

fluent^{MAGAZINE}

July | August 2012

The Art of Fran Skiles

No Ordinary Landscape:
An Interview With The Artist

Contemporary American Theater Festival 2012

A Theater Perspective: From
An Alien In Shepherdstown

The Man Who Makes It Go

Season 22 Reviews

Fiction

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"Paper Landscapes I" by Fran Skiles

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Finding Karma

THE TRIP FROM IDEA TO ISSUE has been relatively short for *Fluent Magazine*—January to July. From a winter afternoon conversation at a local art gallery and the seed of an idea... to brainstorming that evening... to testing the idea waters with local businesspeople in the days ahead, the concept of a new regional e-magazine became reality. Word spread, friends said “yes” when I asked them to be part of this unnamed magazine, and artists said “yes” to having their work featured in the pages of . . . *Panhandle Arts? 340? Karst?* More brainstorming of names.

Why *Fluent*? It's not only the name of this new regional e-magazine, it's the vision: to be fluent in the arts and culture in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle, and a reliable source of information on the events in the counties that make up the Panhandle—Jefferson, Berkeley and Morgan. Occasionally, we'll slip across the borders into neighboring Maryland and Virginia.

In *Fluent*, as in the Panhandle, you'll find art in its many creative forms: visual, literary, performance, movement, culinary. You'll meet artists, musicians, writers, photographers, dancers, actors, craftspeople and chefs in its pages. And you can read, view and hear their work. Tasting, though, requires a live visit.

There's another kind of “fluent” as well, in the waters of the Panhandle, where Harpers Ferry sits at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, where a lake and karst topography underlie Charles Town, and in the many quarries that dot the landscape. The geography has inspired—and continues to inspire—painters, photographers and movies, like “Sweet Dreams,” the Patsy Cline story. Scenes were filmed in 1985 at the Bakerton Quarry, now known as Crystal Lake.

While *Fluent Magazine* is posted bimonthly, the *Fluent* website—www.fluent-magazine.com—is updated daily, to keep you current on what's happening in the Panhandle and where.

In the late 1980s, I worked on the staff of an association monthly, where the editor-in-chief's name was Ed and the art director's name was Art. I like to think that made for good publication karma.

I hope you find good karma here, in the pages of *Fluent*.

Nancy McKeithen
Editor & Publisher

PHOTO: NANCY MCKEITHEN



Bakerton, West Virginia

The Blind Eye

BY SHEPHERD OGDEN

MOST MORNINGS, I GO FOR A WALK ALONG CARTER Avenue in Bakerton, one of Jefferson County’s unincorporated crossroads communities and the place where I live. I grew up in Jefferson County, left when I was 18 and moved back when I was 53. The landscape of the county changed quite a bit during that time and so I am sensitive to the differences.

When I left, the landscape was dominated by apple orchards that engulfed the roads. As you drove the back roads, there was a seasonal phase shift month to month, as you looked down a long, diagonal row of trees—now bare, now in flower, now full with fruit. The orchards are almost all gone now, replaced mostly by residential developments or rotations of corn, soy and wheat. Each of these landscapes has its ambiance, I suppose, and it’s not my place nor my intention to set up a hierarchy of value or goodness or even green-ness, though I care much about this last.

Bakerton is the quintessential small village, rare in the modern rural world: We have a general store, with a post office, a couple of churches and a fire company. I know my neighbors; they know me. We have a mix of people, and they map out along the usual demographic— some politically left, some right, some more or less trustworthy, some more or less community-oriented.

I was walking the other morning at sunrise on the road out of the village, and came to the turn where the road now bends left—the old road that went straight ahead was undermined by subterranean quarrying and had to be re-routed. Sometimes at dawn and dusk, I see a wild turkey there who comes out of the rough scrub grown up around the old quarry lands to hang with the neighbor’s chickens and maybe pick up a little loose grain. I had just given “Tom” the nod when I looked up and spied the small white church off to the left, say fifty 50 yards off the road.

I was, then, suddenly struck by both beauty and blight. The beauty was the small white church in its swath of green, backed by a copse of walnut, elder and mulberry; the blight was the telephone poles and electric lines that cut across the view, which I did my best to ignore.



PHOTOS: SHEPHERD OGDEN

Can we consciously turn a blind eye to such intrusions, or do time and familiarity blind us whether we mean it to or not? I know that I now see those telephone poles and lines less than I did two years ago when I started walking this route. Then, they were pure blight, and I cursed them: Here I am, I thought, living in this quaint village, with this quaint small church, and I want to enjoy my quaint diurnal moment as I walk this quiet country road, and it’s been ruined by these wires, these poles, transformers, all strewn across the landscape willy-nilly with no respect for beauty.

Two years later I walk by, just as before, but I see the church, and my mind edits out the wires like the white noise of a train when you live near the tracks. They’re still there, and if I stop to think about it I’m still outraged by the debasement of the view of nature by technology. But my ear or my eye, my emotional brain (not my rational, egoistic brain) sees just the church. My blind eye is timeless, blissful, ignorant of the compromise (one of many) that we as a society have made in the name of convenience and efficiency. Phone poles, cell towers, traffic lights: What don’t we adjust to and accept, over time?

We look at the landscape and we see what our mind and our senses and our ego (that combination of need and experience) filters from the totality of what is really there. Look at a photograph of a favorite place, a favorite person or even yourself, and see how the soul-less truth of the camera contradicts your memory of that same frame.

Your portrait of the place or the moment is your own, but

it’s not necessarily the only truth of that place or moment.

I look at the small white church and the green sward before it and the blue sky above it that together form a picture of community in my mind. My eye, my blind eye, doesn’t see the wire and the pole and all the other elements that are equally a part of this real world that we try to dignify with our blissful blindness daily. And I walk on, smiling to myself because of that. *fluent*

Cruising the Cone Zone

BY K.P. ROBBINS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

CHIP RUBBED A POLISHING CLOTH AGAINST THE METALLIC green hood of his '38 Dodge sedan while he waited for Sandy to finish getting ready. After twenty years of marriage, he had come to accept his wife's tardy primping.

"How do I look?" she asked, finally emerging onto the driveway where he and his prized automobile stood waiting.

He eyed her up and down. She was wearing a long t-shirt that only partially succeeded in camouflaging her belly bulge encased in tight jeans. Twenty years and twenty pounds, he thought. But her salt-and-pepper hair was fixed up nice and she was smiling a bright pink lipstick grin.

"Wonderful," he replied. "You'll be the prettiest girl there, as usual."

They got into the car and headed to the Cone Zone, an ice cream stand in a strip mall parking lot, for their weekly ritual. Every summer Friday night, antique car collectors from around the county gathered there to show off the unblemished bodies, gleaming engines and pristine interiors of their vehicles, all of which were decades older than Chip and Sandy's three teenage kids. At these get-togethers, the Cone Zone always played pop tunes from the sixties, considered oldies even when Chip was still in high school, but with the simple lyrics and catchy melodies that begged him to sing along.

By the time they arrived, a crowd had already gathered under the Cone Zone's bright neon sign as the lyrics to *We sailed on the sloop John B* drifted on the air. Chip recognized a few of his favorite cars, all of which belonged to customers of his at the bank: a farmer's turquoise '39 Plymouth coupe with running

boards, the insurance agent's bright yellow '53 Ford with a V-8 engine, and a cherry red '60 Corvette, owned, of course, by the minister. Sometimes when Sandy complained about the time and money he spent on his classic cars, Chip defended his hobby by saying it was better than golf as a way to attract and retain customers. But the truth was he just liked working with his hands. If his grandfather hadn't sold the four hundred-acre family farm to a developer before Chip was born, he might have been a farmer today instead of a banker. Of course, his father couldn't have founded the bank without the inheritance from that

PHOTO: CURT MASON



land sale. Still, Chip believed mechanical aptitude was in his genes.

He spotted his brother-in-law Todd's '58 two-tone Dodge, turquoise and white with tail fins and an abundance of chrome. *What goes up must come down* blared from outdoor speakers. He pulled the sedan into a parking space next to Todd and put on his baseball cap with the bank's logo. There wasn't much chance of sunburn in the evening, but he wanted to cover his bald spot anyway.

After he and Sandy retrieved the lawn chairs from the trunk and set them up behind the car, they sat and waited for admirers to stop and inspect his handiwork, ask questions about the flathead six engine or the ram hood ornament. Todd approached and greeted them with the same comment he repeated every Friday.

"Now that's a true Dodge," Todd said, referring to the Dodge Brothers nameplate on Chip's sedan.

"There'll never be another Dodge like this one," Chip said, his standard reply.

Let the sunshine in boomed from the speakers as Rick pulled up in his red '67 Mustang to park a few spaces away. A young woman with big brown eyes and full red lips occupied the black leather passenger seat. "Doesn't look like she's from around here," Todd said. She waited in the car until Rick made a show of chivalry by opening her door while not so surreptitiously glancing down at her pendulous breasts, very much in view under a low cut top that clung to her body. Chip wondered if she forgot to put on a shirt over her underwear. She wobbled slightly on very high heels and a short, tight skirt as she emerged from the Mustang. He tried not to stare, but Todd showed no such restraint.

He walked over to Rick and said, "Introduce us to your lady friend."

"This is Amber. She just moved here. Got a job at my dentist's office. Amber, this is Todd—he's a veterinarian—and Chip, my banker."

"Oh, a banker," she said. "You must know a lot about money."

• • •

Sandy stayed plopped in her chair when the men went over to greet Rick. She watched as they ogled the pretty woman who looked younger than their daughter Becky, away at college. She hoped Becky didn't dress like that in public.

Her older sister Judy, holding a chocolate cone in each hand, sat down in the chair next to hers. "Look at our husbands with Rick's latest," she said, pointing with her chin as she gave a cone to Sandy.

"Makes me feel old," Sandy said.

"Even if I lost the weight I've been trying to take off for the past ten years, I'll never look like that again," Judy said.

"You never looked like that before," Sandy replied, and they both chuckled. "Remember my high school boyfriend Jack? He had a Mustang just like Rick's, and now it's considered an antique, or close to it. Guess that makes me antique, too."

They watched as the young woman touched Chip's arm and laughed at something he said. Even the chocolate ice cream didn't console Sandy. "I've been thinking about going back to work," she announced.

"Doing what? You haven't worked since Becky was born."

"I don't know. I was a public relations major, but there aren't many jobs like that around here. There's just not that much to do with the kids anymore."

"You sound down," Judy observed.

"I just feel old," Sandy repeated. The young woman, standing uncomfortably closer to Chip, whispered in his ear. She watched as Chip took a step back, but his head was turned and she couldn't see the expression on his face. *I've looked at love from both sides* now purred the music.

A schoolbus yellow ’38 Chevy truck with bug-eyed headlights cruised past. Sandy wondered what it looked like before its restoration. What body work had been done to remove rust and pound out dents? Perhaps she should get some body work done herself: Botox the wrinkles, liposuction the love handles and smooth away the stretch marks. She admired the truck’s gleaming chrome and its brazen color. While I’m at it, maybe I’ll whiten my teeth and dye my hair, too, she thought.

The young woman was handing Chip a piece of paper. Was it her phone number? Sandy wondered.

• • •

Chip couldn’t remember when a woman had last flirted with him so outrageously. It made him uncomfortable, and Chip preferred his comforts. He wasn’t the kind of man to be attracted to the new and exotic. He craved the familiar.

When he returned to his car, Sandy asked him who the young woman was.

“Rick’s new girl friend,” he replied as he sat down beside her. “He’s robbing the cradle again.”

“Looked like she was more interested in you,” Sandy said. She shot him an accusing look that, after twenty years of marriage, he recognized as dangerous.

“She’s Becky’s age!” he protested.

“What was on that paper she gave you?”

“She gave me a stick of gum. Here.” He pulled a crumpled wrapper from his pocket and handed her the evidence.

Sandy blushed. “I’m sorry, Chip. It’s just that she’s so young and fresh and sexy. Everything I’m not anymore. And I thought....” She began to cry without finishing her sentence.

Chip pulled his chair closer and put his arm around her. “Don’t you know me better than that, Sandy? I love old cars and oldies music. And I love you, too, old girl.”

Sandy’s shoulders twitched and she inhaled gasping breaths. He couldn’t tell now if she was laughing or crying; maybe both. “Come on, let’s get out of here,” he said.

They got in the Dodge and when he peered into the rear view mirror, he saw Amber staring at him. Her face receded into the blur of the Cone Zone’s neon lights as he put his arm around his wife and drove away.

The refrain of an oldies hit blasting from the Cone Zone speakers trailed after them. Chip pulled Sandy close to him and sang along at the top of his lungs—

*Do you love me?
I can really move.
Do you love me?
I’m in the groove.
Do you love me now?*

—until his wife giggled.

Cumberland Valley Artists Exhibition

BY KATHRYN BURNS



THE WASHINGTON COUNTY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, with the assistance of renowned artist William Clutz as juror, has once again honored the artists of the region with its 80th Annual Cumberland Valley Artists Exhibition. Opened on May 20 with an artist reception, the exhibit will be on display until July 29. The 63 works of art by 46 contributing artists selected for display combine for a rich and varied grouping of styles, medium and content.

The juror, William Clutz, was born and raised in Pennsylvania and began his art career by attending classes at the Museum’s Art School in the late 40s. Clutz exhibits primarily in New York City galleries,

and his work appears in many museums and corporate collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

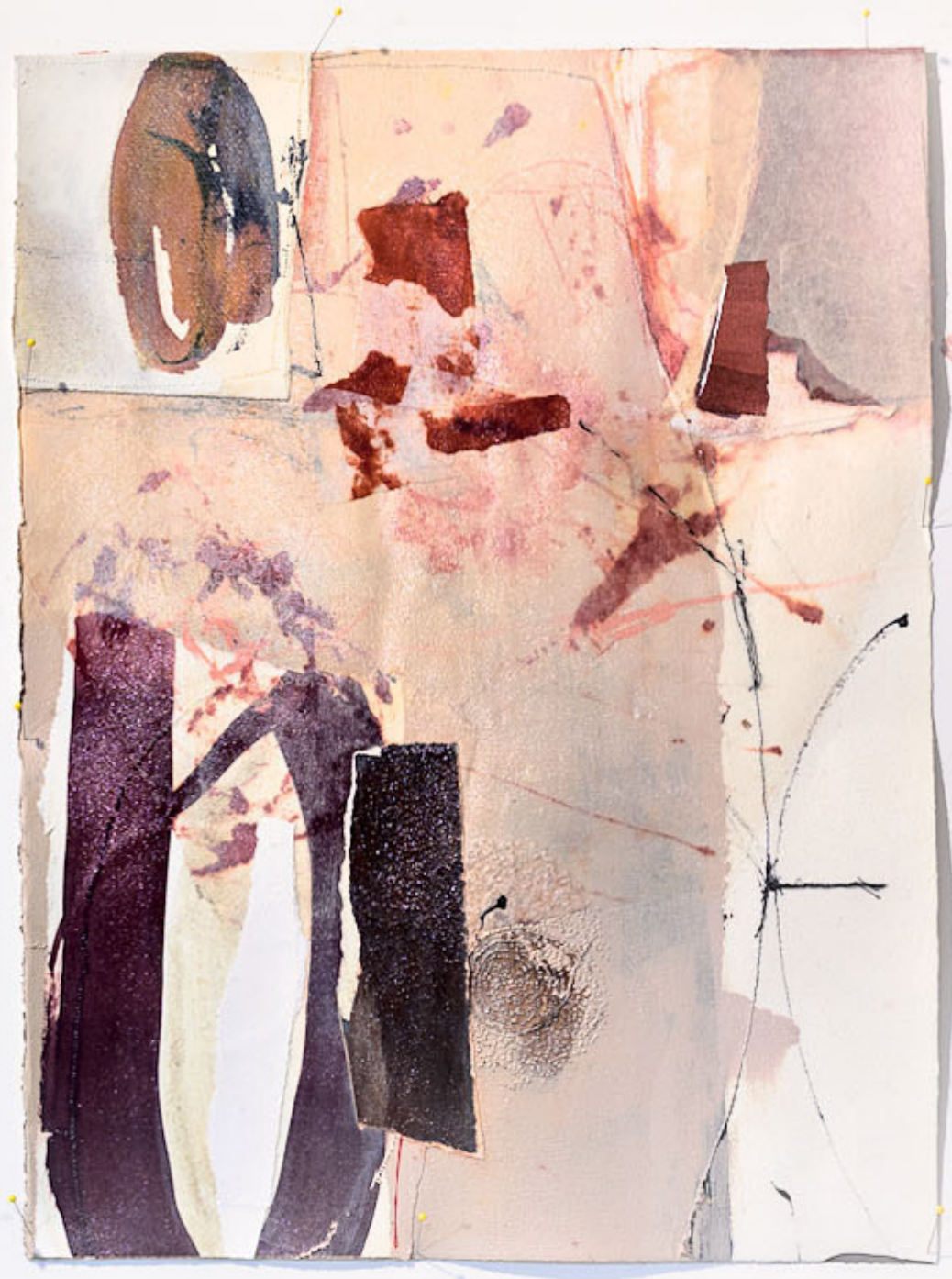
Local West Virginia participants include artist Susan Carney from Shepherdstown with her monotype “Dresses I”; Andrea Burke from Martinsburg with her watercolors, “Those Days of Wine and Roses” and “Wishing Time Would Stand Still”; and Harpers Ferry artist Etel Garra with “La Sagrada Familia,” an oil on wood.

“Best in Show” honor was awarded to Carol Mackay Mertz of Fort Vallery, Virginia for “Tribe,” a pyrophyllite sculpture.

The exhibition is sponsored by Hugh and Mary Talton, Bob and Mary Helen Strauch and the Washington County Arts Council, Inc. For additional information, visit www.wcmfa.org. [fluent](#)



Best in Show: “Tribe” by Carol Mackay Mertz, Fort Vallery, Virginia



No Ordinary Landscape

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRAN SKILES

by Ginny Fite

photographs by Mark Muse

THERE IS SOMETHING IN FRAN SKILES' WORK THAT TUGS AT YOU, that makes you want to move closer, to touch it, almost as if you could immerse yourself in the layers of paper, fabric, ink, line and emotion that lie beneath its seemingly serene surface.

This is not a simple art form in which Skiles works, though to the eye these canvasses seem sometimes to be simplicity itself: a gesture, a breath, the color of a fallen leaf, the deep red of sunset, sudden blue of the sky, a mark, a circle, a texture. But that would be misreading these



Her work has changed over time, moving not just from the object to the abstract but in her own view of how to work. “One generation ago, my work filled the whole space [of the canvas]. Now I want the paper to have a place. I want freshness. Artists simplify as they mature.”

Skiles starts on a blank canvas and adds stitches. “Stitching is one way of getting rid of an empty canvas,” she says. It is also part of her signature. Then she adds line in ink, a wash, then maybe she fits in parts she has made before and stored away, like writing on Chinese paper or silk fabric. There’s no formula for creating these pieces. If something doesn’t feel right, or even if it does, she can layer over it.

“I follow my nose, one step following another in the creative process. When the piece starts feeding information back to me, then it is working.”

For Skiles, developing the piece is a dialogue, an exchange between her and the work. She is not making it in the traditional sense, say, of making bread.

Below is a section of an art quilt called “Making Tracks.” The whole quilt is 70 inches x 70 inches, and was executed in 1994.

The collages above and on the previous two pages are part of the “Paper Landscape” series and as yet unnamed. The series is about paper to paper. The papers used are watercolor papers, Rives BFK, Japanese mulberry, Chinese rice paper, found papers and pella. The processes are machine stitching, ink and acrylic washes, inkjet printing, marbling, mono printing, and mark making with crayons and other

abstract multi-media pieces. What you take away from them is the synergy of the parts, the synthesis of the layers she puts down, the satisfaction that you have been spoken to.

“Line,” Skiles says, “can be a pure expression of joy.”

It feels that way, emanating from the cream-colored watercolor paper of a work in progress from which it hails you like an old friend you haven’t seen in a while.

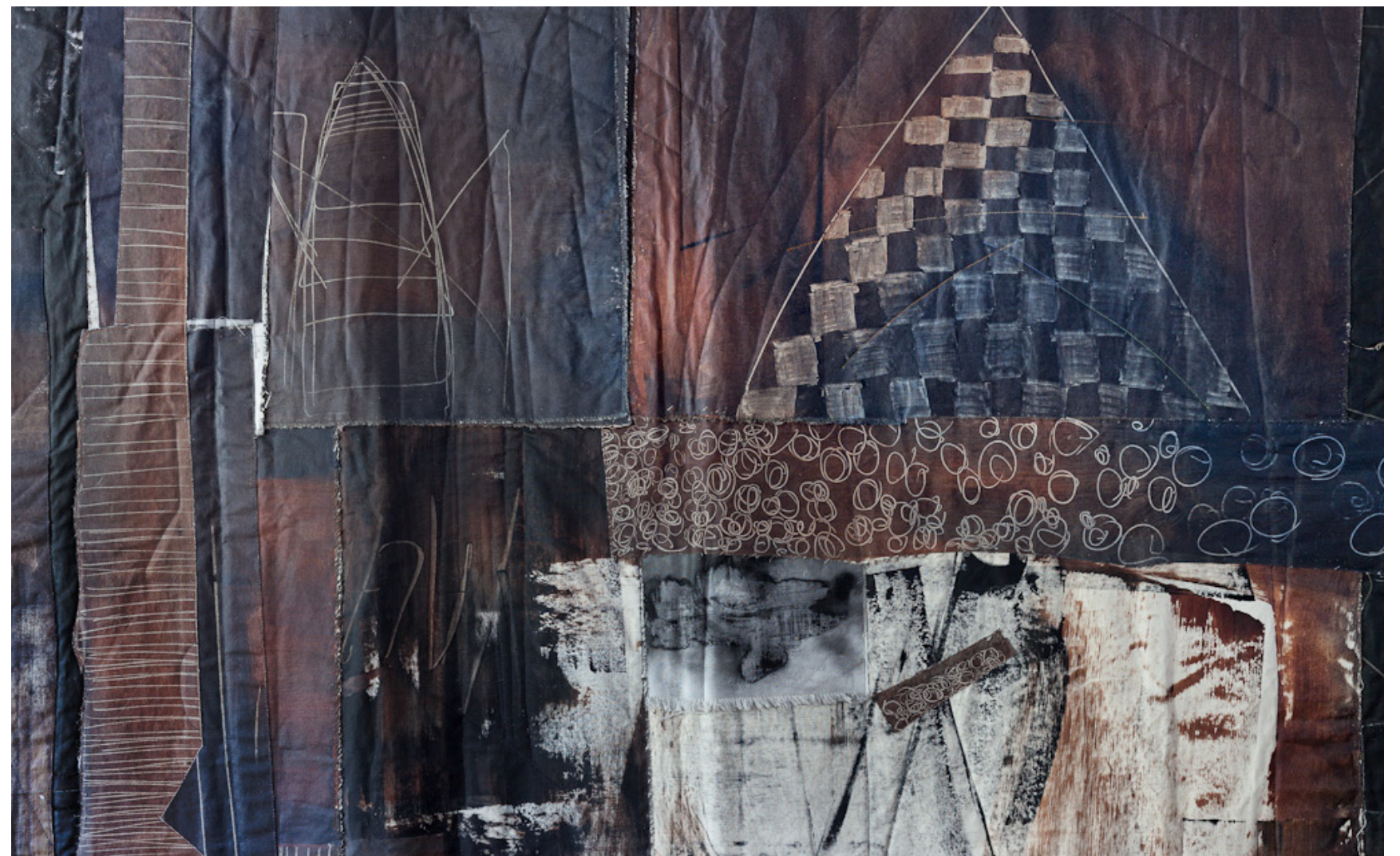
Fran Skiles works in canvas, cotton gauze, found paper, Chinese and Japanese paper, silk, watercolor paper, pencil, paint, watercolor crayon, ink, heat transfers of images and words onto paper and fabric, photography, machine stitching. She puts down warm earth tones, reds, blues, golds. She creates abstract landscapes that link her back to nature. She makes parts and assembles them into something completely new.

She came to live in Martinsburg at age 13, earned a bachelor’s from WVU in ’65 and then spent 40 years in Florida, a resident of Ft. Lauderdale’s substantial art community. She moved back to Shepherdstown in 2007 to live in a restored historic house. Her studio, hung whimsically with an IKEA silver-and-glass chandelier and grounded by one of her exquisite art quilts, is in the stone basement of her house.

A home economics major in college, Skiles began developing her art by making objects—fabric crafts that she sold at festivals. “You have to get your courage somewhere,” she says.

She first exhibited her art quilting 35 years ago. She has exhibited more recently in St. Louis, Santa Fe, San Diego, Ft. Lauderdale and Shepherdstown, where she will again be part of a show at The Bridge Gallery in September. She also teaches art quilting.

“I don’t take myself seriously,” Skiles says. “I take my art seriously.”



“I try to keep a conversation going between me and my work. That’s why I work in a series. Each piece speaks to me and affects the composition of the others. It’s a way of cutting my losses, lessens me over-working or taking something to where it loses its advantage.”

At this point in her career as an artist, she has fine-tuned the art of listening to the piece itself.

“Just before a work is done, I feel a hesitation. The piece says when it’s done.”

There are symbols that Skiles always uses in her work. She almost always does circles, many times they are leaving the canvas. She uses gestural lines, shapes, what she sees and feels in nature. “I really do lose myself in the work so that I’m not consciously thinking. It’s almost as if I have to do it. There’s a lot of emotion, a lot of intuitiveness that goes into my work.”

The layering process that is central to her work, she explains, is like a woman’s petticoat. Sometimes a little bit of it breaks through. It gives a piece character.



“And maybe I’m the only one who knows it’s under there.” She smiles. It’s like having a secret with your best friend.

Skiles often spends weeks making parts. It’s a good way to start a new project or to get unstuck. She is still learning about products. “I am a craftsman,” she



explains. “I like working with my hands. Part of my work is solving the problems of using new or different materials. Can I do this, can I execute this? I take a risk and see what happens. That’s what art is all about: the thrill of discovery.”

There are six pieces in various stages of completion pinned to the walls of her studio, and one piece that stands separate, perhaps completed. If you are very quiet, you can hear them humming.

“The act of producing, creating, making art is a gift. It’s very humbling to be able to do that. The work passes through me.” **fluent**

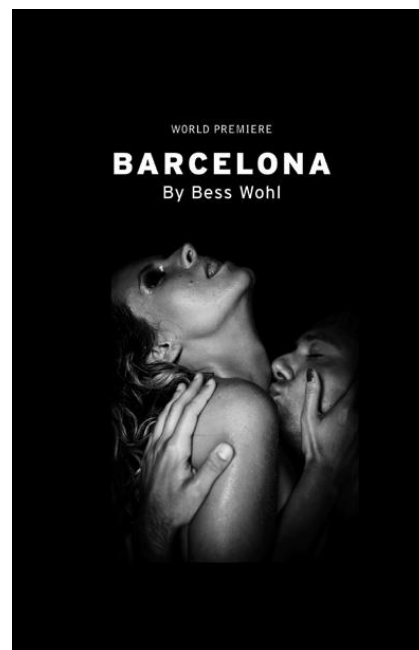
Visit Skiles’ website at www.franskiles.com. Her work will be included in a group show, “An Exhibit of Contemporary Fine Art,” at The Bridge Galllery in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, this fall, September 8–29.

Skiles completed “Snowy Owl” (above) and “Growing Eye Flower” (right) in 2009. Both are collage paintings that comprise canvas, cotton gauze, found paper, Japanese and Chinese paper, acrylic paint, ink, gesso and medium, and machine stitching. In addition, “Snowy Owl” comprises pencil, and “Growing Eye Flower” has silk gauze and watercolor paper.

BARCELONA

A World Premiere by Bess Wohl

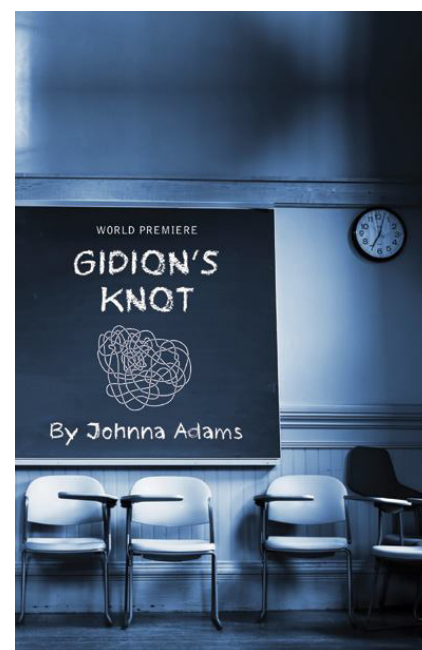
In the shadows of Gaudi's Sagrada Familia, Barcelona's famous cathedral, an American woman drunkenly goes home with a Spanish stranger. In what begins as a wine-drenched, carefree one-night-stand of cross-cultural lust and libation, soon embarks a dangerous lesson in consequence, truth, and moving on. In this funny, sensual, and elegant work, there unfolds a surprising story that tears down the artificial borders of a global world, while proving the universal struggle of healing the human heart.



GIDION'S KNOT

A World Premiere by Johnna Adams

Over the course of an unexpected parent/teacher conference in a 5th grade classroom, a mother and her son's teacher have a volatile conversation about Gidion. Was he a bully? A victim? A protector? Or, was his imagination too powerful a tool for the adults around him? As his story is uncovered, the women try to construct an explanation for his behavior and come to terms with who, or what, is at fault. Gidion's Knot is a heart-wrenching, devastatingly beautiful work about the power of words and freedom of expression. It explores the dangerous, emotional, and often painful world of elementary school.



THE EXCEPTIONALS

by Bob Clyman

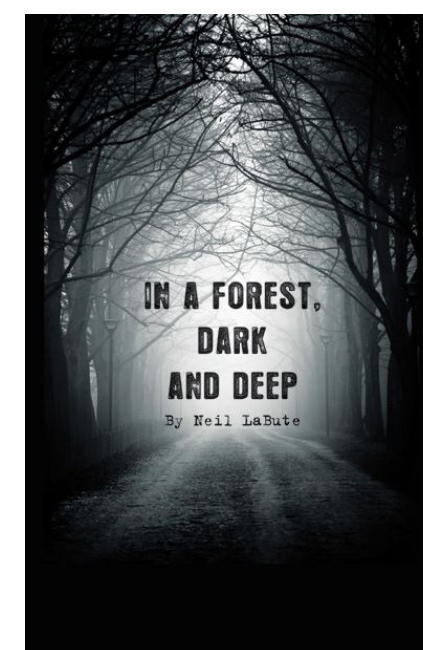
Five years after participating in a fertility program experiment, two mothers, with distinctly different backgrounds, are faced with complicated choices surrounding their extraordinarily gifted children. Set in the near future, this wonderfully smart play of high-stakes social engineering sheds light upon the competitive sport of parenting and raises the question, how far would you go to provide your child every possible opportunity? Gwen and Allie battle over their children's – and their own – lots in life while learning that, perhaps, they need each other more than they realize to successfully raise their super babies.



IN A FOREST, DARK AND DEEP

by Neil LaBute

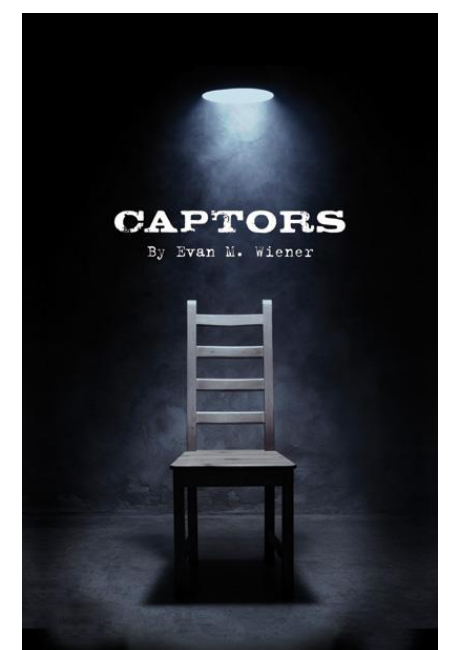
In this compelling new play by the dark prince of the American stage and indie cinema, all Bobby thinks he is doing is helping his sister, a university dean, clear out her cottage in the woods. But in this cabin of lies, nothing is as it seems and the truth refuses to be packed away. Love, lust, and sibling rivalry escalate into a psychological thriller that bursts with savage conflict and insight into human relationships and moral failings. On this dark and stormy night, what is Betty hiding? And what will Bobby do when he finds out?



CAPTORS

by Evan M. Wiener

For 10 days in Buenos Aires in 1960, covert Israeli agents held captive the world's most wanted war criminal and Hitler's architect of the Holocaust – Adolf Eichmann. In a hidden safe house, a thrilling battle of wills unfolds in this historical first-person account of the fight against Fascism. Captors is a portrait of two men: the Mossad agent burdened with bringing evil to justice, and Eichmann, the self-declared "Good German," who is ready to utilize his every last ounce of charm, intelligence, and humanity in hopes of surviving and escaping his final interrogation. On the 50th anniversary of Eichmann's conviction and execution, this absorbing new play is a haunting reminder of the consequences and complexity of closing society's darkest chapter.



A Theater Perspective: From An Alien In Shepherdstown

BY LILY WOLFF

THOSE WHO MAKE THEATER LIVE IN MYRIAD WORLDS. Players, directors, stage managers, costumers, set and lighting designers are time travelers, international explorers, curious sightseers and devoted pilgrims. For however fleeting a time, we become citizens of adopted lands by telling stories. In rehearsal the other day for the annual Contemporary American Theater Festival (CATF), I was laughing over an extraordinary moment that I experienced only days after landing in Shepherdstown, West Virginia—home to the CATF and undoubtedly one of the coolest places on earth and for the next two months my home.

I was standing in the back patio of the Mecklenburg Inn, a place that can only be described as a magical fairy garden for grown-ups. I was one of several CATFers huddled around a West Virginia state legislator who was, in that beautiful place, in the haze of one o'clock in the morning, cooing an old Welsh folk ballad, in Cymraeg, no less.

My love of theater—of storytelling—is a product of where I come from more than anything else, the inevitable story of my own history, my background, my life. I am from many different worlds. I have two passports. One says I am American, the other says I'm British. Together, they say “the world is your oyster—you'd better take advantage of that, young lady.” I was born in Thailand while my father was shooting a film in Chiang Mai. Both my parents are Americans who live in Europe. I was raised in the Cornish countryside in the Southwest of England. When I was 11 years old, on the 93rd straight day of rain we'd endured, my family decided to move to the South of France. I spent my teenage years on the sun-soaked, commercialized-but-still-charming Cote D'Azur, eating and drinking and telling stories. Then, after a year at a private school in Houston, Texas, taking arts classes, appearing as Abigail Williams, and directing my first full-length play, I decided to really figure out what it meant to be an American. I spent three years



Actor Michael Gabriel Goodfriend and Assisant Director Lily Wolff watch Joey Collins perform as “Peter Malkin.” ©Seth Hill

completing my BA in Theatre at the University of Texas, trying and failing to act, directing plays and cheering on the Longhorns. For now, I'm based in Austin and beginning to focus my attention on new plays and devised work.

Five months ago, I shared a morning coffee with Ed Herendeen, Founder and Producing Director of CATF. He was in Austin as a Guest Respondent for a new play that I had worked on that had just premiered. Be warned: One sip of coffee is all it takes to drink the Ed Herendeen Kool-Aid. To. Drink. It. Down. And here I am in Shepherdstown, Assistant Directing, watching five, new, vitally human stories emerging from the pages of scripts, and carrying twelve new plays around in my backpack every day.

Daily, I travel from stunning, economically devastated contemporary Barcelona to the emotional, psychological, and literal chaos of a safe house in turbulent 1960s Buenos Aires. I talk to some of Israel's first spies. I listen to stories of families,

generations lost to the cyclone of genocide. I sit across from Adolf Eichmann meticulously examining his own reflection. I see a sister incapable of speaking truth and a brother choked with love. I sit five feet away from two people devouring each other, who want to hurt each other, to be close, to make love, to escape, to die. In this incredible place called theater, I am transported every day. I am conflicted and enraged, heartbroken and hopeful. I am afraid and full of doubt. I am filled with optimism and beauty and desire. I am here and there and everywhere. Of course, these experiences always end.

A play opens, a book closes, the actors and the stage managers take it over, a run or a festival ends, summer is over and we are back in our own lives, our own worlds—a crash landing after an impossible transportation. But, those places, those people, those times, those entire worlds don't just vanish. The makers and tellers of stories are full of these worlds. And I count myself the luckiest to be among them. *fluent*

THE MAN WHO MAKES IT GO

OTHER TOWNS MAY TELL YOU, with great pride, that they have respected businesses or historic monuments or beautiful scenery. In Shepherdstown, we have all that, and we have Ed Herendeen. The founder of the Contemporary American Theater Festival (CATF) took an interesting idea, which drew him here from Williamstown, Massachusetts, 23 years ago, and turned it into a prestigious national cultural event. CATF draws 11,000 visitors from 33 states to Shepherdstown—and injects more than 2.5 million dollars into local income in the month of July.

Ask what Shepherdstown's greatest asset is, and the answer you hear may well be Ed Herendeen.

This year is the 22nd season of the CATF, and Ed has been busy rehearsing three of the five plays, taking interviews from the press, and supervising the complex business of running and promoting a theater that his incomparable staff carries out. And he doesn't seem to lose a trace of energy.

But let's go back in time. From 1989 to 2000, Ed spent three seasons as a director at the Williamstown Theater Festival, originally as a protege of the late Nikos Psacharopoulos, who had run that Festival for 33 years. It was in 1991 that he was invited to then Shepherd College (now University) to consult on the possible creation of a summer theater festival. The idea he came up with was a one-month festival that featured new American plays, and after getting the idea accepted, he became the person to run it.

Over the years, Ed has brought 90 new plays, including 34 world premieres by 65 American playwrights, to Shepherdstown. From two plays in the first season, he's grown the Festival to five plays a season, some brand-new, some even commissioned by the CATF, and some in the crucial second production—many writers don't get a second chance to improve their work.

This season, Ed will direct the world premiere of Gideon's Knot by Johnna Adams, In A Forest Dark And Deep by Neil LaBute, and Captors by Evan M. Wiener. He'll also carry on discussions with audience members, at “Breakfast With Ed” seven times throughout this season.

Putting together a season starts for Ed almost as soon as the previous season ends. And what did he research when putting together this year's season?

“The economy, housing crisis, violence, evil acts done by real human beings, dysfunctional families—all dominated my reading. Comedies were mostly absent, while dramas and political and psychological thrillers were common. Plus, I read a lot of historical plays set in the civil rights period, Nazi Germany, the War of 1812. Every fall, I feel like I am given a front row perspective on the pulse of the country and world through the lens of our contemporary writers. I think the 2012 season of plays will provide a diverse snapshot on the issues and ideas dominating our world and thinking right now.”



CATF Producing Director Ed Herendeen with Fight Director Dr. Aaron Anderson.

—BILL TCHAKIRIDES

Gidion’s Knot by Johnna Adams. World Premiere. Directed by Ed Herendeen.

What begins as an elementary school parent-teacher conference rapidly becomes a volatile conflict between a distressed mother and a reticent fifth-grade teacher. The problem? Why did Gidion come home on a Friday with a note suspending him from school? As his story progresses, the women assemble the elements of Gidion’s behavior like a complex jigsaw puzzle.

As we descend toward the unexpected and painful outcome, the roles that a teacher and a mother play in a child’s life are revealed in an interaction of deception, vehemence and accountability. The audience follows this conflict and learns in the removal of layer after layer of information the actions leading to the fate of a fifth-grader.

I particularly liked Margaret McKowen’s set that turned the entire performance space and audience area into an actual schoolroom. Director Ed Herendeen has children going through the classroom, using lockers in the audience lobby area, and planting the usual “turn your cellphones off” instruction into a teacher’s admonition to a student at the beginning of the play.

Joey Parsons as the teacher and Robin Walsh as the mother give intense and involving performances, aided by playwright Johnna Adams’ stylized dialogue.

Gidion’s Knot is an emotional and dangerous exploration into the freedom of expression—and worth our attention.

The Exceptionals by Bob Clyman. Directed by Tracy Brigden.

Not too far in the future, two mothers from very different backgrounds face choices to be made for their extraordinarily gifted sons, the results of a genetic experiment in a fertility program. The question is how far will ordinary people go to provide opportunities for exceptional children? Is it

a competition among parents? This is something that Gwen and Allie, and her husband Tom, must come to terms with in the course of the play.

They are steered through this process by Claire, a manager for the program, who tries to get both families to understand the education process that the children could be going through and to give up part of the parental shelter of their sons. It is not an easy progression.

Director Tracy Brigden takes the characters developed by playwright Bob Clyman through a series of two- and three-person scenes until everyone comes together with a resolute view of where the future will be. The play is about a half-hour longer than it needs to be, but this is the kind of thing that benefits playwrights at the CATF, where they can edit and rewrite as part of the “new play” process.

The Exceptionals is worth the effort of the talent involved and is certainly worth the participation of the audience.

Barcelona by Bess Wohl. Directed by Charles Morey.

What happens when an intoxicated American girl goes home with an aggressive Spaniard for a one-night stand in the shadows of the Sagrada Familia, Gaudi’s famous cathedral in Barcelona? After meeting in a bar and falling into a funny and lusty meeting of cross-cultural opposites, Irene and Manuel make us laugh with them—until the party changes into a dangerous and political lesson in truth.

Two people who have met as surface level characters reveal more and more about themselves and their deeper lives, discovering things that push them apart rather than bring them closer. Partly, it is what it means to be an American in a Spain that has reason to hate Americans. Partly, it is the very personal lives of each of the two characters that redefine their needs for the other.

Bess Wohl has written a fantastic play with the best interactive dialog I have heard this season. Every year there is one CATF play that becomes my favorite,

and this year it is, hands down, Barcelona. Charles Morey’s direction is the kind I think of as perfect... the director is invisible. Things happen as if they are actually being lived.

Anne Marie Nest and Jason Manuel Olazabel are exceptional actors and certainly, along with the playwright and director, deserved the standing ovation they received from an enthusiastic audience.

In A Forest, Dark and Deep by Neil LaBute. Directed by Ed Herendeen.

Bobby and Betty, a brother and sister, get together in the woods to clean out her cottage to show to a new tenant. At least this is what Bobby thinks as he wonders why his sister, a University Dean, can’t have her husband and kids around helping her... and why she would want the brother she has been estranged from for years to assist with the packing.

Questions arise during the evening. Is this a cottage Betty and her husband own? Or is it a place her husband knows nothing about? Is there a student who has been living here having an affair with Betty? Every lie leads to the revelation of another truth as Bobby gets to the bottom of Betty’s story. And what will he do when he learns all of her secrets?

LaBute’s play is about the lies people tell themselves and each other, and about the way lies can become increasingly vicious and escalate to a point that is out of control. The play exposes the desperation of a woman who realizes she has aged past her younger attractiveness and become more or less “transparent” to men.

The set for this stormy night in the woods is spectacular, designed by David M. Barber. It focuses the audience in the very large Frank Center into the confined world of two actors in a country cabin. Johanna Day as Betty and Joey Collins as Bobby

are steered through LaBute’s often violent language by Director Ed Herendeen with an inspired verbal choreography.

As the dialogue says: “The truth it hurts... don’t it?”

Captors by Evan M. Wiener. Directed by Ed Herendeen.

In 1960, a group of Israeli Intelligence agents capture escaped Nazi Adolf Eichmann in Buenos Aires and confine him for 10 days in a hidden safe house. Eichmann, the world’s most wanted war criminal and the architect of the Holocaust, has spent 15 years in Argentina leading an assumed life. His captors now want to transport him to Jerusalem, by his own will, to be publicly tried.

The play focuses on two men: Eichmann, the “Good German” who was following orders, and Peter Malkin, the Mossad agent and artist burdened with bringing evil to justice. The Nazi uses charm and sophistication, lies and compliments to ease out of the captive situation. Malkin’s main objective is to disguise the prisoner so he can board an Israeli plane leaving Buenos Aires without being discovered. He must also convince Eichmann to sign a release saying he leaves of his own free will... something that seems impossible.

The conflict between Malkin, his associates and Eichmann, between Jews and the murderer of Jews, is haunting and challenging. Combine this with Malkin’s jumping thirty years ahead to write a book about the events with a co-author who seeks to clarify the actual facts, and you have a complex dramatic presentation that will keep you on the edge of your seat.

Special praise should be given to the characterizations of Malkin, played by Joey Collins, and Eichman, portrayed by Philip Goodwin, and the involving dialogue of Evan M. Wiener. Ed Herendeen has made it all work to perfection.

Captors appears on the 50th anniversary of Eichmann’s conviction and execution, a haunting reminder of the darkest part of the last century. *fluent*

What’s Left Behind

ZACHARY DAVIS

A VERY WISE MAN ONCE TOLD ME, as we sat in a bar pouring our hearts out in the way only old drunks and bad poets can, that a boy does not become a man until his mother dies. As long as she lives, a mother will always see her son as a little boy. Fathers, my friend said, are ready for their sons to become men as early as possible. Mothers want their boys to be children indefinitely. What my friend never said, but what I have come to realize, is that mothers do not want their sons to become men because they know all too well the viciousness and cruelty men are capable of. I came to this realization after I began teaching History, which is the study of what’s left behind by the simpleminded, casual evil of boys who want to be thought of as men. If my friend is right, as I imagine him to be (because as long as I’ve known him I’ve only known him to be wrong about one thing), then I became a man when I was just 12 years old, which is a hell of an age for a boy to become a man, but then again, it was a hell of an age I lived in. Five months before momma died from cardiac arrhythmia, which is a fancy way of saying she died of a broken heart, the President of the United States was shot twice in Dallas, Texas—once in the neck and once in the head, by Lee Harvey Oswald. Lee Harvey Oswald was a boy when he shot Kennedy, even though he was 24 at the time (his momma lived longer than he did, no doubt wishing her little boy had not been so eager to prove himself a man).

Dallas was a long way away from where I grew up, as was Lee Harvey Oswald, as was John Fitzgerald Kennedy, or any President of the United States for that matter. The town I was born in and lived in for the first 13 years of my life no longer exists. New Canaan, West Virginia was not large; it seemed only a hairsbreadth from end to end, and yet it was my world entire. When it died, there was no one to mourn its passing. Men had come, you see, men who promised to make everyone rich if we would just let them take out the coal in our

mountains—it wasn’t a big thing, they said. Just a little off the top, like a good haircut, and then the coal would be taken out, and the money would come in. Our town was for sale in the spring of 1964—everyone was selling. That was because they knew what was good for them—they had lived through enough times of men coming to them with demands disguised as requests to know it would be foolish to stay, since big men get what they want, anyway, no matter what. My chosen profession backs me up on this.

I lived with my momma in a house that would nowadays be called ‘humble’ if you’re polite or ‘a shack’ if you’re not. The house was a present from my grandpappy, built for momma and pappy when they got married. It was going to be a small slaughterhouse for grandpappy’s chickens, but when his eldest daughter (herself only 13 at the time) came to him and said “Pappy, I’s gonna have a baby,” he decided it would be of better use for the soon-to-be newlyweds. Grandpappy insisted my parents get married. My pappy was 25 and educated and had seen too much of the world when he was in the war to want to settle down with his child bride in New Canaan, so he left just two days after the wedding night. I found out he had done the same thing in the Army, making his way across Europe on Uncle Sam’s dime, leaving me with at least a dozen half-brothers and sisters. When momma told him her husband had run off, my grandpappy said, “Well, I s’pose you kin take care of the littun by yerself, seein’ as you was so eager in the makin’ of ‘im. Just remember now, Bertie Mae, that this is what you git when ya lie down fer every man that smiles at ye.” He died soon after that, on a hunting trip where he fell on his own shotgun trying to climb over a barbed wire fence. I have no complaints about my raising. Momma loved me and taught me what she knew, which, God bless her, wasn’t much. I went to school, but it never seemed to stick with me (that would change, in time). I stopped going when momma became really sick. She

died at 25, curled up on the floor of the chicken house, a hand-sewn quilt wrapped around her, with me at the other end of the floor sleeping soundly. When I woke up, I could see her hand stretched out to me, stiff from rigor mortis. I would like to think she died in her sleep without knowing pain nor fear of death. I’d like to believe that, but I don’t.

What kin she had came and laid her in the churchyard of New Canaan Baptist. Her brothers, unconcerned that I could hear them speak, stood by her grave, discussing who would be saddled with the burden of me. Neither had ever met me, nor had they come to

see momma when she took sick. They never introduced themselves, and I never learned their names.

“Ain’t like we got plenty to go round,” Older said.

“Hell, you think I do? Bout all we ever do is git by.”

I approached them, these men hardened by poverty and want, which had drained them of compassion.

“I don’t reckon neither of you need take me,” I said. “I ken take care of my own self.”

“Is that right?” Younger said.

“Hell,” Older said, “how you figger to do that? Ya ain’t but a boy.”



“I’m fixin’ to find my pappy.”

Older laughed harshly, the sound of old machinery rusted from disuse.

“He done took off damn near—how old is you?”

“Bout 12, I reckon.”

“Twelve years ago, then. He didn’t stay long nuff to meet you when you was borned—what makes you think he wants to, now?”

“I don’t know,” I said, and I’ve never in my life said truer words. “I don’t know nothin’ about him, I guess.”

“Yeah. Better for you that you don’t,” Younger said.

“But someone’s got to know something. Ain’t nobody ken jus up and leave without no trace nor no one knowin’ where’s he’s gone.”

“Is you talkin’ back to an elder, boy? Is you tryin’ ta get above yer raisings?”

“No, sir. I jes—I ain’t got nobody. Momma died and pappy run off before I was even borned. I reckon he didn’t want nothin’ to do with me, and I cain’t set no blame on him for that. I ain’t shapin’ up to be nothin’ special—but momma was special. Now that God’s callt her back, I figger pappy oughta know about it. He loved her once.”

“Once’s all it takes,” Younger said. His laugh was warmer than his brother’s, more practiced.

Older looked at me. He stared into my eyes, and for the life of me I cannot imagine what he was looking for, but he must have found it.

“What you know bout yer pappy, boy?” he said.

“He was educated. He was real smart, and he went all over the world in the Army, and he shot that Hitler between his eyes.”

“Your momma told you that?”

“Yessir—he told her all about it.”

The old, rusted machinery started up again.

“You know bout that company buyin’ up the land round here?”

“Yessir. That’s that one what runs the coal mines.”

“That’s right. You know, the company first came round here—how long go must that’a been?”

“Bout 12 years, I reckon,” Younger answered.

“Twelve years ago, then. They didn’t stay long. Nobody wanted to sell the land. It’s a different story now, wouldn’t ya say? Anyhow, when they left, your

pappy left with them. He done risen up the ranks, too. He’s a big ol’ deal.”

“You know where he is?” I asked.

“Ain’t nobody knows that but him and God. Ain’t nobody seen him for damn near—how long must that be?”

“Bout 2 years, I reckon,” Younger said.

“Two years, then. He ran off with ol’ Munshun’s granddaughter. He came up there to talk Munshun into sellin’ his house up there on the mount three miles or so down yonder, and instead of buyin’ a house, he steals a little piece of chicken.”

Older and Younger laughed together, the warm, low tone of Younger forming a counterpoint to the high, rusty squeal of Older.

“So Munshun might know where he is?”

“Boy, if ol’ Munshun knew where your pappy was at, you’d never in this life have the chance to meet him. He’d a killt your pappy, surely,” Younger said.

“True though that is, Munshun may know which way your pappy went,” Older said. Looking me over from head to toe and apparently finding something in me disagreeable to his sensibilities, he added, “If I was you I’d go see Munshun. Who knows but he may take kindly to ye, and let ya stay with him.”

I got directions to the house on the mountain. The three miles or so Older had mentioned turned out to be five. It was dark when I finally made my way up. The land had been scoured of trees except for a small clump. There was one light, weak and flickering but heraldic, in the center of the trees. As I got closer to the light, I could see the outline of a house. It was smaller than many houses today, smaller in fact than the apartment I now live in, but to my boy’s eyes that were used to the cramped confines of the chicken house, it loomed large. The light from the house seemed to move forward and back, forward and back, as if carried by a slow treading man. It seems strange to admit this even now, but I was not afraid. I suppose that’s the one benefit of becoming a man: after your mother dies, you never have anything else to fear because your worst fear has already been made manifest. Everything afterward pales in comparison.

“Hold it, there.”

The voice seemed to come from the house. I couldn’t see anyone, just the soft forward and back swing of the light.

“I’m looking for my pappy,” I said.

“Ain’t nobody’s pappy up here, boy.”

“I’m looking for Mr. Munshun.”

“Is that your pappy?”

“No, he ain’t. He knows where my pappy is.”

“Does he now? There’s no Munshun here. Do you, perhaps, mean München?”

“Mewn-chin?” I said.

“Close enough, I suppose. Is that who you’re after out here in the dark, in this town of shadows?”

“This don’t look like no town.”

“Ah,” said the voice. “That’s because your idea of a town is based solely on your experiences. You think ‘town,’ and you think of buildings and people. You think of a town’s defining features as houses and those that live within them. Might I suggest you think this way because you have never before encountered a town whose defining feature is desolation?”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Emptiness is what it means. You ain’t never before seen an empty town, have you?”

“No sir.”

“Well, this here’s your first, boy. It will not be the last. Anyhow, you came looking for München. That’s me. You also came looking for your pappy. Why have you come looking for him, I wonder? When I talked to him, he told me he didn’t have no family.”

“He don’t—not any he takes care of, no how.

He ain’t never met me. He done took off fore I was borned.”

“So why look for him? Without meaning to be rude, boy, he seems to have been clear that—on the subject of you, especially with regards to you being his progeny—he don’t give a good goddamn.”

“I ain’t looking for him for no benefit of mine. I want to tell him my momma’s dead.”

“Dead momma. Hmm. About your dead momma, when she was alive, did your pappy call on her often?”

“No sir.”

“So, let me revise. It was your momma he didn’t give a good goddamn about it. You just inherited

that lack of interest, an ancillary benefit from your absentee pappy.”

“I don’t know what none of that means, Mr. Mewn-chin. I came a long ways. I just want to know if you know where my pappy is at.”

“I do indeed. I know exactly where he is. I could tell you, but let me give you this little piece of advice, boy. Knowing don’t help. It don’t make no difference, and it ain’t gonna make you feel no better. You telling him about your momma ain’t gonna bring her back and it ain’t gonna make him love you.”

“Please, sir. If you know which way him and your granddaughter run off to, I’ll be on my way.”

The laughter in the dark came in waves: short, clipped barks followed by long bellows.

“He ain’t run off with no one. That’s just what I told ev’ryone. She took off with someone else, three months fore your pappy came up here. He wanted my house. Everyone else left. He said his comp’ny was gonna take the top off this mountain. Gonna get its coal. You know what that is, boy? It’s cutting the teats off Mother Earth and taking the lifeblood outta her. What’s left behind when she dies, they just dump somewhere’s else. Your pappy wanted to kill this town. I didn’t let him.”

“Where is he?”

“What I tell you? Knowing don’t help. You ain’t gonna meet your pappy for a long time yet. You can stop looking. When the time comes, he’ll find you. But that ain’t gonna be till you’re a old man, older’n me. Get outta here, boy, and don’t you never come back.”

I turned around and walked back down the mountain. I fell down, exhausted after two miles. I slept till morning.

In the spring of 1965, a representative of the company visited the lonesome house of München after the cold winter and found the man dead by his own hand. A shotgun lay on the floor next to him.

They found my pappy buried in back of the house.

When I told my very wise friend this story, he told me it was good I knew pappy was dead. He said it gave closure.

This is the only thing I’ve ever known him to be wrong about. **fluent**

Write Funeral Service, Clean Out Attic and Basement

BY ED ZAHNISER

WHEN I HEAR BABY BOOMERS SAY they wrote their wedding vows, I tell them, “Now it’s time to write your funeral service.” I am not morbid or a wet blanket but realistic. If you are un-churched, who wants some perfect stranger—often a male dressed in a long robe—pretending to know you well enough to do your eulogy?

I also tell boomers now’s the time to start cleaning out your basement and attic, or you might end up like the billionaire Howard Hughes . . .

I pause there . . . because most boomers would love to end up billionaires. But few are still hip to how, a few years before he died, Howard Hughes began saving his turds.

President Richard M. Nixon got brought down because he saved his words on tape. Each new batch of released Nixon tapes pushes his vocabulary closer to turds. But still, who knows what future advances in DNA testing or other sub-cellular sleuthing may make it possible to discover about you by analyzing your turds?

I recommend flushing as usual. You can argue sloppy detective work.

Howard Hughes must’ve thought you could have a life of all input and no output. Even Sumo wrestlers and party balloons know better.

The Howard Hughes example suggests that modern humans think we’re so sophisticated, but, given one small warping in the strange electrical discharges that masquerade as consciousness, even a brilliant aircraft industry magnate, once as come-hitherish as flypaper to gorgeous celebrity actresses, suddenly reduces himself to absurdity.

Primitive cultures buried the chief or king’s wealth with him. That is primitive. What a waste. (Rememer Howard Hughes.) Some cultures also burn a dead man’s wives with him. What skewed electrical discharge caused that? It’s a good thing Congress nipped Nixon in the bud.

Tricky Dick fudged the dates of donating his personal papers to a library and took a whopping big tax deduction.

Only two things in life are certain, and Nixon cheated on at least one of them. Even Howard Hughes couldn’t cheat on the other.

When you are young and hear BIBLE stories about Israelites worshipping a golden calf, or Queen Jezebel worshipping foreign fertility god Baal, it hardly sounds modern. In the Jezebel and King Ahab story the god Baal sounds a lot like the gospel of prosperity with no concern for justice.

Does the Dow Jones Industrial Average know any more about what comes next than bird entrails did? What’s the golden calf of our post-agricultural, post-industrial, post-economy economy? Comfort and security? Homeland security?

The human mind loves bovine grazing. That’s why we think adulthood is an endless plateau you achieve after puberty. Then you float all the way to your coffin

or urn. Most of our adult lives debunk that assumption with divorce or a loved one’s death or dementia.

The prophet Elijah must’ve struck King Ahab and Queen Jezebel as unlikely. Elijah comes out of nowhere. King Ahab has just spent a few chapters of the First Book of Kings defeating his neighbors in battle. He married and brought home a foreign queen, built a temple for her god, and imported the god’s priests to impress his people.

Elijah has no portfolio. He’s simply “the Tishbite.” He has been living someplace in Gilead whose name might mean “the Settlers.”

What the priests of Baal did was bundle and sell subprime mortgages. When those wrecked the economy, they bought up bottomed-out property.

“Ahab did more to provoke the Lord than did all the kings of Israel before him.” (That’s not stuck in to shore up dead the self-esteem of kings or politicians.)

Elijah has all 450 priests of Baal slaughtered by the sword—smushed by road-raged SUVs.

God ordered the ravens to feed Elijah. Naturally Ahab and Jezebel die horrible deaths. Dogs eat all but Jezebel’s hands and feet. A random arrow gets Ahab. What blood the dogs don’t lick up from his chariot, his men wash out in a pool where prostitutes bathe.

What I like about the Howard Hughes example is trying to imagine the IRS trying to figure how to subject a room full of desiccated billionaire turds to the estate tax.

An optimistic mid-level manager might send in a top agent, saying: “There’s bound to be a billionaire in there somewhere. Don’t come out until you audit him.” *fluent*



PHOTO: CARL SCHULTZ

The Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia has a very active poetry community, including the Bookend Poets Workshop, monthly readings at Shaharazade’s Exotic Tea Room in Shepherdstown, the Sotto Voce Poetry Festival, and poerty pages in the quarterly GOOD NEWS PAPER. This issue features poetry by Bookend Poets.

An Iraqi Soldier

There he lies, lifeless, at dusk,
his trivial helmet blown away,
his body humped over a berme,

his sand-plastered face sideways
on an outstretched, pointing arm,
his eyes horrified. Shells explode.

This is not his war. No match
for the coalition, he holds his side,
his olive drab blackened with blood.

His stiffening arm points eastward
beyond smoke curling from the hatch
of a tank, past the glow of Baghdad,

across the desert of his ancestors,
over the ancient mountains of Asia,
across the Pacific, beyond a boy

in red shorts making sand castles
on the beach in San Francisco,
beyond the girl in Topeka, Kansas

playing hopscotch, past a teen
at the salad bar in Dayton, Ohio
reaching for tongs, her Sunday skirt

pulled against her thighs,
toward steps of the Pentagon
where a reporter scratches his neck

before the briefing on a breezy day
in the Tidal Basin where branches
of cherry trees explode into bloom.

—Tom Donlon

Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike
(Winter 1862)

I’m propped against a naked maple tree,
a wounded man abandoned in a field.
Some time ago, beneath a snowy sea,
My gun and shifting tracks were sealed.

A mute platoon of pines salutes the sky.
The silent subjects here are bound
to stay with me. Birches bow and sigh,
deferring to the wind and icy ground.

A solitary spruce accepts a screen
of powdered camouflage that lights
along its limbs and coaxes them to lean
in quiet homage to insistent rites.

Gray, denuded hardwood stands invite
an oak with rusty leaves still clinging on
to help them filter out the light.
A chill rolls in with dark, and day is gone.

I’m cuddled in a comforter of snow.
An aching heat in my upper half
has not let go. Propped on my bed I know
its twisted branches are my epitaph.

—Tom Donlon

Pubcrawlers All, Please Note

Pubcrawlers all, please note herewith:
the multi-genre singer-picker Arnold Smith
looms larger than any media-made-up myth.
His song list as time-tested as a paleolith
and paced by banter sure to make you feel like kith
if not like kin—as if it’s you he’s singing with
not to. His show shows all the storied flow of Arrowsmith
(the novel, not the rock act spelled like aerolith).
It’s gentle at the core like elderberry branches’ pith.
You ladies listen up: this suave dude Arnold Smith
puts on an act to make your boyfriends nervous with.

—Ed Zahniser

Uncle Wiggily on Entertainment Tonight

We had just stepped on the point of no return
—our feet felt too big to fail—and by design or not
someone had left close drawings for Phone Headsets
for the Bald that would come complete with hair
something we decided to treat as distraction
but the drawings were so good you could call collect
to leave your rambling voicemail like a Mary Oliver
line hanging way out there to give God enough rope
to hang Godself.

We thought back to EZ Mart
how it made you feel so at home that last Tuesday
someone—Flash or Dave?—called-in sick instead
of placing their breakfast sandwich order ahead
but nostalgia is simply our way of seeing the past
as though we’ve always had air conditioning
ATMs and the highest extinction rate for millennia.

Turn off the A/C and shazam we all go Postmodern
so our opinions count just as much as Heidegger’s
or Wittgenstein’s or a New York taxi cab driver’s
which makes sense because all movements need
limits to growth or the whole world would end up
as homogenized as milk—
if for example all six
billion of us had signed on with the Reverend Moon
like true believers from Eric Hoffer Boot Camp
who make the planet too big to fail until
our every step lands on the point of no return
and dashes our long-held hope for a UN bailout.

—Ed Zahniser

Later, Off The Interstate

The pattern made by deer flies on the flank
of the berry-robber in the front garden
is probably insignificant, doesn’t tell
all after all. You wreathe your *chi* in smoke
& get used to hoping for the best,
whatever that is. The machines go on
running on leftovers. Your plumbing never got
over Eisenhower, though to this day
you can’t keep off his roads, can you?
& that’s knowing none of them go where
you thought they would. Did they ever?
Is this really the rest of anymore?

& a *frisson* of fear twitches by as you
find yourself unable to remember anyone
who has or ever had a coffee-table book
on a coffee table. Or, for that matter,
even has a coffee table. The lifelong longing
for stasis is not a death wish, keeps
itself moving, grail-riding out
on pitying winds, following a convertible
with a EWE NEEK vanity plate, lost
by the time you notice being low
on gas, lost in the would-be stars.

—Paul Grant

Counting The Days

Copper turtle keeping his one remaining eye
on the front porch, my neighbor
The Widow washing her old Cherokee
with Strang's Cemetery in her background,
Mother and Sister, who live nearby,
taking their nightly stroll through,
counting the days. The redundancy
of spoiled cat struts at the end of his rope
with the air of one who tied its knots,
& the landlord's chainsaw gobbles brush
up the hill, where the money is.

Down here where the ground lives, we
are as welcome as we ever were, now
that even though everyone's plans
have been changed by fate, we all
have some idea of how long
we're sticking around. Money
just gets in the way with its lies,
its false mercies, that mind of its own
we've grown to suspect it has.
& living this close to a graveyard,
every night hears us learning to whistle again.

—Paul Grant

Night Visit

A night owl, wandering around the house at 2:00 a.m.,
reading Merrill's Poems from the First Nine and
gathering poems from my friends, I bump

into your 3:00 a.m. awakening, your shade
prowling about in the spaced dark. You fiddle
with the TV dials, pour

cups of day-old coffee, roll cigarettes and spill
clumps of tobacco in odd, untouched places. Distinct,
each of us, in our separate strolls we collide

on fields untilled, in intersections, and at busy
construction sites, where Caterpillars scrawl moratoria
in the earth. Seeing you, I have learned

to turn off the two-way radio. My hard-hat hangs always at hand and close enough for me to snatch it in emergencies, like when your skies give way

to tornadoes, or when your mountains give in to rock slides, or when the temperature in this room rises.

—Georgia Lee McElhaney

Water Table **Goose Pimple**

Canada geese flown –
Farmer's pond has gone to grass.
After a warm rain
Toadstools erupt in a field
Like subdivision houses.

No rain – no toadstools.
Downstream, geese walk on water.
No water – no wells.
No subdivision houses.
S'burban Planning 101.

—Georgia Lee McElhaney

What a word does on its own time

[mind your own]

Hovering,
a way to quibble about meaning,

We are contiguous when you lie down next to me, our bodies touching.

I like this word contiguous.

bee.

—Sonja James

is nobody's business.

[mind your own]

is acceptable nonetheless.

May it outlive the daisy & the

Birth Day Poem

my interior: ()

womb-groove,
happy to house my sons—
though serially,
one at a time....

all
 falls away

 before I hear the clapping
 turn to singing,
 the blunted thud of the baby
 as he dives through birth canal
 & onto the table
 where doctor's hands
 wait to catch him

call me “And Oh”
because even now
I describe this almost equine pleasure
as
AND OH, THE BEAUTY OF GIVING BIRTH

even now, years later,
the first cooing of each son
lifts me from my lethargy,
enables me to strut my stuff
while snapping my fingers
& dancing in place

—Sonja James

Stirring Coffee

A well made bed is silent.
I stack the pillows,
tuck the sheets, smooth the quilt.
No stories,
even though last night
the sea wall broke
and a riot of tulips
swept into the tide
between dancing wooden shoes,
castanets, silk shawls and roses,
Van Gogh's star swirled sky,
Big Ben, and maybe the Acropolis
(or was it pyramids), all of Asia, Europe,
and even red-bearded men in Viking ships;
or that with every undone button
a world of careful expectations fell away
until the universe was nothing but desire.

—Ginny Fite

Finding What You Didn't Lose

The time will come
when you will paint the walls purple
and put down a green rug
and carry in all those paintings
stuffed in the hall closet
behind clothes you don't wear anymore.
You will take out all the boxed items
and unwrap them like birthday presents,
letting your fingers blacken from newsprint.
And that plaster flower holder molded
lumpily by seven year old hands
and painted with the turquoise word MOM
goes on the wall to hold pink straw flowers
the way it did 30 years ago
when you first had courage,
before life demanded penance for survival.

—Ginny Fite

Magnolia Blooming

You'd never guess blood
could be shed on a day like this—
not with magnolias blooming and laughter
hanging off the mouths of the white men
as casually as their thick cigars.
It could be any autumn day
in Mississippi—Spanish moss beckons
from a Red Maple; the air is ripe,
sky cloudless.
The men lean into their white
police car parked on crab grass,
suck in the stinking smoke
of their cigars. One lifts his club
in jest, swings his arm swiftly down
then back up. The others chuckle,
lean back casually, as his arm
slices a black shadow
across the Southern sun.

O

It is the eternal, continuous, the serpent
curled; the ripened plum, the endless sky;
the desperately searching eye
of the moon grown full and aching.
It is the breathless gasp, a waiting,
an emerging; the womb round with life,
the baby's cry, the new head emerging
from darkness and liquid. It is liquid,
the long row of waves cresting, flowing,
cresting, crashing. It is the belly of the sea,
the basin holding ancient life. It glares,
a Cyclops beaming, the mythical giant.
The longest vowel, it circles the mouth;
rolls off the lips like a kiss; takes shape deep
in the throat, guttural. There it is as the zero,
the number before all numbers, nothingness
that is deeply full, making a one into ten.
It's the exclamation and the force of recognition
bubbling out of each person, realizing that yes,
yes, and oh yes, I know exactly, and the exact
sound, too, of yes, yes, oh oh I love you yes,
but also the no that is death.

—Christa Mastrangelo

Sanctuary

Haad Tien, Koh Phangan, Thailand

I was woken just before sunset by the sound of
drumming
exorcist voices,
some old self, perhaps,
being driven away, expunged.
Walking down the steep, stone lined path in the
gathering dark
I heard first a patch of conversation,
some couple in their bungalow,
sharing an intimate moment, perhaps,
then cicadas, then a lecture (taped?)
on the pursuit of transcendent energy
(Osho, perhaps?)
then the sound of breakers, of birds,
cicadas again, and then coming closer,
upbeat jazz from the palapa,
a cacophony of voices and tones,
and from the kitchen,
the fragrance of spices, simmering coconut.
Out on the distant, now black horizon
the squid boats were lit up
bright white, incandescent,
while overhead the red and green wing lights of a prop
plane hummed north,
engines barely audible above the demonic grumble
of a generator
at the bungalow colony down the shore.
On the sparsely lit beach
the fire dancers practiced,
their spirals of flame boring into the dark
next to the longtails bobbing just outside the breakers.
There had been talk of a party in town tonight;
a longtail, leaving late for Haad Rin,
returning later still, maybe dawn.
But, walking on the beach at sunrise,
I find the boatmen still asleep in the sand,
a foot resting carefully on their anchor lines.

—Shepherd Ogden

Venus In A Tank Top

Haad Tien, Koh Phangan

I was floating just out beyond the breakers
when she came from between the palms
and the casaurina.
My feet were lightly gripping a small boulder
of smooth, broken coral,
and I drifted slightly in,
then slightly out,
like a seaweed sucking up sun.
Drifting out,
I watched her walk up the beach
just above the tide,
listening to something on tiny headphones.
I waved,
hand barely out of the water,
and she waved back,
bit of a smile,
then began a more practiced gait,
eyes straight ahead,
hands down, hips certain.
Drifting in,
I thought to let the surf throw me at her feet.
We could pick up where we left off last night
I thought, but she didn't look,
so I let the water take me out again.
She walked on,
past the anchor line of a long-tail,
then turned, strode through the slack surf,
stepped into its prow,
made her way to the center
and sat.
The boatman lifted his anchor and pushed off backward
from the beach,
coasting out with the slight, equatorial tide.
I drifted in.

* * *

When we'd met the night before,
she'd said she'd come to do some serious self work,
had just lost the love of her life,
been shown the door, and so
left the fast life in London.
She was looking for some sort of sign as
to what was going to come. I said
I had come to go to pieces
without falling apart, to
try and put myself together in a new way.

I drifted out
and around --
tide turning me as I held to the coral with a toe --
facing the boat, now in profile
as it turned to leave the little harbor.
By then the headphones were around her neck
so I spoke, said "Bye!"
She smiled a bit,
raised the fingers of her right hand
and mouthed a "Bye" in return.
The boatman cranked the engine slowly
and it popped,
then pattered along.
She put on a pair of sunglasses and leaned back,
elbows on the seat behind,
shoulders against the luggage deck,
facing backward,
still a slight smile.
I drifted in
and the surf left me at the tide.
I lay there,
back against the rising beach,
elbows half buried in coarse sand,
shoulders against a tide mound of coral fragments,
still watching,
each new wave bringing the water up around my
knees.
The boatman throttled up the engine,
lowered the prop into the water
and skimmed out of the bay,
her still, reclined body
a Madonna, a Cleopatra, a Venus in skirt and tank top,
eyes iconic, like the windows of a limousine.
And, soon
the sound of the engine was lost
beneath the light crash of surf and distant reggae.

—Shepherd Ogden





Saugatuck, Michigan Public Loo: Painted by local artists, the public restroom is the backdrop for Georges Seurat's "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grand Jatte."