guys creep me out! Bye!

(The girl exits, Patrick sits back down in his chair.)

PIB: Ouch ... harsh much?

PATRICK: Yeah. But then again, it doesn't help that we live in a mental hospital and are schizophrenic.

PIB: Still, she didn't have to be so mean!

PATRICK: Now who's the pansy?

PIB: Oh shut-up. *Law and Order* is on.

— Abran Cruz



Corri Batten



What's a Cow to Do? - S.D. Lavender

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