© 2010 Segue online literary journal
ISSN 1939-263X

All rights reserved. This publication may be freely distributed only in its entirety and without modification, and only for private use. It may not be sold for profit. Excerpts may only be reproduced and distributed with permission from the copyright owners, except for classroom use or in the case of brief quotations used for book reviews and interviews. The creative works published in Segue do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of its staff or of Miami University.

Issue 9 Fall 2010

Editor: Eric Melbye
Managing Editor: Michelle Lawrence

Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between January 1 and April 30 (closed May through December), and writing about writing year-round via email. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

Segue
www.mid.muohio.edu/segue

Miami University Middletown
www.mid.muohio.edu
CONTENTS

For Crying-Out Frogs 4
Crescentia, Alone, Then 6
Ornithology 9
Author Notes 12
For Crying-Out Frogs

after a line in a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay

While Pooch-Cat squinted, rain-wind wrung

hydrangea mops. Four

o’ clocks struck. Even lizard’s tail

wagged, free from Mama’s
ill-will tugs. Even beggarticks
loosened splinter-seeds, glib with springtime
love. Like the long-haired seal she

was, Pooch-Cat arfed

appreciative. Even Grr-Hound bared his gums—
like Cerberus, snaggle-fanged—to
katydids’ singsong drub. Or, may-

be, Hound heard wrong. Even harpies harmonized.
Erinyes croaked arpeggios—less vengeful
than tree frogs’ lipless saw.
Who needed skitterin’ aliens when
ecoterrorists showered us all with “Kyrie
Eleison”? Such ululation
neither Pooch nor Grr could sanction,

much less when performed by frogs.
Even hailstorm weren’t so odd

as this fusillade floppin’ onto roof slate.
Nearby, plaster swan
dappled. Radio flyer

tipped, then yawped as red-eyed, orange-toed
haunts walloped Mama’s garden.
Even crookneck squash ker-plopped.
Couldn’t blame child-forsaken dog for 
runnin’ head-first into andiron, 
yankin’ hearth rug to ash grate. 
Ifin Papa could have saw Pooch-Cat
matterin’ and shuttlecockin’, he’d of
got religion onct-and-for-all.

Only like last Sunday, he’d
forgot, leavin’ Mama

to shepherd all they’s children. The youngest
huddled under pew,
evangelizin’ ant family. Simple

faith defies much law, ‘specially nature’s, only
righteous seldom caw ‘bout frog showers
outside Apocalypse. Still, even Mama did not blame
Grr- Dog for dredgin’ goblins out of scum-pond.
She believed in plagues—also in giggin’ prongs.
Crescentia, Alone, Then

1.

I didn’t know her anymore than you did: eyes a lighter shade of sepia, dress tucked about her feet like a chrysalis, but damp as though she’d fallen in a well rank with rust water.

In the photograph, she hovers, ectoplasmic and grim, beyond her almost lover’s shoulder. If he turned, he would not see her. Only the collodion plate reveals her, fixed like *Morpho laertes*, stilled by a camera’s clairvoyant focus.

Invoked, Crescentia is speechless like De Quincey’s Mater Tenebrarum, that opium-limned Lady of Darkness. In the photo, she seems to be keening at decibels below human notice. If he touched her, he would not know it, fingers dipping through shade like silver emulsion.

Skimming through a book on spectral photography, you see her, floating sylph or invalid, arranged amid layers of cloth, tousled, but graceful, despite being caught in this awkward, impractical pose; this ghost seems displaced, like a mermaid out-of-water, and all too aware of the obvious duplicity of grief, that double exposure.
2.

Crescentia. He didn’t know her anymore than you did. Yet, he touched her hand each day for a week as if by accident. She kept her gaze on the keys, the ebony amid so much ivory, as if pondering a love song she could almost recall, music of the spheres, not heavenly, but sublunary, a feminine descant that held her, enthralled.

3.

She did not know herself, Crescentia, though she tried out provocative poses:
- Madeline on the Eve of St. Agnes;
- Kore Before She Bit the Pomegranate;
- the Divine Sarah Reclining in Her Coffin;
- Julia Margaret Cameron Huddled Behind Her Lens, Vivian to Tennyson’s Merlin.

Crescentia never tired of playing the feminine in tableaux vivants; her eyes stayed so wide, so opaque, they defied focus. Now, she is all image, all levitation, tricked out with veils, summoned by frauds, toe-crackers, scribblers, mediums with gauze up their sleeves, crystals in their pockets.

4.

“Crescentia, Alone, Then” is the title of this portrait. Clamoring, but mute for all intents and purposes since no one living can hear, see, or feel her, not even those said to specialize in translation of tantrums thrown by the restless, but all too vigorous dead.
Though they comfort the desolate mothers
of stillborns, give hope to almost lovers,
grant others assurance of lives continued
after death, they offer little solace to ghosts.
Crescentia, alone, then, remains suspended
like a scream in the sleeper’s unresponsive throat.

This is the story of a ghost, haunted by hypotheticals,
by selves never realized, never even tried out.
Crescentia, alone, then, her fists full of asphodels,
murmurs, melodramatizes, implores. If death
were a stage, she would need no limelight;
but, death, unlike life, is no tableau vivant.

Crescentia is alone, then, waiting for her curtain,
yearning for an audience to notice and applaud.
Ornithology

When we consider all these changes of animal form, and innumerable others, which may be collected from the books of natural history; we cannot but be convinced, that the fetus or embryo...is formed by apposition of new parts, and not by the distention of a primordial nest of gemes, included one within another, like the cups of a conjurer.

—Erasmus Darwin, Zoonomia

The reader once saw a glass hummingbird pause by scarlet seaweed (dyed to revive the aquarium), and wondered if the widgeon or the anchovy ketchup had conjured this vibrato from light, or perhaps it was fatigue that, as usual, had compromised her eyes.

She’s reminded, now, by this girl of a vagueness suspended in flight, something slurried beyond music or genera like that bird in the parlor, a sight that not even Audubon could render plausible in India ink.

Such nervous energy, confined to a room already full of inlaid cabinets, étagères, and mahogany bookcases, probably would not be calmed by chocolate or seedcake.

The reader could not be sure that the child would not spring wings and fly into the mullioned windowpanes. After all, her cat, or whatever one called it, had already tried this particular form of escapism, and, now, hiccupped and hyperventilated against the girl’s chest, its pupils hugely askew.

The reader had never seen such variation in any species despite her affinity for Dickensian creatures, that is, animals that others thought madly misbegotten, or else too sentimental to live.

Even the coral with its perpetual hives and the anemones with their feathery tines are less baroque, more classifiable than the bird-feline-bug that the runaway coddles and tries to distract with grim lullabies, in which moths peck at eyes, but are eaten themselves by a gargoyle, or some outré, impossible dragonfly.
The reader, impressed by the song’s malapertness, puts reason aside and studies the child: skin of clock-face patina; eyes of moss-light; dress of dustbin-gray wool, but implausibly bright as the rest of her.

The reader would not be surprised to learn that her belly was navelless, and what this implied could give clergy more reason to fret than amoebas and fossils had yet; or, else, her conception might prise renewed faith in a populace where fasting girls, weeping stone eyes, and spirit photography thrive as miracle and credulity connive to sell memento mori on lithograph slides.

If Erasmus Darwin and his grandsons had fathomed her ontogeny, her peculiar development from germ cell to fetus to sylph-child (or silverspot butterfly), how would their theories of natural (or unnatural) selection be rectified?

The reader can only surmise, her own faith given to capricious mutation during Sunday sermons, when her conscience rewrites all the pastor’s promises of vengeance as privilege for sinlessness.

She could never abide the condemnatory impulse in her fellow Christians, preferring instead to believe in a happily-ever-afterlife in which humans grew wings, but weren’t angels or parakeets named Folly or Sheepskin or Life.

They might be archaeopteryx, scarabs, and other zoomorphic delights that made the Book of Kells seem nigh colorless, indeed drab by comparison.

Just now, this child with her furious concentration and her hummingbird reflex to shy at sudden movement, then return with an intimacy to light just out of hand’s reach, but enticed by unfamiliarity, encouraged the reader to mind what drew the child’s eye.

What could she offer a hummingbird that knew such unusual rhymes?

One might offer her claret or other red things,
but the reader, instead, picked *The Chimes,*
and, then, paused as another slim volume with dodos, flamingoes, and sundry strange birds drew her gaze to the mulberry wine of its cover. Inside were such fancies of flight to unnerve ornithologists, but might be a nectar to right wayward girls and mock felines, besides,

so the reader began, “Down the Rabbit-Hole,”
and the air became redolent with thyme.
Author Notes

Brenda Hammack teaches courses in Victorian literature, women's literature, and creative writing at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in a variety of journals including Mudlark, Gargoyle, Caveat Lector, The Sow's Ear Poetry Review, Arsenic Lobster, Steampunk Magazine, Word Riot, and Pedestal. She has also recently published literary criticism on Florence Marryat's 1897 novel The Blood of the Vampire. Three of her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.