

# Birmingham Arts Journal

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## Table of Contents

<b>CROWD CONTROL</b>	Beth Miles	1
<b>JOSEPHINE'S BEACH</b>	Nancy Milford	4
<b>ZEN IN HOLLYWOOD</b>	Ravi Shankar	10
<b>QUALITIES OF THE MODERN FARMER</b>	Emily Franklin	12
<b>APOLOGY TO THE BLUEBIRD</b>	George Sawaya	23
<b>STRAW HAT</b>	Andrew Tyson	24-25
<b>LIGHTNING CATCHER</b>	Xochitl Luna	26
<b>BLUE COLLAR AND A SHORT CHAIN</b>	Ben Thompson	28
<b>RECORD SETTING SERVICE</b>	John Williamson	30
<b>MOVEMENT 1</b>	Mysti Milwee	31
<b>AUTUMN REVERIE</b>	Frank Dawson	32
<b>THE DAY I REALIZED LIFE WASN'T FAIR</b>	Harper Evers	34
<b>FOLLOW MY LEAD</b>	Joshua Lim	35
<b>THE HEELING HEEL</b>	Jim Reed	36
<b>WHAT SAVES YOU</b>	Ann Gengarely	38
<b>RED HOT FACELESS SAX MAN</b>	William Crawford	40
<b>From GLEANINGS, a novel</b>	J.A. Bernstein	41
<b>I SAW THE LIGHT</b>	Ben South	47
<b>MIRACLE STRIP</b>	Matthew Layne	48

Front Cover: **SIDE PONY** — Pastel on Paper — 12" x 18" *Wanda Randall is an artist in Birmingham, AL. Her painting, SIDE PONY, won the 2015 Birmingham Arts Journal Publication Award which is given annually to one member of the Alabama Pastel Society.*

Back Cover: **MY SELF** — Oak Sculpture — 28" x 10" — Calvin Macon is an aspiring poet, self-taught stone and wood sculptor, who retired after 24 years in the Navy. His inspiration comes from nature which silences the white noise in his head. He is a displaying member of the Artist Incorporated Gallery, Vestavia Hills, AL  
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## **From: GLEANINGS, a novel**

J. A. Bernstein — 2015 Hackney Literary Awards: Novel

- 1 -

Two hundred ninety-six hours before his death, Corporal Ivan Belkin was sitting on the toilet in the barracks of the Rachel's Tomb Outpost, playing a game of Tetris on his phone, obscured by his Marlboro's smoke, when the half-attached knob of the door started jangling.

"The hell do you want?" Ivan said.

"Patrol's in twelve," said his friend, speaking in Russian.

Ivan flicked his cigarette, which sizzled in the shower's rank stall. Then he reached in his vestpack, which was slung around the sink, and pulled out a small silver flask. He took a long sip of his honey pepper vodka, leaned his head back, and sighed.

Outside the sun burned a hole through the clouds and the tall cement beams of a base, the neighboring one up the street. Blinking, Ivan followed the procession of soldiers, each a shade darker, as they bounded up Derech Hevron. Then he closed his eyes and smelled the bright Bethlehem air: the scent of sweet diesel, Arab cologne, rotting roadkill and smoldering trash.

"Ivan," yelled Shaul, his platoon leader, in front, "keep a watch to the rear and stay close."

The men treaded forward. They were heading for the graves down below, a small terraced hillside, adjacent to their base, that was layered with Ottoman tombs. Ivan was spinning. His eyes settled back in his head.

He heard a boom. He would later describe this as the turning point in his mortal existence. But when he heard it right then, it sent a shock wave inside him. Beside him, a whooshing explosion, like some bright, congealed force, flared up majestically, and in those squirming waves, he swore he saw the face of a god. Not a Jewish one, exactly, but some roiling figure, like a fluttering angel of death. Then Liav, who was the fourth man in line, walking about four or five paces ahead of him, turned to find a sparkling flash on his shoulder, as if something licked at his neck. He started swatting at it frantically. Before Ivan could react, let alone anyone else in the vicinity, he heard a sharp bang. Then another one, in fact. It was coming from up the road, beside a parked truck, where his commander had run with his rifle. He was bursting out rounds in quick fire.

Thirty minutes later, or what Ivan would take as thirty minutes—it was in fact four or five seconds—an Arab lay sprawled on the road's graveled edge, his chin at his nose, the thin sucking maw in his clavicle burbling what could only be described as a mulberry jam—this had been Ivan's favorite in Russia. His

commander stood over the body, gasping like some great winded boxer while the others provided cover from the blocks. At some point during these last thirty minutes, Ivan found himself running to a large cement barrier, a chipped guard block at which they would check Arab cars—none were now present, owing to a curfew—and, as he knelt on the pavement, two or three shots rang out from the hood of a Humvee ahead, where his platoon leader had run and, strangely enough, acted bravely. The rest of them froze.

Ivan, being the platoon medic, found himself obliged to act. Witnessing Liav on the pavement, about four meters down, he saw that the fire had sparked and receded. Liav was dead. No, he wasn't dead, Ivan told himself. He was only superficially burnt. The guy was still breathing. And whatever this thing was that had been hurled at him—a Molotov probably—contained fire and nothing else. Perhaps molten wax. Nothing that would disrupt his insides. Liav was still clutching his CAR-15. What was he hoping to do with that, Ivan wondered. Before he could resolve it, Ivan found himself running to the sandbagged caboose of their outpost, through its thick steel frame, and down to the barracks below, where he proceeded to remove his gray blanket, gather it up, consider folding it briefly—though that was beside the point now—and unhesitatingly run, re-sling his gun, and pounce towards the checkpoint outside, where he proceeded to swaddle his friend with this bandage, which was undoubtedly reeking of sweat. Nevertheless, Liav seemed to appreciate the gesture, as if he were being bid goodnight. Beyond, his commander continued his firing. Or maybe he had just started it at that point. It was not immediately clear, and time had just enveloped itself in some ill-construed form, a sagging gray heap of bruised cotton reeking of semen and sweat, while above him, in this gray pewter day, with its evanescent sun and hewed clouds, dusk folded over the horizon like a lid sealing mulberry jam.

Ivan ran in haste now down to the foot of the road, where he attended the Arab who was sprawled like a kill, was a kill, in fact, the first they had seen on the line.

It was 17:40, 22 March, on this, the tenth day of *Nisan*.

- 2 -

Seven nights later, on a damp Friday evening, beyond the west hill of this base, a small cemetery choked with Aleppos, and blue garbage bins stenciled UN, a sultry wind gathered and bounded off the laundry-draped homes, clacking tin, overhead water tanks, rattling the loosely-set panes. This was the Aida Refugee Camp. Population: 4,012.

Inside one of the warren's north buildings, a two-story, poured cement home, a young girl peered through the curtains of her room at the purpling wash

of a sky. She had delicate features, and her downy cheeks glowed in the light. Outside, the muezzin's call echoed, though Leda didn't care to pray.

She rolled out the mat. Since the curfews had started, it wasn't easy, because she had to keep her head below the window. That's what her father had told her. And he had boarded it up once with a long sheet of wood, but then she had a hard time breathing. She had asthma. The yoga was good for her. That's what her mother had told her. And her mother knew well. She was a doctor. Or, at least she would give out the medicines. But everyone called her doctor. Her shop was downstairs. Sometimes she'd come up and join her. Right now she was across the hall arguing with her dad. They were talking about her uncle.

She could hear them yell as she spread out the mat, using her hands and her feet. And she didn't see the point of yelling all the time when people were standing right by you. But it's all they would do, yell at each other. Sometimes her mom would make pudding. Her dad would complain that the pudding wasn't sweet, and her mom said they were all getting fat.

Leda wasn't sure if she was fat or if she was one of the thin girls. She felt in between: round in some places and long and bony in others.

She stretched out her arms and lay along the mat. She could feel the cool sponge on her cheek. It felt crinkly and soft, kind of like her dad when his beard wasn't coated in pudding.

She kissed the mat, and she kissed herself—at least, she blew a kiss in the air. She grabbed it with her hand and put it back on her cheek. Then she breathed in some more air.

Lately she hated doing this stuff, but she felt like she still had to do it. They couldn't go outside or even walk around and her kneecaps were starting to tighten.

She wished she could jump up and cling to the walls, bounce from the floor to the ceiling. She would swing from the light-set and pounce at her desk, claw at her bed and the carpet. But this was much better. Better for the house. To her mom, that was really important. They had lots of guests—people who'd come and visit her family's apartment.

Most of these men were friends with her uncle, and her mom didn't like them at all. But her uncle's home was no longer around. At least, that's what her father had said. She wondered if maybe she could go live in the sky, because there was plenty of room up there. Plenty of birds and pheasants and swans, and no Jews that she'd have to be scared of.

Sometimes the Jews would come from the graves and point with their guns at her window. And she wasn't really scared. The boys from her school would throw rocks in the graves, and they were the ones who were scared. They would hide behind tombstones, dash down the rows. A couple got hit with a bullet. One of them died. That's what she heard. Though she hadn't seen anyone since school closed.

She liked being home, drinking tea with her dad and doing yoga right here with her mom. But she wanted to go outside and take a break from this place and maybe get a bottle of Pepsi. Her mother wouldn't let her drink Pepsi at home, though sometimes her father would sneak it. He brought her a bottle early last week, and she was saving it under her mattress. She also enjoyed Coke, but she liked Pepsi more, because that was the one with Britney. She had seen the ads on the television set—back when they still had the antenna.

She remembered the night when they got rid of the antenna. Her father came home with a dish. He put it up outside of her room, and that's when her mom started crying.

This was over two years ago. This was when she was four. And it was weird, she thought, how she remembered these things, because she barely remembered her brother.

Her younger brother had been in the hospital then. He had some kind of problem with food. He stayed away for over one week, and then her mom said he was gone. And when her parents came home from the hospital that night, her dad brought the dish for the set. It had lots of cartoons, and some really good shows, but her mom said that they couldn't have sugar. Her father got mad, and he threw down the dish. Then her mom went to live with her aunt. She decided to come back early last year, and since then, they hadn't had sugar.

Sometimes her mom would make honey-syrup cakes or this pudding that tasted so weird. She used this gray bottle of liquidy stuff that took a long time to come out. And afterwards Leda had to go to the toilet, which she really didn't like to do. So she stopped eating sweets. And she didn't really mind. The only thing she missed was the Pepsi. And Britney Spears, who wasn't even on. Now they only watched the news.

She took out the tape with the Asian music on it and set it down by the mat. Then she clicked on the lid of her new cassette deck, which her dad had brought

from work. He had said she could keep it for as long as he was here, because the post office closed during curfew.

The music began playing soft and then loud. It sounded like blowing wind. Then water crashed down against some far rocks, and she could hear the tingle of stars.

She lit up a candle, which she kept by the chair. The candle smelled like banana. She liked banana; it wasn't too sweet. Not as sweet as the melon.

The air smelled nice. It was pleasant and warm. She no longer heard all the shouting. It might have been there, but she tried not to think as she breathed in and out of her lungs.

She sat along the mat with her legs spread apart and her toes curled up from her feet. She took a deep breath and she thought of the stars—the ones that she heard on the tape.

She could still hear the shouting outside from the hall. It kept interrupting her breathing. The men were still there. They were talking about war, or whatever it was they discussed.

The power flashed off in her room and the hall. The music and lights went off. The waves stopped crashing, and the candle flame flicked, hissing along the table.

This was not good. It happened last week. But at night, it always took longer. Then her father called out:

“Leda, you okay? Stay where you are, sweet. I'm coming.”

“I'm fine,” Leda said as the flashlight approached, spotting the door, then her face.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Leda said. The flashlight was right in her eyes.

“I'm gonna run down and get gas for the stove.”

“Can I come?”

“No, stay where you are. I want you to sit at the table.”

The flashlight left and so did her dad. Leda sat down at the desk. She drew on her hand with a rose-colored marker: two circles and then a diamond. She held up the face and talked to her hand. She asked herself how she was doing.

“Fine,” she said. “It's warm in this place. I want to go out for a walk.”

“You can't do that,” her hand mumbled back. “You know there's still a curfew.”

Well, *f\_\_\_\_\_ the curfew*, she wanted to say, but her parents would never allow it. .“F\_\_\_\_\_” is what the boys all said—the ones she used to chase. But they weren’t interested in her. Not anymore. Maybe it was because of the cola. She needed the drink to give her some life. It made her whole head feel sparkly. She thought that the boys probably felt the same thing whenever they threw rocks at the Jeeps And they hadn’t lately. Things here were calm, especially outside of her home. She didn’t understand why she couldn’t run out and get a quick drink from the store. Her cousin’s shop was down on the corner. They also sold Bissli and nuts. Her mother had said she could have plenty of those. Maybe she’d go get a package.

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“Good friends, good books, and a sleepy conscience: this is the ideal life.”

—Mark Twain

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