

The Blue Guitar Jr.

*Featuring
fiction and
poetry
for youth*

The 2013 edition





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“Things as they are are changed upon the blue guitar.”
— Excerpt from Wallace Stevens’ 1937 poem “The Man With the Blue Guitar.”
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Air

By Shirley Mason

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Jake is curious about everything. He wonders what keeps the moon up. He wonders why his thumb is not as long as his fingers. He wonders why his puppy, Cosmo, can't talk. And Jake wonders why he can't see air. Grandpa says air is all around us. He says plants and people and Cosmo need air. We can feel air when the wind blows, or when the fan is on, but we can never see air. Even so, Jake waves his hands about and tries to see air.

"Why do you think air is made that way?" Jake asks Grandpa.

Grandpa thinks a minute and replies, "If air could be seen, we could not see through it. I could not see you through colored air."

In bed at night, Jake continues to think about air. It is all around him but he cannot see it. He has an idea. Maybe he can paint air so it can be seen.

In the morning, he uses his tin of paints to mix red paint with water. He places it in a thimble from Grandma's sewing box. He wants only to color a small amount of air so Grandpa can always see him. Outside Jake tosses the red color into the air. It settles down on grass. Then he tosses a blue paint and then a yellow paint, but they settle down too. Jake can't paint air.

That night in bed Jake wishes hard to see air. Unable to sleep, he goes to his worktable where he finds three new tubes of paint, one red, one yellow and one blue. Where did these come from, he wonders. He decides to try his experiment in the dark with the mysterious new paints. Maybe dark air can be painted.

Outside he throws into the air a thimble of blue paint, and some air turns a brilliant glowing blue. Jake watches as it drifts off in waves. Excited, Jake throws up a thimble of red paint, then yellow, then another and another, amazed as the paints move and churn, coloring the air as they drift off.

The next morning Jake tells Grandpa that he has painted air so he can see it. But Grandpa merely grunts for he is quietly reading in the paper about strange events in town. He reads that a woman has turned bright red. A tree is a shimmering blue. And several cars, which were white, are now bright yellow.



Shirley Mason writes:
"For seventeen years, as programmer/analyst, I wrote small software systems for installations in CT and NY. I'm a homemaker, mother, pilot, divorcee, widow, writer and painter, though it was hard finding time for the latter two. During my long Connecticut commutes, I wrote limericks in stop-and-go traffic, but time didn't allow me to take writing seriously until recent years. Now I've finished two novels, one novella, and many, many short stories. Except for two instances, I haven't shopped the novels, but continue to edit and let them ferment. Just for the heck of it, I put a collection of eight short detective mysteries on Kindle—titled, 'The Hand at the Top of the Stairs,' author name Shirley Mason. I study the craft of writing, both online and in workshops and classes at Pima Community College. I read and work on improving, and I'm registered for fall Advanced Creative Writing at Pima (for the second time)." Contact the writer at slarsen2222@gmail.com.

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That night, after all are asleep, Jake tries again. Using the mystery paint, he mixes red and blue to make purple. Then he mixes blue and yellow to make green. His red and yellow paints mix into a sunny orange. Outside in the dark, he tosses up these colors and watches as the breeze waves them away.

In the morning's paper, Grandpa reads to Jake about some colorful surprises. The village people are full of wonder. A sidewalk has turned sunny orange. A red building is now green. A black cow is now purple. Jake hurries to the village. He sees purple air still

drifting about and puts his hand through it. His hand turns purple.

"WOW!" Jake yells, and he rushes home to show Grandpa. Grandpa washes the purple off Jake's hand.

It rains hard that night. Jake lies awake and worries about painting air. It is better if air is not painted. He must see Grandpa, Grandma and Cosmo.

The next morning the village people go out and look about. The sidewalk is white again. The building is red again. And the cow looks happy to be black again. Jake's colors have all washed away with rain.

After all, it was water color.

The Magic Crow Ring

By Shirley Mason

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One

For many years a sparkling emerald ring slept in Ava's jewelry box beckoning her to wear it and enjoy its green watery brilliance. The setting that held the emerald was weak from age and wear. The band had slowly worn until it was quite thin.

Ava would sometimes slide it on her finger and admire its cool depths and sparkle. A perfect stone, rare now. Said to be very valuable. She planned to have the emerald appraised, and maybe sell it to help Larry, her husband, pay bills. However, she didn't want to part with it; it had been her grandmother's, but these were hard times. Larry had been laid off a few weeks back and bills were mounting.

Soon the twins were born and there were extra mouths to feed. Ava stayed home to care for them and Cassie, who was four, and not yet in school.

At dinner one evening Larry announced the good news that he might be called back to work soon. While clearing the table, Ava thought, this is a good time to have my emerald appraised. If Larry is hired back, we will more easily be able to pay for the appraisal. Then once we know the stone's value we can discuss whether we should sell it, or keep and have a stronger setting made.

After washing dinner dishes, Ava removed the ring from her jewelry box and slipped it over her finger. Wearing it a couple days would be okay until they knew for sure whether Larry could return to work.

Two

The next day, Ava prepared a back-yard picnic and the family gathered outside to play and to relax in the warm sun while Larry grilled hamburgers. Cassie blew large soapy bubbles to entertain the twins who giggled and squirmed, waving their fat little hands and legs, wishing they could touch the large bright bubbles drifting over. Ava set the picnic table with salad, drinks, and deserts, then stretched out to relax until hamburgers were ready.

The soft afternoon drifted on, soothing and serene. All too soon the lazy sun seemed to sink rapidly and chill the air. After all had stuffed themselves on Larry's delicious hamburgers, Ava and Larry began to take the picnic remains inside. In and out through the screen door into the kitchen Ava traipsed with dishes and jars. Just then the door fell back on her hand before she could jerk it out of the way. When she checked to see what damage had been done to her hand, she found the ring band bent and empty. The emerald was gone. It had popped out!

Frantically Ava looked all around the door. The emerald was not in sight. Not under the door. Not in the cracks or edges. Not on the steps or path. Not in the surrounding kitchen. She called for help.

Ava, Larry, and Cassie searched the grass nearby, combing it with their fingers, trying to find a green emerald in green grass! A formidable task. And the twins were sleepy and ready for bed. And the sun was going

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down.

“Take heart,” Larry tried to make Ava feel better, as he helped bring in the last of the picnic. “We’ll continue looking tomorrow. The emerald can’t have flown very far. We’ll fan out in a circle and cover every inch until we find it.” He sounded positive and certain.

Still, Ava went to bed that night with a heavy heart, but she remembered to be thankful for all the good and many benefits they enjoyed. Especially each other.

Three

Although they tried to be thorough with their search, the next day and the next brought no success in finding the stone. They intended to look through every inch of grass, but after a while, they despaired, for the back lawn was a large area for three people to cover on their knees. Soon they gave up trying to crawl along, and instead, strolled around randomly watching for a sparkle.

The summer days went by and no emerald. While the twins napped, Ava and Cassie continued searching for it.

Larry’s company called him back to work. Money was coming in but was still scarce due to all the bills that had accumulated during his lay-off.

Winter settled in. Snow arrived quickly enough—cold and deep. No chance of finding the emerald with all that snow. Ava turned her thoughts to the hungry birds and squirrels and their efforts to find food—more precious to them than emeralds.

It was Ava’s custom each winter to make a wild-life feeding area in the back garden. Wearing heavy boots, she would walk around in a large circle and pack the snow so seed and food scraps couldn’t sink in. Then all around the ring she would spread chunks

of bread and birdseed, cracked corn, and bits of fruit. Something for every sort of bird and squirrel taste. No matter how tight their budget, Ava would find food to share with woodland critters.

Back inside the house, Ava and Cassie would only have to wait a few minutes before they could see little creatures flying and darting out of the woods, spreading themselves around the ring. Blue jays, sparrows, bright red cardinals, chickadees, house finches, squirrels, and several proud, strutting crows. With plenty of room in the large ring, no creature bothered the others. The crows caw’ed their “thanks.” All were busy savoring this largess. The creatures would not bed down hungry these nights. The snow ring appeared to be magical. Cassie named it the “Magic Crow Ring.”

Four

After a few months, the gray days began to lighten and lengthen. Spring patiently knocked at Winter’s door. Ava reminded herself that she would look for the lost emerald again when the snow was gone.

The days warmed slightly and Winter gave a last sigh; promised no more snow this season. Snow began to yield its hold on the lawn—thinning and slinking away. Ava still put food around the snow ring but not as much as during the harsh winter. Woodland creatures still came, but not as many as before. Crows would drop by for dessert.

After school while Ava made dinner, Cassie sat by the kitchen window watching woodland life come to the magic crow ring. Winter was wonderful, but she looked forward to picnics again. Each day there was less snow, and fewer hungry creatures.

One day while Cassie sat in the window seat, a cocky crow startled her by settling on the outside

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windowsill. Cassie jumped back but watched the crow. It cocked its head and appeared to look straight at Cassie. She saw something in its mouth. Something shiny? She couldn't tell for certain. She knew that crows liked shiny objects. She stood very still and waited. The crow carefully laid whatever it was on the window sill. Then it "cawed" loudly several times, and with a knowing look, cocked its head to Cassie and flew away. Cassie moved close to the window and stared at the item. It looked like the emerald!

She shouted to Ava, "Mom! The emerald is on the windowsill. A crow just put it there."

Ava and Cassie rushed outside and saw that indeed, the emerald was safe on the sill. Ava gratefully and quickly put it in her apron pocket. Then inside she stored it safely in its box.

That night, with eager appetites and happy smiles the family ate their good dinner. Each thought about the crow and its gift. Although there were still bills to pay, Larry had been able to work all winter and their bills were nearly paid. They agreed that now there was no need to sell the emerald. Ava could have it appraised and set into a good band.

"Your crow ring is magic," Larry said. "But the real magic is my family."

2 haiku, 3 poems by Shirley Mason

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Fall

I get all their leaves.
They get all my trumpet notes.
Oak versus Hummel.

© 2013

My Elegant Crows

My elegant crows
Step head cocked downward to peck.
Cat food? What the heck!

© 2013

Crossword

Words found
Puzzle Tryst
Time Lost
Brain Heist

© 2013

Tom Cat

Tom Cat and I stroll.
Turning sunward I stare,
Whilst Tom reads the air.

© 2013

Peanuts

Peanuts; two to pod
Who thought this up? What god?
Would three be blasphemy?

3 Limericks by Shirley Mason

© 2013

A Cactus Wren

A cactus wren came hopping by
And cocked her tail about.
Then bobbed her head
And took a sip
Of water I'd put out.

Said she, I say your Ladyship,
I've your largess surveyed,
And wish to offer this small tip,
Please move it to the shade.

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A Cardinal Couple

A Cardinal couple came today.
I hoped that I could make them stay.
Instead I distinctly heard him say,
"Let's scratch around and be on our way."

© 2013

Opera Mouse

T'was the middle of the opera
And the audience was asleep,
When the twinkling toes of a mouse
Played across my feet.
The conductor spun around with glee
As what arose from my throat,
Was a new, bizarre, horrific
And profoundly awakening note.

The Creature

By Betty G. Brown

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I jerked my head to scan the trees,
A twig snapped.
A muffled thud from a pinecone,
dropped by a hasty squirrel chattering his irritation,
then silence.

I had to make a decision.
The sun was already edging
above the line of the cliff.
Soon, I would be
Exposed.

Thirst.
My tongue, like a dried fern
coiled upon itself.
Salted spittle encrusted my lips.

There it was
a small laguna of clear water
But to reach it
I would have to emerge from the nestle of trees.

I lowered my head, assessing the distance.
Should I go for it?
The memory of my brother
shivered through my body.

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Betty G. Brown is an associate professor of Health Sciences at Northern Arizona University. She was raised in the South in the 1960s and '70s, and has since dedicated her life's work to reducing social inequities and promoting compassion. Reach the writer at Betty. Brown@nau.edu.

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My brother.

We were twins,
not typical in my family.
We competed for our mother's milk,
but we were inseparable,
racing in ignorance
through the high grass next to our home.

We never knew our father.

The confusion of our mother's abandonment
left us dependent on each other.
Life was hard,
but we had figured it out
together.

At a favorite stream
we escaped the sun's intensity
and cooled our feet.
We laughed
as the water swirled around us
and tickled the hair on our legs.

We had been standing together,
like this.
Then, crack!
My brother collapsed into the water,
eyes bulging,
teeth glistening with blood
from his mouth and the gash across his neck.
I ran,
terrified.

Mother had tried to warn us about
the creature.

She'd never seen it,
so we did not take her seriously.

Now, alone and cautious,
I move with all of my senses.

But thirst dissolves caution.

I bobbed my head lower to get a better look,
my heart pounding.
The water was close – so close.

Suddenly,
a wail like a coyote,
but more shrill and piercing
ripped the silence.
The creature was awake!

Reeling, I bolted up the hill,
plunging back into the thicket.
The thorns raked my flesh
and shredded the growth of new velvet
from my antlers.

I am not safe here.

Friends

By Betty G. Brown

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Em

Orleans Parish, Louisiana, 1963

I am Emma Louise Marie Antoinette Bodine. That's a mouthful of a name for an 11-year-old, even in Louisiana. My friend, Pearl, used to tease me. Said it took up more room in the mouth than a frog's leg, deep-fried and stuffed in sideways. I guess that's because her name was Pearl – just Pearl. It was really Pearl Martin, but her daddy left home when she was five and she didn't want *nothing* to do with him, so to please just call her Pearl. And that's what I did, because Pearl was my best friend, and you do that kind of thing for friends.

I asked my momma once why I had such a long name. She said I was named after my grandma and my three aunts. Each one was so special, she just couldn't choose among them, so that made me extra special too. Well, that was sweet, but I think she just didn't want to offend nobody. Southern ladies do *not* offend.

Momma kept wanting me to look like a Southern lady too. She wanted me to wear a pink dress – got me one from that Sears catalog. Had a lace collar and silk ribbons with rosebuds sewed into the center of the knots. That dang dress like to give me rashes *for days* when I wear it on Sundays. And those silly little white gloves. Huh. As if God cared. I still don't know what she was about. We weren't fancy folk.

At least momma called me Emma Louise, instead of all those other names, but Pearl called me Em, and

Dedication

This story is dedicated to Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, and Carol Robertson, who died at the ages of 11 and 14 when white supremacists bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 16, 1963. No arrests were made for the crime until 1977 and 2000, in part due to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation's delayed release of information on the case.

This story is also dedicated to all of those who have ever felt and continue to experience racial hatred.

I liked that best. Maybe that's why we become friends right from the start. Or maybe it's because of her kindness. See, Pearl's oldest brother, Joseph, worked for my daddy down at the gas station. Pearl would go along with Joseph, same as me with daddy. I didn't pay her much mind. One day, though, my favorite doll came unstrung, and its head and arms and legs went a-rollin'. Pearl kneeled right down in that dirt, and worked and worked on that poor doll like a doctor on a patient. Fixed her just like new. How could you not become friends with somebody who fixed your favorite doll?

Pearl

I almost envied Em at first. She had a daddy. I was mad at my daddy, and why not? But momma made up for it. She never said a bad word about him, not once. She'd just say Jesus had another plan, and we needed to leave it up to Him. I

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think my momma must be an angel from heaven.

Em's daddy was different from most white men.

Kind of gruff on the outside, but at least he gave Joseph a job. That was more than other white folk did. But some didn't like Mr. Bodine's doing that for a colored. They broke his shop windows, even threatened his family. That's what Em told me later. That's why Mr. Bodine had to let Joseph go.

But where are we supposed to go? I wonder sometimes if they'll ever be a place for us.

I'd never talked to a white girl before. I remember Em looked so helpless, sitting in the dirt, crying over that doll. After I fixed it, I looked up at her. There wasn't a bit of hate in her eyes. She was just thankful. Talking to her felt safe. I'd never felt that way with a white.

Did it matter that she was white and I was colored? To others, maybe, but not to me, not after I got to know her. But at first, I was kinda jittery.

My momma told me since I was little that our people had been torn from their homes; husbands stolen from wives, mothers from children; women and girls had been raped; folks beaten and murdered. I saw a man hanging in a tree like some piece of meat strung out to dry in the sun, and the law didn't do anything about it. I don't like to think on it.

I see strangers' hateful eyes peer at me every day as I walk down the road, and I don't know why. And my momma, my own momma, she's treated worse than a stray dog when she's as beautiful a lady as ever lived. So you can see why I might have been troubled.

Momma taught me the hard truth, but she also taught me I was and am a part of everything and everyone – even the mean ones – because we are all a part of the Lord's creation. And what a blessing, then,

when you also find one person who accepts you just as you are. A friend.

Em was mine.

Em

Pearl was shorter than me, even though she was two years older, and a lot smarter, too! Skin smooth as the chocolate syrup on Mr. Johnson's ice cream sundae. Not like my red freckled arms—look like grandma's old comforter after the mice had gotten after it. No, Pearl was pretty, especially her big bright eyes.

Pearl wasn't allowed to go to school until she was almost eight, and then just a school for coloreds, but her momma started teaching her to read at the age of four. Four! Said that was the only way she was going to have a better life than the rest of the family.

It weren't common for colored folk to read. Years ago, they was former slaves, and back then, their owners didn't want no "uppity darkeys" on their farms. Now, colored folk have their own land, but feelings about them haven't changed much, from what I heard grandma tell about the war times. That was almost 100 years ago, and they still can't go to school with us or drink from our water fountains. Hell if I understand that. ... Sorry, God, but I don't! ... Grown-ups are mean. I keep my mouth shut when I hear them talking, but it sure don't seem right.

Pearl was the youngest of ten children, kind of a surprise you might say. Her oldest brother was almost my momma's age and had two kids by the time Pearl was born. Their home was full of children now, all those nieces and nephews, but Pearl was still her momma's treasure.

How could *anybody* not like Pearl and her momma?

Pearl's momma was even prettier than Pearl. Skin

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dark as a chestnut, but glowed gold in the sunlight. She looked like some kind of movie star out of Hollywood. She was smart, too, and opened her heart to everybody, even me. Used to read to me and Pearl on the back porch when we'd been playing and got all hot and tired and needed to keep out of the sun. She thought we needed educating our minds as much as playing. She read to us from the Bible mostly, but also from a tattered copy of Mr. Twain's book that Joseph found in the trash and brought home. I liked hearing about that Huck Finn best—I could just see me and Pearl, drifting down the river on that raft, just as much as Huck and Jim without a care in the world, free and all. And nobody was wearing a pink dress.

One day, when I was walking home from school, I saw Pearl outside the fancy dress shop. It had a big mirror on one corner of the outside. You could stand half hidden, half showing, and stretch out an arm and a leg and look like you was flying in the air! I thought I was the only one who knowed that trick, but I come around the corner one day, and there was Pearl, flying, just like me!

We went to that little shop a lot. Not to buy nothing, of course, but to look in the windows and watch the private school girls come out of the dressing rooms to spin in front of the mirrors and pretend like they was going to a fancy dress party.

Sometimes, me and Pearl would spin around too — when nobody was looking. Pearl would pretend she was dancing with some beau from her school named Elijah. Me, I was dancing with Bobby Ray. Me and Pearl thought we looked like all get out, dancing elegant and all, though I'm sure we looked more like

whooping cranes, hopping over hot sand and swooping for crawdads. We'd spin and spin, until we saw the ladies come out of the store, then we'd hide behind the bushes and watch.

One time, one little girl said to the other, “Darling, it's snowing in the north.” The other little girl got all red in the face and fixed her bra strap so it couldn't be seen.

After they'd left, Pearl wrinkled up her face. “What does that mean, Em, ‘snowing in the north?’”

“My momma tells me that, too, Pearl. ‘Snowing in the north’ means that your bra strap is showing, and ‘snowing in the south’ means that your slip is showing. My momma said Southern ladies don't use words like ‘bra’ an ‘slip’ in public.”

Pearl just rolled her eyes and took a step back. “Oooo, Darling ...” Pearl came prissing over to me, one finger on her cheek, flouncing back and forth, her other hand holding the air like a handful of petticoats, little finger out straight of course. “Darling,” she said, “it's snowing in the north.”

“Oh yeah,” I sassed back at her, “well, you got a regular *blizzard* down south, girl!”

We both busted out laughing. Had to prop ourselves against the shop window to keep from falling down, laughed so hard our stomachs hurt, but we couldn't stop! We'd been laughing there all day, except the shop lady come out and told us to git.

When I got home, my grandma said she seen me with Pearl and gave me a whipping. Said I wasn't supposed to have friends like that. I asked her why, and she called Pearl that n----- word. I won't use it. It ain't right. Pearl is just Pearl to me, a gem, just like her name, and she's my best friend, whatever folks say.

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Pearl

You learn things early when you're colored. My very first memory was when I was three. I wanted to play in the park, but momma said I couldn't. Other children were there – why not? It was a park for “whites only.” I looked at the swings. I wanted to fly too. My little hands barely made it 'round the bars of the fence, but I remember how cold they were. And hard. Painted white. I stared at my small, dark fingers against all that white. White is cold. White is hard. White doesn't let you go where you want to.

In books, though, there're no fences. Momma read to me and took me everywhere. There's freedom in books. Freedom in words.

Some folk look as if they have freedom, like Em's family, but they don't. Being white doesn't make you free, really free. Freedom starts somewhere deep down inside your heart. Em's got a good heart. She's got some good folk in her family, but others are just scared of coloreds, like her grandma, and it comes out mean. But that's for Jesus to figure out. It's probably just the way things are, but it's sad.

When I saw the welts on Em's legs, it reminded me of great-grandpa's scars from when he was a slave. I don't know why, but I never thought that whites beat up on each other like that.

Whites could always beat down on coloreds. Coloreds, though, who were we going to beat on? Each other is all we got. And that's sad, because nobody needs that. After all that long pain of slavery, maybe that's all some know to do. It goes around and around, family to family. I suppose some have to get the pain out or it builds up inside and smothers you until you

can't breathe. Momma wouldn't stand for that, though. That's why daddy left.

How could Em's grandma whip her, though? She won't tell me why, but I expect it has something to do with me. We've been meeting at our secret place more, and that's probably good. Some folk in town are getting kinda restless and shouting more at coloreds. It's hard to keep from taking it to heart.

But there's freedom in books. Freedom in words. Sometimes I wonder, though, whether there will ever be real freedom for us. Do we have to fight another war? And if we do, who'll be on our side? “As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free ...” Do we have to die, too, Jesus?

Em

One time, I snuck out and went to church with Pearl and her momma. When I got to their house, they come out on the porch, both wearing the prettiest yellow dresses I ever seen. Yellow, like lemon drops from the corner drug store. They didn't have no lace or silly rosebuds, just big sashes tied around the waist. Her momma was a seamstress and could she sew!

The three of us, along with Pearl's little cousins, walked to their church down by the river. I seen more folks caring for each other and helping each other with big smiling faces than I ever seen at my church up the road. Grown-ups watching out for the little ones, whether they was theirs or not. Laughing and hugging and hand-shaking all around.

And their hats! Big hats with wide brims, all different colors. They was all bobbing up and down each time one of the ladies laughed. And they laughed a lot. Looked like a fancy Easter basket full of eggs and

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candies, all come alive. One woman's hat brim was so wide I was sure, if it started to raining, she could keep herself and half the congregation dry. I looked up at the sky, half hoping for clouds to gather.

The service was like nothing I ever seen before. Singing like angels from on high, and everybody swaying and saying "Amen" when the preacher praised the Lord. One woman went up to be saved. Started shaking all over and fell backward when the preacher touched her with the Lord's grace, except two other men caught her before she fell to the floor in a heap, thanking Jesus and weeping. The rest of the congregation was swaying and saying "Amen" and weeping for her. Seemed like one big family.

Afterwards, Pearl's momma herded us over to the preacher. He bent down to look me in the face, so close that I couldn't see nothing but his broad cheeks and big smile, and his eyes downright sparkled.

"We sure are glad to have you here with us today, Miss Emma."

And he meant it too. I couldn't help thinking what our preacher would have said to Pearl if I'd brought her to celebrate the Lord with us. I heard some folk in our church say coloreds were the seed of the Devil. Huh. And they call theirselves "Christian." I don't know Mr. Jesus, but I bet He'd like Pearl's church heaps better. More like the home He'd always talked about up in heaven. Yessir. I think He'd feel right comfortable here.

Pearl and me met a lot, after church and after school, down by the river under a tree covered with so much moss that it looked like some big sea monster from out of a story book. When the wind blowed, that moss would creep up under our collars and tickle the back of our necks. But the grass was deep beneath that

tree, and cool in the summer, and Pearl and I used to read books together. I had to get the books from the library for Pearl because they wouldn't let her in. The librarian must have thought I was the best pupil in the whole school, but if she'd looked at my grades, she'd have scratched her head, all puzzled.

One day, as we was reading, Pearl looked up at me. "What do you want to be when you grow up, Em?"

"Oh, I ain't thought about it much. I'll probably just be a maid, like my momma and grandma. What about you?"

"I want to be a teacher, like my momma."

"But your momma's a seamstress, Pearl."

She turned her face towards me, eyes wide. "That's what she *does*, Em, because she *has* to, but it's what she *is* that counts, and she's a teacher. I want to finish high school and go on to teach other children that don't have as much as I do."

Pearl was amazing. Here she was, a poor colored, thinking that she could be a teacher. And she'd do it, too. She was that way, caring about others, and stubborn as all get out. Yessir, she'd do it.

"You'll be a teacher, too, Em."

I just laughed. "Sometimes, I think you just crazy in the head, Pearl! Me, a teacher!"

"Yes, Em. You'll be a teacher, too."

Pearl

Those were good days. But things changed, and they got bad. Real bad. We heard about fighting in the city, coloreds and whites, and some boys got hurt, one even killed. There was talk about making coloreds and whites equal. Talk about the new President, maybe, who was going to turn things around. Coloreds going to white schools.

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Em was so happy when she heard about the schools. She told me I could sit next to her every day in class, but I didn't smile. I felt scared.

"What's the matter, Pearl?"

"Ain't that easy, Em." She didn't understand, but I did.

I don't want to get Em in trouble. Momma said it might be best if I stayed closer to home. Something is in the air. I can feel it. I hope Em won't be mad. I love her like my sister, but I trust momma. God, please take care of her. And us. Amen.

Em

It was almost like a bad dream, but it wasn't. Things got bad. White folk went about their business more serious than before. Nobody, coloreds or whites, gathered on their porches in the evening no more. Our whole town was holding its breath, waiting for something, not knowing what. Our preacher started talking more about loving our fellow man, nevermind the color of his skin. Ain't that what Mr. Jesus said a long time ago? Love each other? Don't seem now like nobody's listening. Some folk even up and left the church, right there in the middle of the sermon. I asked Mr. Jesus to forgive them, all the same, but I was mad.

Then it happened.

I was at school, trying real hard to listen to Miss Fontaine talking about some soldiers long ago, back East somewhere, fighting for freedom. Seemed like everybody was fighting, even back then as now. We heard the fire truck go by, sirens a-blaring, then the bigger one from two miles away. They was headed east – east to where Pearl lived. Then somebody hollered that the coloreds' school was a-fire! I didn't wait to hear no more. I bolted down the street as fast as I

could go.

Big clouds of smoke was rising from the school house. Children and parents and teachers gathered around, looking for who was there and who wasn't. Hollering. Crying. Praying.

"Pearl!" I whispered, a whisper that was a scream in my whole body. "Pearl, PEARL!"

The school house was all made of wood, so it burned to the ground pretty quick. The radio said ten little girls been trapped in the downstairs classrooms because there weren't no windows. The janitor died too. That was all. No names. They was "just coloreds."

They never found who done it. Talk among the white folk was that the janitor was drunk, "typical no-good colored," and started the fire hisself by knocking over a kerosene lamp. The children who got out said that it was a couple of white men set fire to the school. Waving a Stars and Bars and shouting something mean. The janitor run back in to try to get the children. He never come out.

But the law was white. Case closed. All I know is, I never seen Pearl again.

I went to the funeral, even though my grandma told me not to and swore I'd get a whipping. I felt sick, sicker in my soul than I ever been. I didn't have the courage to go see Pearl's momma until later that afternoon. I waited in the yard for near an hour. Felt like I had no words in my mouth. What do you say to a momma who's lost her most precious child? There she was on the porch, holding that Huck Finn book in her lap, and just staring out at the sky. I walked over to her, but all I could do was bite my lip, tears streaming down my face, no good to her at all.

"Come here, child," she said.

I buried my head in the folds of her black dress and

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just cried and cried. She rocked me back and forth for seemed like hours, until I couldn't cry no more.

"It'll be alright, Miss Emma. Here," she said, handing me the book. "Pearl would want you to have this."

I took the book, gave her one more big, long hug, then turned and run away.

I never went back to that house. I heard that Pearl's momma and cousins left a week later to live with her sister in Georgia somewhere.

Some folks grasp for why's. Others say, "It's God's will." Well, Mr. Jesus, I don't mean no disrespect, but if you had a hand in this, well sir, then we ain't friends no more.

I never prayed again.

They put up a marker on the fence with the names of all the children and the janitor, and rebuilt the school, this time with plenty of windows. I wanted to do something else, though, something just for Pearl.

I walked down to the place where they make grave-stones. In the yard outside were all kinds of fancy angels, white marble wings and all, looking up to heaven. "Here lies our beloved ..." Fill in the blank with your loved one's name. Hell, I couldn't afford no stones.

"What you want, honey?" the man behind the counter peered over his glasses at me.

"Something small for ... for ..." I stopped. I remembered his face. He'd been outside the court house, yelling that his son weren't gonna go to school with no n-----.

"For a dog is it?"

"Y-Yessir," I said. Now Pearl weren't no dog. I was angry at myself that I didn't tell him off, right then and there. Angry, too, that I couldn't afford no better. But then I remembered some folk say a dog is man's best friend. Well, then I guess it was ok, because Pearl

was my best friend. She'd have just rolled her eyes. She'd understand.

"There're some little wooden crosses over there." He waved toward the back of the store. Small, wooden crosses, no angels, just enough space for a name. "That one's only a dollar."

"How much to put a name on it?"

"Ten cents a letter. Simple letters, mind you."

I looked in my sock where I kept all my money in the whole wide world. I had just enough for that cross and five letters. I smiled. Five letters was all I needed.

"Pearl." I said. "Just write 'Pearl.' "

I planted the cross right under that big old tree where Pearl and I used to sit reading. Dug up some flowers from old Miss Fontaine's yard, but she never missed them. Flowers all around that little cross, yellow ones, like lemon drops, like Pearl's best Sunday dress.

Em

1968

It's been near five years since Pearl died. I don't go back to that tree by the river no more. Mostly I just sit on the levee and kick dirt down into the water. I watch the big boats go up and down for hours, up and down. They say they go out to the ocean, bound for Mexico, or China, maybe.

I seen a man drown once. Fell right off one of them boats. He was just a speck in the water, flailing his arms, until the river took him under. Then it was quiet, as if he'd never been there at all. Tug boat couldn't get to him in time. I guess that's just the way it is. Some folk just disappear. Don't make it right though. Some folk shouldn't oughta just disappear.

That new President up in Washington disappeared too. He had ideas to make everybody equal, and

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somebody just up and shot him. Then somebody else up and shot him too. Why? Why are folks so full of hate? I still don't understand. We lost Mr. Reverend King, too, who said all white children and black children were going to play together someday. Some day. But Pearl won't be in it.

Sometimes, the pain gets so deep. Sometimes,

seems like the river calls my name. But then I hear Pearl's voice. "Come on, Em," she'd say. "You got living to do for the both of us now."

"Alright, Pearl," I said. "I will." I pushed myself up off the grass, and looked hard down that river to where it loses itself in the sky. Picked up *Huck Finn*, held it close under my arm, and walked back down the road to town.

The Trouble Upstream – An Excerpt

By A.L. Means



Illustration by Sav Scatola

What the story is about

Home for Beaver is a wild river in Arizona and, like Ratty in Kenneth Grahame's "The Wind in the Willows," he can think of no better place to live than somewhere surrounded by water.

The snag is that the river seems to be drying up and someone needs to do something about it. "The Trouble Upstream" chronicles the adventures of Beaver and his friends Skunk and Ringtail as they trek to the river's source in search of a solution.

In their journey, they tangle with a succession of creatures native to the area — each with an impact on their mission. Pack rats, ground squirrels, a rattlesnake, javelinas, coatimundis and a Gila monster are among the more prominent characters.

As in the human world, difficult decisions have to be made and the result will not satisfy everyone. But, in fighting to preserve their homes, the creatures are surely following a justifiable precedent.

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There is magic in all rivers ...

Chapter One Across The Saddle

It was one of those late afternoons in midsummer when nothing seemed more important than just doing nothing. Well, nothing in particular that is.

If anyone had seen the Beaver sprawled by the river bank on his back, they would no doubt have thought him a very lazy creature. Only an occasional swat at a nosy bee betrayed any life in him at all. His ample belly protruded like an anthill from the grass — a reminder, as if he cared at that moment, of the algae diet he had resolved to start that very morning.

Even though his eyes were squeezed shut against the dappled sunlight, however, the Beaver was anything but closed to the world around him. His sharp sense of smell had picked up the scent of rain long before rumbles from above announced the coming storm.

Likewise, he was alert to every sound. The drone of a million insects. The calls of birds echoing through the thicket of sycamore, walnut and willow trees around him. And running through it all, the trickling waterfall that had been his comfort and joy for as long as he could remember.



A.L. Means grew up in Britain and has lived in the Phoenix area for 30 years or so. He has written in various forms since a tender age, and has spent much of his working life as a journalist. His short story "A Change of Scene" appeared in *Blue Guitar Jr.* in 2009, and he has also published a novel in the contemporary adult genre entitled "Shine Like the Sun" and a set of short stories, "Foreign Ways." As Andrew Means, he has written biographies of novelist and essayist George Orwell and the rock group Pink Floyd as well as "Some Memories," a memoir about the childhood of the late Country-Western singer Marty Robbins, who lived in the Phoenix area in the years before World War II. To contact the writer and to read his work, visit <http://meansal.wordpress.com/fiction-2/>.

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He thought about getting up and doing something. After all, he prided himself on being an animal who didn't waste time. There were always errands and jobs to do around his home, and he rarely needed an excuse to take a healthy walk along the meandering path upstream to inspect for litter and other debris blocking the current.

It was altogether too tempting though to surrender to the humid air and leave his nose and ears to keep track of the state of things. And so he sank back into a daydream about the crystal clear pools and endless shoals of fish he'd heard about when he was a cub. Could such places ever have existed? Or were they only the stuff of tales told in a warm burrow on winter's evenings?

Suddenly, an unfamiliar sound caught his attention — the shrill cadence of a small voice singing somewhat off key — and it did what none of the other sounds had been able to do. It made him sit up. The Beaver rubbed his eyes with his paws and then looked up and down the valley for the source of this strange interruption.

Nearer it came, the high-pitched wailing, until the Beaver thought he might be well advised to dive into the water and head for the safety of home. Just as he was about to make a move he saw a tuft of black and white fur. At first all he could see was this plume bobbing like a headdress along the path between the reeds. And then, emerging from the undergrowth, came a nose even more pointed than his own and two eyes as shiny as slivers of obsidian.

"Hello there," said the stranger.

"Hi to you too," the Beaver replied, adding after a pause: "You gave me quite the scare with that noise

you were making."

"Well, if a body can't holler away his troubles," came the response, "what's the good of having a voice? A song's not a song unless it's sung."

The Beaver thought it better not to pursue that subject, and sat contemplating the new arrival with his black and white coat so different from Beaver's own camouflage of brown.

"Don't see many skunks down this way," he said at last by way of making conversation.

"You wouldn't see this one neither," the Skunk said, "if it weren't for a near death experience on the other side of that gully over there."

"Oh, how come?"

"Just minding my own business, crossing over the saddle from the valley yonder. Before I knew it there was a whoosh and a rumble and a grating and commotion like a chorus of owls hooting. Before I could get out of the way, something hard and gleaming thumped into me. It's no fun to find yourself somersaulting through a clump of cactus, and that's a fact."

"What an ordeal," the Beaver agreed.

"You're telling me. Lucky to be alive I am. No broken bones anyway. But I couldn't tell up from down for a few minutes. That accounts for my wandering thisaway. Look at me, I'm a mess. Darn it, and rain coming too."

The Skunk did indeed look somewhat shaken, and hospitality being the code of the river the Beaver felt duty bound to offer some help.

"I live just over there," he said, pointing a paw in the direction of a short jetty of logs jutting out from the bank on the opposite side of the river. "You'd be most welcome to come in and rest up."

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“Mighty obliged,” the Skunk returned. “I just might do that if it’s all the same to you.”

Beaver led his new acquaintance along a rough path towards the jetty, increasingly aware of the muttering welling up in his wake. There followed a sighing and a tuttering and finally the Skunk stopped in his tracks and squinted at the lodge of stacked poles and surrounding thicket coming into view beside the jetty.

“It’s a bit rough,” said his companion, thinking that his homestead was not meeting approval. “But Beaver Vista, as we call it, is sturdy and comfortable, and has served the needs of generations. Not to mention their occasional guests.”

The Skunk seemed not to hear, for he ignored the Beaver and just stared ahead as if something highly improbable were facing him. Something like a jaguar perhaps, or an ocelot, or an unknown creature from far beyond.

“You must think I’m a bird,” he announced after a pause.

The Beaver didn’t know what to say to that. Living the fairly solitary life that he did, he was not used to brainteasers. For a start, he was not used to being told what he thought, and certainly not when he wasn’t thinking it anyway.

“A bird? That hadn’t actually entered my head,” the Beaver said. “I mean, you don’t look like a bird. And if I may say so without causing offense, you don’t sing like a bird. You don’t have wings, do you?”

“Of course I don’t have wings.” The Skunk seemed a little exasperated. “I simply mean how do I get there from here?”

“Well, obviously ...” the Beaver began. But then he stopped. In all his days living by the river, he’d never thought once about how to get from one side to the

other. It seemed as clear as a June sky. Simply slither in among those delightful bubbles and then bob and weave until you emerged in the rushes on the far bank. What could be easier? What could be more refreshing?

But, as he studied his visitor’s frowning muzzle, it dawned on the Beaver that not all creatures might see things his way. Now that he considered it, he’d seen some mighty skittish rabbits hopping gingerly around puddles when the river was in flood. And so the Beaver changed his tune.

“Oh, I see. The water. You’re not a swimmer then?”

“Not a swimmer nor a sky hawk neither,” came the reply. “I don’t swim. I don’t soar. I don’t tunnel. Skunks are land folk. They keep their four feet on the good earth, unless they’re knocked head over tail into thorns they do anyway.”

The Beaver looked around for a solution, and it didn’t take him long to come up with one. Years before, there had been a family of coyotes living in a cave not far away, and coyotes being natural born wanderers they had a yearning to cross the river at all times of day and night.

Water not being their preferred element any more than it was the Skunk’s, they had taken over a contraption prospectors had rigged up using a wire cable threaded through pulleys attached to the cliffs. With the aid of a sort of bucket dangling below the cable, the prospectors had been able to haul themselves and their equipment back and forth above the river. The prospectors left when they could no longer rely on the gleam of gold flakes in the sandy crevices of the rapids. The coyotes were only too glad to move in to the abandoned neighborhood.

“Can’t leave anything alone, coyotes,” the Beaver

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remembered his father saying. Too clever for their own good, had been the paternal verdict when the cable got stuck once and stranded a couple of cubs over midstream. Still, it might be just the thing for present needs.

It took some persuading from the Beaver, all the same. The Skunk was still grumbling as he climbed up the rough rock steps to the ledge where the bucket perched.

“Now you just get in and pull on the cable and it will take you across,” the Beaver instructed from below.

“Easy for you to say,” the Skunk shouted down.

As he climbed into the bucket and reached for the cable, the Skunk looked anything but comfortable. But even he could not be blamed for what happened next. No sooner had he tugged on the cable and no sooner had the bucket lurched towards the edge of the rock than there was a grinding from the pulley above, a cloud of rust and a broken cable cracking like a whip. Before he could jump out, Skunk and bucket were sent plunging into the eddies below.

The Beaver was in the river a split second later, swimming alongside the bucket with its passenger standing bolt upright, tail wrapped around his craft and fur turning a shade whiter with the fright of it all.

What was a death-courting disaster for the Skunk however was virtually business as usual for the Beaver. Zigzagging through these same sink holes after floating leaves or fish was a daily sport for water folk such as himself.

“Hold on,” Beaver yelled above the noise of the spray. “We’ll soon have you on shore.”

The Beaver nudged the bucket out of the flow of silvery bubbles until it came to rest against the bank

not a stone’s throw from his own jetty.

“There we are,” he said. “Practically home. An afternoon snack and a brief siesta and you’ll feel as right as rain. Talking of which, it looks like that storm is about to open up on us.”

He started to jog in the direction of the burrow. For even though the Beaver was used to being wet he liked to choose when and where rather than have some arbitrary rain cloud decide for him. Looking over his shoulder, he could see that the Skunk was in no condition to follow. He had managed to clamber on to the bank. But there he stood, stamping his feet and spouting language that had rarely been heard on that stretch of the river.

“Offal the blanmad kirts,” the ruffled little creature was yelling. “Ascrue notholt fometh.”

Who could blame the Beaver for backing away? He’d never heard anything like this chant and wasn’t sure what to expect next. Back in olden times, so he’d heard, chants could summon the help of powerful and helpful forces. But that was only what he’d heard.

This particular chant can’t have been one of those powerful ones, for nothing much happened as a result of it.

“Sorry,” said the Skunk after a moment’s silence. “I get that het up I don’t know what I’m saying sometimes.”

“Well, come along then,” the Beaver urged. “I think you need to calm down.”

“You’re right,” the Skunk agreed. “Look at me. I look like I’ve been run over by a stampede of white-tails.”

“Do deer stampede?” the Beaver inquired. “They’re mostly pretty standoffish around here.”

“Well, let’s hope they stay that way,” said the

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Skunk, and with that the pair of them hurried into the shelter of the lodge.

There they stretched out on the verandah for a snack of crayfish stew and mesquite crackers. For dessert, Beaver opened a jar of wolfberry preserve — a gift from a distant relative — and topped it off with nuts and prickly pear syrup. So eager was the host to help

his guest recover that he quite forgot about dieting.

After that the Skunk had a rest and a good soak in a warm bath and then, wrapped in a soft towel, listened while Beaver serenaded the dusk on his wooden flute.

“What a day,” the Skunk said. “One travesty after another. Lucky I’m a born survivor, I guess.”

“Lucky indeed,” murmured the Beaver, and with that they drifted off to sleep with the patter of gentle rain and the gurgle of the river as a backdrop.

A Call to Writers for The Blue Guitar Jr.

Open to children and teens who write
and to adults who write
for children and teens

The Blue Guitar Jr. magazine seeks literary submissions for its next annual issue for children and teens. Submissions from children and teens and adults who write for children and teens are sought by Oct. 1, 2014, in all genres — fiction, poetry, plays, creative nonfiction — all geared to appeal to youthful audiences. Writers must submit original work and must live in Arizona. Simultaneous submissions will be accepted, but the writer must notify the magazine as soon as possible if the work is accepted elsewhere. It is free to submit, and submissions may be made in multiple genres. Please include your name and the best way to contact you on your submission. To submit or for further information, e-mail Editor Rebecca Dyer at rebeccadyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org. For more information, visit www.theblueguitarmagazine.org.

A Call to Artists for The Blue Guitar Jr.

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and to adults who create art
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