
P E N N E D

KENTUCKY MONTHLY'S 8TH ANNUAL WRITERS' SHOWCASE



POETRY

Sandi Keaton-Wilson // Somerset
Lisa Kindel // Lexington
John E. Moss // Jamestown
Anthony Stallard // Lexington
William Sutherland // Floyds Knobs,
Indiana

FICTION

Crystal Bradshaw // Lawrence, Kansas
Ed Ford // Richmond

NONFICTION

Bobbie Bryant // Louisville
Bernard Mitchell Plumlee // Rockfield

WHERE DOES SHE GO ...

In the early morning hours,
 I weep for my Sweetheart,
 Her mind is going to a far away place,
 Where I cannot follow.
 In silence she sits,
 Without me ...
 Even though I am beside her ...

I weep for my Sweetheart,
 And cannot realize the horror,
 The frustration,
 Of losing the sense,
 Of one's own self ...
 Where does she go when she sits,
 In silence ...

There is no laughter,
 Or soft spoken word,
 Anymore,
 Where she treads with small steps,
 Here or there,
 Or stands in silence,
 Just beyond the doorway.

Oh my love,
 You do not hear my words,
 Or see my tears,
 But I am beside you,
 Despite the hour day or night.
 Rest this evening and do not stir,
 I am here ... only a breath away.

John E. Moss // Jamestown

HAIKU TO THE HUMBLE GOLDENROD

Ambrosia it's not
 Clogging my lungs so I wheeze
 Until winter's freeze.

Lisa Kindel // Lexington

LYRICAL

I have skipped words, like smooth stones,
 across the surface of sound,
 lent use of my voice,
 willingly writing what "others" want to say.
 I have rolled on my tongue
 the sweetness of a white grape,
 round vowels and fleshy syllables,
 biting down and piercing skin
 with passion's pen as it sends
 the last line through the mind
 like a rapier hitting bone.

I have made a home among sentences,
 slept between the pages of plot and promise,
 awoke in the arms of parenthesis.
 In times of pain and purposelessness,
 my muse muted for months, I have
 torn away strips of my flesh
 to examine what remained beneath
 my surface, to study old wounds,
 then bandage them with those healing words
 that are as much a part of me
 as mere mortal cells.

Sandi Keaton-Wilson // Somerset

WHY DON'T YOU CUT
THAT OLD TREE DOWN?

Why don't you cut that old tree down?

It's leaning closer to the ground,
if I don't watch it won't make a sound
At least that is what I've read.

Why don't you cut that old tree down -
we just don't need it around!

Not as shady as it used to be and
the kids no longer need it for their swing
I can relate, it's the same for me
my time is nearly through.

Why don't you cut that old tree down?

Maybe you don't understand
what it's like growing up to be a man
there's been some that tried to cut me down
but I stood straight and I stood true.

Ever reaching for the sky
always trying to grow towards the sun
saw my share of bad weather and high wind.

I'll grow again when I am done
nourished by the rain
and maybe some tears from your eyes.

Why don't you cut that old tree down?

Just one favor and I'll ask it -
use the tree to make my casket
bury me sweetly in the ground
with a seed inside my pocket close to my heart
so we can grow again
the heart of the me inside the tree
waiting for a new boy to come along
and play among my branches.

Why don't you cut that old tree down?

William Sutherland // Floyds Knobs, Indiana

BENDING EVER-SLIGHT, UNENDING

Bending ever-slight unending,
all the stardust, all there is
or ever was or will be's dancing,
on the darkest winter sky.

In the middle, of the middle
of the middle of the night,
where is and when the show's begun;
a cosmic play staged on a ribbon
in the playground of my mind.

In between the palisades
of what is here and what is there,
from what was then to what is now
to where's a somewhere up ahead.

I take a path and I arrive
where stellar voices sing
and know
I'm in the house
where time is born.

Anthony Stallard // Lexington

SLAVE

I's in the kitchen when I's hear it. The cry. My back go all straight, and my eyes bug out as I go on ovah and stand in the doorway. I's imagine that I's look like a momma hen wid her feathers all ruffled up. But I's ain't thinkin' 'bout me bein' no chicken when I sees Joe standin' ovah my babies. John clutchin' on ta Granville, boff cryin', callin' me.

“Momma! Momma!”
 “You better get quick boy before I give ya something to cry about.”
 “Watcha think ya be doin’?”
 Joe turn 'round so quick it take a moment fo' the rest of his body catch up wid his nasty self.
 “Get back in that kitchen 'fore I whip ya good,” he snarl, curlin' his pink lip. I's don't see 'em tho'. My eyes be lookin' at my babies on the ground.
 “Them be my chillen,” I say.
 “Nigger, you hear me? I say to get on back in that kitchen!”
 “I hear ya allright. It's ya that can't hear. I says those be my chillen.”
 He charge at me, the long ol' whip flashin' in his hand. I sees him, years agos, on top of me, reachin' ... reachin'. Lily there ta stop him then. But I's know it only the Lord and me on this one. Next thing I know, I in the kitchen, grabbin' that kettle ovah the fire and water be flyin' everywhere.
 “Get outta here! Ya gonna 'member me when ya think 'bout hurtin' my babies 'gain!!!” I's scream, throwin' water.
 He scream, runnin' outta there like he on fire. I right on his heels tho', flingin' water, chasin' him like David afta the Gentiles. He run off down the hill, screamin' and hollerin' up a storm, and I's stand watchin' him. My hand be numb, but I yank John and Granville up and swat 'em a good one.
 Their lil' faces look on up at me from 'hind tearful eyes.
 “Naw ya'll bettah git on home and stay wid Granma Nancy! I catch you here 'gain I gonna tear yo' backs up, ya hear me?” Theys nod all quick like starin' up at me wid them big ol' eyes 'fore John pick up Granville and carry him down the hill ta our cabin.
 I's watch him wobble on down the hill, jus' barely able ta carry Granville,

and go in the cabin 'fore realizin' my hand feel like it on fire.
 “You knows what, Ruth?” I says, leanin' on my knees, pantin' 'way and glancin' up at the sky.
 “What that be, 'Liza?”
 “If I could write, I'd have a whole lotta stories ta put on papah 'bout my chillen! Theys gonna git whooped like no othah tonight.”
 Fo' a moment, it sound like I hear Ruth's laff, but then it only be silent 'cept the sound of aftanoon locusts and my pantin'.
 I go on in the kitchen, grab me a bucket, and pump me some water. It ain't cold, but it might as well be as scorchin' hot my hand feel rights naw. I barely makes it back in the kitchen when I knows I needs ta sit fo' a moment. The Misses be 'specially ugly today and give me a whole lotta work ta do. She know I be wid chile. My belly nearly poppin' wid this one! And wid ... wid Ruth gone on up ta the Lord, I can't git everythin' done quick nuff. She know that. That snake woman know that.
 “ 'Liza ...”
 I's look up quick like, a cold shiver goin' down even my hand.
 “What do you think you are doing?”
 Lord, Lord, if you hear me naws I needs ya. I needs ya, Lord. Please help me.
 “Nuthin', ma'am.”
 “I see that, girl. You getting smart with me?”
 “No'm.”
 “Well, is your work done then?”
 Lord, Lord, please help me. Please help me.
 “No'm.”
 Crack!
 I's hear's it but it ain't connectin' wid my head what happenin'.
 Crack! Crack! Crack!
 I's scream, blood runnin' down ovah my eyes, blindin' me. Stingin' me. Then my head be on fire and I's scream tryin' ta throw the salt offa my head as I hear that woman axin', “Why [Crack!] isn't [Crack] your [Crack] work [Crack] done!!!”
 CRACK!
 I's screamin' holdin' ta my head, blood and tears streamin' down.
 Please, Lord! Please, Lord! Please, Lord! Please! Please! PLEASE!
 The broom clatter ta the floor and I's hears her footsteps leavin'.
 “My husband is going to be made known of your disobedience,” was the last thing I heard her say 'fore she leave.
 Rockin' back and forth, I holds my belly, weepin', sobbin', sayin' ovah and ovah, “Lord, please. Lord, please.

Lord, please. Lord ... please.”
 “Allright, I'll whip her after dinner.”
 Massa be home. Supper been served. I in the kitchen, listenin' 'bout what he gonna do. That same fire that rolled on thro' me when I's protected my chillen early today, roll thro' me 'gain. A voice tell me ta git that kitchen fire stirred up real blazin' hot. And I know that that voice belong ta nuthin' othah than the Lord. I's make that fire so hot that it put the shame ta Nebudchaznazer's furnace.
 “C'mon and let'm try, Lord,” I says.
 My fingahs be swolt but I's smile when I's put that there big ol' kettle of water ovah that fire. I set my lil' chair and bucket by that fire, waitin'. I done had my last beaten evah.
 I ain't sho' how many moments latah it be but I's finally hear footsteps and Massa comes on in the kitchen. The Misses be right 'hind him, grinnin' like the snake she be as he start takin' down the rawhide whip hangin' ovah on the kitchen wall. I's grin back. Well, she done come along fo' the show. Well I's gotta a show fo' 'em allright.
 “Get up, 'Liza,” Massa say, steppin' toward me.
 In the name of Jesus, I's ain't gonna be beats no mo's afta today.
 He be in the middle of 'nother step, sayin', “ 'Liza, get up,” when in go my lil' bucket and it sho' nuff begin rainin' hot water. Massa yell, jumpin' on his toes as I's throw 'nother good ol' bucket full of that scorchin' water on his feet. The Misses be standin' in dumb shock, not believin' what she be seein'. I's look up at her and our eyes meet. I's sees my reflection in her big ol' wide eyes as I dip my bucket in 'gain. Wid Massa, it be his feet. But wid her ... I gonna make sho' she nevah forget.
 A scream tear thro' the air and she grab her face wid her hands, wailin'.
 Massa stand there lookin' at me, eyes big. He look from his wife ta me ta the water, ta me, and back on ta his wife screamin' on that dirt floor. I's wait fo' his decision, my lil' bucket ready in my hands.
 “Crazy! Crazy!” he yell, reachin' fo' his wife.
 “Get this place cleaned up and get on out of here!” he say but I's don't move none till he drag hisself and his wife on outta my kitchen. Only then does I move.
 Crystal Bradshaw // Lawrence, Kansas

“My submission is an excerpt from my historical fiction novel that I self-published about my great-great-great-great-grandmother, who was a slave in Kentucky.”

THE NOTE

“What’s this?”

Thelma Baxter looked at the piece of paper thrust toward her.

“Just read it,” the man said.

He was tall and thin, with a determined look. He frowned as he stared, waiting for her to pick up the small note.

Thelma, a veteran clerk at the convenience store, had been ringing up a steady stream of customers. The man with the note was the last in line, perhaps for a reason. She picked up the note, unfolded it and peered at the scribbled message. Her eyes ran over it several times before she looked again at the “customer.”

“What’s this all about?” she asked.

“Just read the note,” he instructed.

Thelma shook her head.

“Sorry, I can’t. It doesn’t make any sense. The writing is hard to read, and I don’t know what you want.”

The man seemed puzzled, undecided as to what he should do next.

“Let me see it,” he finally responded, reaching for the piece of paper.

He read it several times before tossing it back to her. He had a vacant look and opened his mouth as if to speak, but couldn’t seem to find the words.

“What is it you don’t understand?” he finally asked.

Thelma shook her head.

“Look,” she said, “I can’t read this. Some of these words—I can’t figure out what they are.”

She leaned toward the man and pointed to the note’s first sentence.

“‘Dew ure told.’ What’s that mean?”

He reached for the note, again reviewing its contents. Somewhat embarrassed, he looked again at Thelma.

“Well, I really didn’t write this,” he confessed. “My friend did.”

He nodded toward another individual standing near the front door. He wasn’t as tall as the first man, but obviously very nervous. He shifted from one foot to the other between frequent glances out the front window.

Thelma peered at the second man, then back at the man with the note.

“Why don’t you ask him to come over here?”

Hesitantly, the note bearer stepped away from the counter and motioned for his friend to join them. The second man stared for a moment before catching on to the signal. He shook his head “no” with authority and pointed outside with agitation. He was in a hurry to leave.

His companion again motioned for him to join them, this time more forcibly. Hesitantly, the second man moved toward them, stopping several feet from his friend.

“What?” he growled in a hoarse whisper.

“She can’t read this,” his partner whispered in response.

“Then read it to her!”

“I can’t read it either.”

Indignantly, the second man jerked the note from his sidekick. He glanced at it, then back toward Thelma. He surveyed the store, noting one other customer browsing through some paperbacks at the other side of the room. He then approached the counter.

“Have you got a pencil?” he asked.

Thelma scowled at the two men, finally pushing a ballpoint pen toward them.

The author of the note placed the paper on the counter and scribbled something above two of the words. He pushed the revised message back toward Thelma.

The blue-ink addition looked like two small snakes upright on their tails. She gazed up toward the men, who saw she still didn’t understand.

“That’s ‘as,’” the note writer explained. “I left out the word ‘as’.”

Thelma looked back at the message.

“Dew as ure told,” she read aloud. “You mean, ‘Do as you’re told?’ ” she asked.

“That’s what it says.”

“No, it doesn’t. The spelling’s all wrong. Let me show you.”

Thelma placed the note on the counter and rewrote the sentence with proper spelling. The men leaned over the counter and watched carefully as she made the corrections.

“Aahh!” they exclaimed, nodding affirmatively.

All three waited, but no one spoke.

“Well?” Thelma asked.

“Well, what?”

“Well, I still don’t know what you want.”

“Did you read the next sentence?”

Thelma took a look and threw up her hands in disgust.

“I can’t read that either! What’s that mean ... ‘None will hurt.’ What’s a hurt?”

The note was taken back and read again by the author.

“You know, hurt. If you fall down, you could get hurt.”

Thelma shook her head.

“Your spelling is atrocious. That should be h-u-r-t,” she impatiently corrected the note. “And this isn’t even a complete sentence ... ‘None will hurt.’ ”

“I guess my spelling’s not too good,” the second man apologized. “What I meant was: ‘No one will get hurt.’ ”

“Then we should replace ‘none’ with ‘no one’ and insert the verb ‘get’ shouldn’t we?” a now sarcastic Thelma asked.

“Well, yes, m’am, add that in if you would. Uhh, do you understand the rest of it?”

“‘Open ure drowers?’ ”

Thelma was at a loss for words.

“That, uhh, should read ‘Open your drawers.’ Sometimes my ‘a’ looks like an ‘o’.”

Thelma’s temper was rising.

“And just exactly what do you mean by that? Are you some kind of pervert?”

“No, m’am, I didn’t mean ...”

“And this,” she snapped. “‘Give us all ure ... what’s this crossed out ... kash, dolers?”

“Well, I couldn’t spell what I meant, so I wrote in ‘m-u-n-i’. See, it follows the crossed-out words.”

“You mean muni as in municipal?”

“Uhh, no, m’am, that’s supposed to be money.”

“All right, all right, let me correct this and see if anything here makes sense.”

Thelma continued to cross out and make revisions, then made a final attempt to read the message.

“I’m going to read this aloud,” she explained, “and see if we can sort out a reasonable meaning.”

“OK, but not too loud,” the author cautioned.

Thelma glared at him over her glasses, then began reading.

“‘Do as you’re told. No one will get hurt. Open your

continued on next page

“THE NOTE”
continued

drawers. Give us all your money.’ ”

Thelma’s body snapped to attention.

“Why you mean the cash drawer,” she said. “Is this a robbery?”

The note bearer wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The author cleared his throat and stared at the floor.

“If you’re going to rob someone, at least say something like ‘Stick ’em up!’ ” she snapped.

“Can’t,” the first man said. “We don’t have a gun.”

“This is insulting!” Thelma stormed. “Expecting to rob someone with an incoherent, poorly written note! Not to mention the world’s worst penmanship!”

The two men were getting edgy.

“It was his idea,” the note bearer said, back-handing his companion’s shoulder. “I didn’t like the idea of using a note in the first place.”

The second man’s anger was mounting.

“You could at least have read it before you gave it to her!”

The note bearer, with great indignation, shook his head.

“How did I know you were such a lousy writer?”

“I was nervous,” the author snarled. “And I never was a good speller.”

Thelma stepped to the wall and lifted the phone.

“I’m calling the police,” she announced.

The would-be thieves moved quickly toward the door.

“I’m not listening to any more of your hare-brained ideas,” the note bearer announced.

They continued to grouse at one another, passing through the doorway and hurrying down the street.

Ed Ford // Richmond

HARVEST

I committed my first sin in a church. But in my defense, I must proclaim that had I not been exposed to such a rigid environment that demanded unnatural conformity from a toddler, the said event might well have never happened. And the fact that the awareness of transgression awoke in me during a worship service makes me highly suspicious that religion itself just might be the author of sin.

I’m not sure if I was old enough to walk when I entered into the world of ill repute, but without a doubt, I had mastered the art of crawling. My initiation into the immoral occurred at Pleasant Grove Missionary Baptist Church, a white wood-framed house of worship that still stands on top of a hill overlooking rolling fields of rich Kentucky farmland. My dad grew up not far from that sacred spot that put me on the road to ruin. He certainly was not a churchgoer by anyone’s account. The only interests he had in spiritual matters were those that came in liquid form, preferably whiskey. Nor was my mother a fan of churches. Her family had a small construction business, and she was left unimpressed by the fact that the faithful often tried to renegotiate their bill after the work was done. One of her favorite sayings was: “I wouldn’t trust a preacher or a deacon any further than I could throw ’em.”

So I don’t know why they attended church on the day I officially became a sinner. But when one considers my father’s legendary reputation for drinking and carousing, it’s reasonable to assume my mother hoped a little religion might settle him down a bit. She always found it hard to believe that I could even remember the event, seeing as how I was not much more than an infant at the time. But it is as clear to me today as it was that fateful night I sat on the floor near the back of that small country church. I nestled in, as children often do, and hid directly under the pew, my mother’s feet in front of me, protecting me from the strange surroundings. The constant chatter of conversation gave way to the roar of what I now know was a preacher bellowing out a sermon. This foreign world quickly became very boring, so I explored my new surroundings. I looked off into the distance and saw my first object of lust: a man’s brown fedora hat. It rested on the floor next to the feet of its owner, who sat in the front of the church. I don’t know why, but I had to have that hat. There was nothing special about it at all in that day and age. It was typical attire for men in the late 1950s. But once I set my eyes upon it, I could think of nothing else.

Between me and my objective was a jagged path through dangling legs and ladies handbags. When the cries of the preacher and the echoing shouts of the congregation reached a crescendo, I glanced up at my mother. Much to my liking, her eyes were fixed straight ahead. I shot out from under the pew on all fours; I weaved and bobbed between people’s feet and descended upon my prize in no more than five seconds flat. Without the slightest bit of hesitation, I snatched that hat, made my way back through the appendage jungle, and snuggled once again safely beneath that old wooden pew.

I held the hat before me, admiring its soft luster. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. I put it on my head; it fell over my eyes. Its velvet-like material felt warm and closed off the world around me. Everything became quiet, dark, still and serene. I could’ve stayed there forever, comforted in the bosom of my sin. But sin is only fun for a season, and then comes the harvest.

Without warning, my mother jerked the hat from my head. A hushed rustle of whispers filled the room. I leaned out and looked up. Everyone seated in front of us had swiveled around in their pew and stared down at me. I did the same thing Adam did after he tasted the forbidden fruit and God came looking for him in the Garden of Eden: I jumped back under that pew and hid myself from their presence. But with one quick swipe of his hand, my father grabbed me up, threw me over his shoulder, and carried me toward the door. I stretched forth my arms toward the congregation and screamed, “Help!” Roars of laughter rang out. The door shut behind me. And my father executed judgment on a poor sinner such as I.

Bernard Mitchell Plumlee // Rockfield

THE FUNERAL

The line of people snaking toward the open casket is finally dwindling. Elizabeth spots a folding chair close by and plops down, exhausted. She and husband David have been at the funeral home for five hours already. It wouldn't seem such a long time, if she could only remember why she is here.

Suddenly conscious of her appearance, Elizabeth wonders for a moment if her lipstick is still applied. She gently rubs her forefinger under her eyes, wiping at unseen wear of the day. Fishing around in her pants pocket, she finds a breath mint and pops it in her mouth. She smooths her hand over her cropped gray hair, surprised to find it in place for a change.

Seated for a few moments, she stands and takes David's hand. She whispers in his left ear, "I see a lot my cousins here. Who died?" David lowers his head, wagging it sadly. He murmurs, "Elizabeth, it's your brother, Andrew. He died the day-before-yesterday." She grimaces, "Oh yes, he went so suddenly!"

Elizabeth sits back in the chair as she remembers their shared childhood. Andrew is three years older and her only sibling. He was a bit of a bully when they were young children; "frogging" her arm every chance he got. But he did save her life that one time when they went swimming in the fish pond at Uncle Tommy's house. She never did learn to swim.

David takes the seat next to Elizabeth, but then spots their daughter, Jenny, and son-in-law Tim coming into the room. He stands to greet them. Jenny quietly inquires, "How's Mom doing?"

"Well," he whispers, "if she can just remember who's in the casket, we'll be all right."

Jenny bats her eyes several times to clear sprouting tears, then moves to greet her mother, "Hey, Mom, you look real pretty, your hair looks terrific, she whispers in her ear.

"Well, I don't know how," Elizabeth scoffs. "Someone must have helped me with it before I came." Jenny nods and says, "Yes, you told me just how you wanted it."

Jenny takes the seat next to her mother and watches the line of family and friends continue filing through the door. Elizabeth leans over to her and shares in a hushed voice, "I can't believe how many of my childhood friends are here; I've actually known most of them, even remembered their names."

Looking around the room, she continues with pride, "I may not remember what I had for lunch, but by golly, I can recall 40 years ago like it was yesterday."

At the door, Elizabeth spots a woman that she'd worked with more than 20 years ago. At once revived, she jumps up to say hello.

Jenny wistfully observes the scene before her. She scans the room decorated with Art Deco floor lamps and

Victorian-era faux silk wallpaper of mint green, patterned with giant blobs of pink and yellow roses. Funerals in her hometown have always been the same: open casket, intermittent quiet sobs, a bountiful display of fresh flowers splayed across the casket. Baskets of fresh floral arrangements, green plants and angel statues are scattered about. Amid discreet conversations, occasional laughter erupts, and friends and family stream by, one by one, to comfort the grieving.

Jenny's attention is drawn back to her mother, standing again in the receiving line. She is relieved to see how well Elizabeth handles the onslaught of people. Elizabeth smiles, takes their hands, or in some cases, reaches for an embrace, cheeks touching. She responds graciously to their remarks, thanking them for coming. Fortunately, there is no time for each guest to get into a prolonged dialogue.

Jenny rejoices inwardly that the charade is working so well. Even though her mom doesn't know why she is here, or what is going on, somehow she instinctively knows how to behave.

As the evening visitation comes to an end, Jenny looks through the guest registration book. She sees that one of her high school friends, Jill, had indeed signed in, leaving before she and Tim arrived. Jill had phoned Jenny when leaving the visitation, reporting how pleased she was that Elizabeth had remembered her right away.

At dinner later that night, Jenny asks, "Mom, did you recognize Jill Martin when she stopped by the funeral home?"

"No, was she there?"

"Yes," Jenny says, "she used to work with Uncle Andrew."

"Wasn't that nice that she came?" Elizabeth replies. "I wish she'd said something to me. I would have enjoyed seeing her."

Jenny sighs, aware that Jill's feelings would be hurt if she knew that her visit was not remembered.

The next morning is flooded in sunshine as the family prepares to return to the funeral home for the final ceremonies. Jenny asks her mother, "Would you like for me to help you get dressed, maybe curl your hair?"

Elizabeth is instantly offended. "Don't you think I can do it myself?"

"Of course I do, Mom," Jenny replies, "but I know you'll want to look just so when you see everyone, so thought I'd offer."

"I don't care what any of them think about how I look," Elizabeth puffs. "They're not coming to see me anyway."

"OK, Mom," Jenny concedes. "It's really up to you."

After a light lunch of cold-cut sandwiches, potato chips and fresh summer tomatoes and cucumbers floating in a vinaigrette dressing, the four adults head for the door. The time has arrived for Elizabeth and her family to say goodbye to Andrew. David reminds Elizabeth to get her suit jacket and Jenny asks, "Are your shoes comfortable; you'll be on your feet a good bit today."

"Oh yes, they're fine," Elizabeth says cheerfully. "Now, where is it we're going?"