

Birmingham Arts Journal

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Birmingham
Art Association

Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **LEANING AGAINST TIME**, Moore County, TN, 10" h x 8" w Print,

Focal length 18mm, F/9, 1/500 sec, Nikon D70

When he is not hanging off the edge of a mountain, **MicaJon Dykes** of Tullahoma, Tennessee, enjoys photographing people and places.

Back Cover: **OLD MAN LAUGHING**, 17" h x 10" w x 8"d, Colorado Yule Marble

Steven Stone was born in Mishawaka, Indiana, but has lived his entire life in Alabama -- from Waterloo in the extreme north to Mobile in the extreme south. Steve says he's split the difference and now lives in Alexander City. His fondness for Alabama is evident when he says, "I love Alabama and hope I can leave something to inspire its people when I'm gone."

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A MULE NAMED ADA

By Frieda Stevenson

My father preferred mules over horses for work animals. I remember a horse named Nell, who was hitched to a plow one day in the cornfield on the upper forty. Nell was expecting a colt soon and evidently decided that heavy work was unsuitable in her delicate condition. She first tried running away with the plow and when Daddy reined her in, she lay down in the traces and refused to get up.

Ada, the gentle female mule, kept right on working while Daddy gave up, unhitched Nell and put her in the pasture.

Ada had always been an excellent worker, never giving any trouble pulling the plow or getting along with the other animals in the pasture.

But a few weeks after Nell's tantrum in the field, Ada suddenly started acting strangely. I don't think we have any loco weed in Alabama, but something caused her to go haywire.

Maybe she realized that she was now middle-aged, entering mule menopause, incapable of bearing offspring. Even as a young mule the odds were about a million to one against it.

"I will adopt a baby," she must have thought. The first baby animal she chose was a calf, and it was easy chasing the cow away. Ada stayed close to the calf, nuzzling it and sniffing it while the mother cow bawled in alarm. Daddy finally coaxed Ada away with an ear of corn. Ada settle down, probably thinking, "That baby isn't what I want anyway. Doesn't look anything like me and doesn't smell right either."

A few days after Ada's attempt to kidnap the calf, Nell was in the pasture with her new colt, a horse. Ada spotted them and her maternal instinct again stirred, or maybe she decided to get even with Nell for refusing to pull the middle buster that day in the cornfield, leaving Ada to do all the work.

How well I remember how frightening it was, watching Ada keeping the baby colt close to her while chasing away the mare. When Daddy and John, our tenant farmer, tried to coax her away from the colt and into another pen, she threatened to bite them. The episode lasted a long time, at least it seemed so to me, for I feared for my father's life and I begged him to shoot Ada. Finally, Ada was separated from the colt and penned in a separate pasture.

I wrote this entry in my diary on May 10, 1940: "We had an awful lot of excitement when the mule, Ada, took possession of our mare's colt and fought at Daddy and everyone else. I was so scared I had hysterics and cried. Then I went to town and felt some better. Later, Dorothy came over and we went frog hunting with Brother. We killed one frog.

I'm glad the frog was the only animal killed on the farm that day.

.....
Frieda Stevenson lives on Birmingham's Southside, where she writes and remembers.

BLESS YOUR HEART

By Geoff Langdon

About 25 years ago was the first time I remember hearing the expression, "Bless your heart." A local corporation's most powerful employee, the executive secretary to the president, used it. I was telling her why the order her company placed with me was delayed.

With my hopefully reassuring smile, I said I was working hard to get the delivery moved up.

"Bless your heart," she said.

I gushed.

I should have gulped.

I left that office feeling that I had avoided a disaster by employing my winning charm.

By the time I got back to my office, there was a message from her on my answering machine. "Cancel the order. Don't bother yourself with coming by. We will mail you all the samples you gave us." A pause, then, "You take care now, hear?"

Being a transplanted New Yorker, I was not privy to Southern nuance. I learned from this and later experiences that the degree of stridency in the eyes and the tightness around the mouth are indicators to pay attention to.

Here are some things I've heard over the years, and their possible Southern meanings:

A. Bless your heart.

1. Bless your heart.

2. I haven't heard a word you said.

3. Go away, now.

4. Die.

B. Bless your little old heart.

1. Bless your little old heart.

2. Drive your car into oncoming traffic.

C. Take care now.

1. Hope you are okay and do well.

2. Are you still here?

D. How is your sweet wife?

1. How is your sweet wife?

2. Still on medication, is she?

E. Don't be a stranger, hear?

1. I will call you, don't call me.

2. If at all possible, become a stranger.

F. You don't sound like you are from 'round here.

1. I know you are not from here and I want you to know that I know.

2. Leave our city.

.....
Geoff Langdon is an award-winning poet and author in Birmingham.

THE GIRL WHO LIVED IN THE T-BONE HOUSE

By Ed Lynskey

One September evening, a girl appeared on the lawn. Gathering the blue dress, she sat on the porch. She lived in the house where two streets T-boned. Motorists stopping on the perpendicular street pitched their headlamps straight at her.

She stood out. Her cobalt blue dress crackled in its allure.

If headlamps struck at the right angle, her eyes gleamed fire-orange like a tigress.

"Bernie? You out there?" a lady's fatigued voice drifted through the screen door. "Come inside. The night air is chilly."

"In a little, mom."

"You wearing a jacket?"

"Yes, mom."

"You barefoot?"

"No, mom."

"Okay, a bit longer. No more. I'm pooped."

"Thanks, mom."

An MP3 player played The Cranberries. On an Internet-enabled cell phone, a pal kept IM'ing Bernie: "Where r u?" Indeed, where? Bernie hummed. A distant cop car siren chased evildoers. If she wished hard enough, the siren would go chase down a thief.

Al was a thief. A thief of hearts.

Her pal asked, "Did Al dump u?" Bernie sniffed. It won't be the first time my heart gets broken, she thought.

"Talk 2 me. B-, r u there?"

"Bernie, you ready to come indoors? The mosquitoes are out. West Nile virus is on the news. You getting bites?"

"No, mom."

"You finished out there?"

"Almost, mom."

"Should I switch on the porch light?"

"It'll only draw moths."

"M'm. Honey, listen. That boy wasn't worth your time."

"Thanks . . . but . . . I'm holding up."

"You want to talk?"

"No, mom."

"That phone call was Darlene. She asked why you don't answer her?"

"I'll see Darlene tomorrow at school."

"We both have early mornings."

"All right."

Mules swishing over the bare floorboards faded. Her mom worried too much. Bernie once saw a girl near her age in a B-

movie. The girl's cretin for a boyfriend, much older and in college, had given her the heave-ho. Distraught, this girl crept to the dark side of a street. At a hairpin bend, shrieking from the bottom of her lungs, she hurled herself out into the twin cones of oncoming headlights.

DOA but no more heartbreak.

That seems radical, thought Bernie. A crisp shiver ran up her spine. She frowned. Well, what sort of future do I hold? Take this joyless moment and multiply it by however many moments combine to make a lifetime The night before, Al and she had gone to an ethnic grocery. The signs, all printed in Korean, were indecipherable. They weren't, as it turned out, the only signs Bernie couldn't read.

They'd strolled between the aisles bustling with shoppers. It was great. They read a few English translations: roasted seaweed, mulberry leaves tea, and shiitake mushroom powder. One petite lady wearing gold hoop earrings picked up a sack of white rice and the bottom fell out. Al, pointing, laughed at her.

I should've smacked him while I had the chance, she thought.

Outside underneath the mint green awnings, the frosty air smelling of insecticide and caramel, Al, still smiling, had an "oh, by the way" to lay on her.

At least he had the decency to let go of holding her confused hand. Al was a classy guy. Right.

"You see, Bernie, things just aren't clicking for us," he'd said.

"Huh? Clicking?"

"Yeah. What I mean is, we should start seeing other people."

"Say what?" Bernie couldn't believe what her ears were hearing. "You're splitting up with me?"

"Not exactly. Still friends?"

"Bull."

"What?"

"I said bull."

"I thought so. Look, don't go away angry"

"Just go away, right?" Tears sprang into her eyes. Of course, Al was doubly dense or too vain or probably both to realize that indignant rage, not sorrow over losing him, was behind them.

"Hey, you'll meet somebody new." He rattled his car keys.

"I better get you home."

"Don't bother. I'll save you the trouble," she said. "I'll use my cell phone to call my mother."

"Oh Christ, don't bring her here," Al said. "Not after this."

"She'll only want your intestines on a kebab," Bernie said.

"So, you better beat it."

"You'll be okay? Here, I mean?"

"Al, you're kidding me, I hope. Why do you give a damn about my welfare?"

Without another word and only a limp, lame hand wave, Al had stalked around to let himself inside his car and drive off. She

**"What's the use of
happiness? It can't
buy you money."**

--Henny Youngman

went out a few rows into the parking lot, had herself a righteous cry, then called her mom.

On the way home, her mom spoke. "Look. Let's face it. Al is a jerk. Pure and simple. And I for one am glad you'll not see him anymore."

Turning, Bernie arched a surprised eyebrow. "But I thought you liked Al."

"M'm. Did I say that? Not really, honey."

"He is a senior," said Bernie.

"And you'll be a senior next year."

At present, a set of headlamps punctured the darkness. Through eyes bleary from bitter tears, Bernie seated on the porch steps studied it. Life these days seemed too overwrought with symbolism. It lurked in the lyrics to love songs and between the lines in the novels. It was all too goofy but she was keenly attuned to it just the same. Now, for instance, the vehicle braked at the stop sign, then turned right. Its red taillights vanished in the night's murk. The meaning wasn't lost on her -- at reaching a dead end, you veered in a different direction and moved on.

Bernie gathered up her stuff and went up the porch steps.

"Bernie! You inside for the evening?"

"Yes, mom."

"Good. Don't forget to lock up. I'm tired and going to bed.

Good night, honey."

"Good night, mom!"

As Bernie opened the screen door and sidled through the threshold, a risible image crystallized in her mind. Snickers welled up inside her. Turning, she put a hand over her mouth but still burst out laughing.

Lord, but that boy Al was pigeon-toed!

.....
Ed Lynskey's short fiction has appeared in Mississippi Review, Sou'wester, and Pleiades. His novels include The Dirt-Brown Derby (Mundania Press, 2005) and The Blue Cheer (Pointblank/Wildside Press). His web site is <http://www.satlug.org/~lynskey> and his email address is e_lynskey@yahoo.com.
.....

DECLARATION

By Mark E. Wadley

1.
This is not a call for independence,
no lusty shout for love from beneath a balcony.
I am no Romantic, I am no deist.
Am not, Am not,
may I be defined by what I am?
I, I, I – vertical lines drawn down a page.

In Pre-Cal I learned that functions are found
by drawing a vertical line through the graph.
My vertical lines hit more than one point,
but can I not function? Am I valid?
This has become an existential avowal.

Through my cupped hands I propose quiet speech,
a notch or two down on the knob,
inside voices, like elementary school.
I discover your lips unfunctional –
a vertical line across makes them useless.

2.
I do not secede from myself or others,
I depend on things and people.
This troubles me.

3.
Piracy runs rampant here – music, words, ideas.
We steal what has been bought,
sell it again for almost nothing.
No one has been hurt, we think,
And when we see the blood we think of the cinema.

These ideas are not original with me.
They are planned, mapped by forefathers
with flowers in their lapels
and large quill pens.

My t-shirt is stained,
and my keyboard is sticky.

4.
My sentences grow long; all the fruit has been eaten.
These words are vessels for thoughts, not ideas.
The ideas are quiet these days,
they say the next generation will not surpass.

I ponder the validity of this,
nod and crack my knuckles.
You hate the sound of bones popping.

5.
White space on a page
is more important than words.
I once wrote a poem about jazz
let the words cascade down the page
like water, or fire.

I give you this: vertical lines
stretching downward towards hell, or China,
and white space. This is all that remains.

.....
Mark E. Wadley lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and has aspirations of not starving for his art.
.....

BIRMINGHAM ARTS JOURNAL

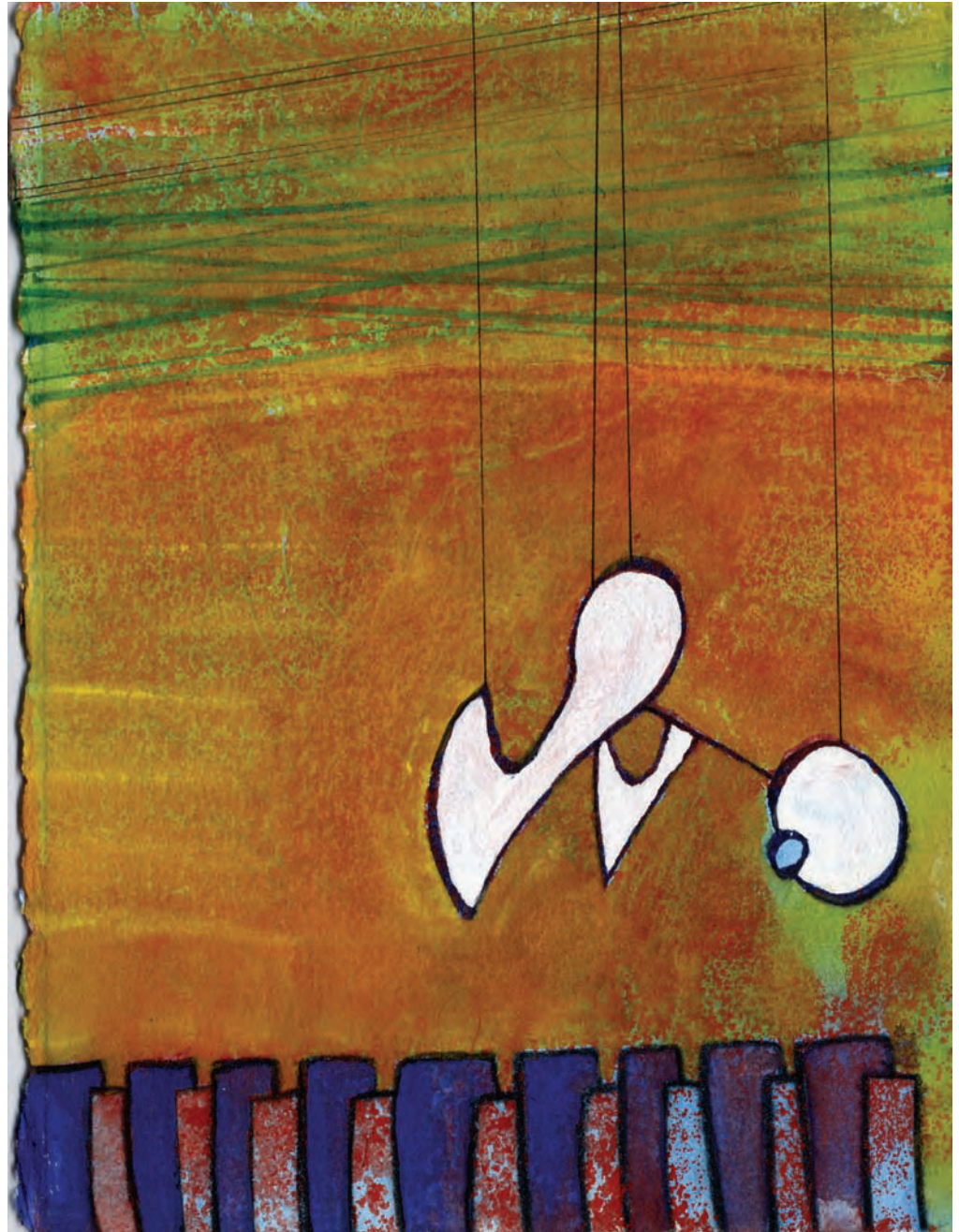
STAR SPANGLED

By Tina Harris

I stole the blue bra,
speckled with white stars,
when Mom wasn't looking,
but had to leave its red
and white striped panty behind.
Mom won't let me wear it
under my thin white blouse
because its dark satin sky
makes the stars shine
through the cotton fog.
So I pull the shirt back
over my face, let it hang
from my head like a limp flag
of surrender while the stars
around my chest reflect
in the grateful tears
of lost spelunkers, miners
and subway bums,
as I conquer crickets
and black widows
to haunt those dark
unmapped places,
until Mom demands
I put my shirt back
on, and cover the spitting
image of her younger self.

100

.....
Tina Harris lives in Birmingham, Alabama, where she is a founding member, teacher and director of the Magic City Community Writers. Her poems and essays have appeared in Santa Clara Review, PoemMemoirStory, StorySouth and the anthology As Ordinary and Sacred as Blood: Alabama Women Speak. She is also a potter and has served as a wilderness counselor for delinquent boys.
.....



EXECUTION

5.5" w x 7.5" h
Mixed media on Rives BFK
2004

Lisa Michitti graduated from the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa with a Master of Fine Arts Degree. Contact info: michi002@bama.ua.edu or website: www.bama.ua.edu/~michi002/

CORNCOB

By Karl Koweski

my wife often asks,
especially after reading
one of my pornographic
stories, how much
truthfully occurred
how much of "me" is in it

I'm tempted to relate
the anecdote concerning
the same question posed
to William Faulkner
by a casting director
in regards to his
novel Sanctuary

Faulkner's answer –
"Madame, I am the corncob"

of course, my wife
doesn't even know
who Faulkner is
and...
I've never actually
read Sanctuary

.....
Karl Koweski is a displaced Chicagoan now living on top of a mountain in northern Alabama. He occasionally misses the snow, crime, and culture. His latest poetry chapbooks Internet Killed the Mimeo Star and Casualty of the Industrial Revolution are available from Hemispherical Press and Liquid Paper Press respectively.
.....

SNAPPING BEANS

By Darrell B. Grayson

She cuddled the cheap yellow bowl, filled with
Fresh green beans, on her industrial strength lap
That has born brats numbering in the double
Digits.

Nervously, timidly, I would venture forth onto the
Screened-in front porch where she sat amid a symphony
Of snapping green beans, the snapping of their spines
Resembled the breaking branches on the sole tree
Surviving at the top of the world.

Watching her out of the corner of my eye, I would
Bite off a section of bean and marvel at the
Tiny brains rolling around inside their pods before
I ground them into savory green pulp tasting of
Winter.

Sometimes I'd ask her a question, just to hear her
Voice, to be close to her, but only received the
Look climbing over the rims of her glasses and a handful
Of beans to snap for my troubles. Even now, those
Sharp looks above lips pressed into razor blades
Produce goose bumps and curiously I wonder why
I'm forever asking questions and despise vegetables.

.....
Darrell B. Grayson resides on Death Row at Holman Prison in Alabama. He is Chairman of Project Hope to Abolish the Death Penalty (www.phadp.org). Mr. Grayson's poetry has been published in the Open Door Newsletter, Wings of Hope, Right Hand Pointing, and the e-zine Axis of Logic. He has one chapbook and a new one forthcoming from Mercy Seat Press.
.....

IN THE DIGITAL MOMENT

By Mike Sloane

I was in Western Supermarket the other day picking up a loaf of bread when I rounded the end of the aisle and came upon this guy who was talking to the English muffins! "Do you really feel that way? How long have you felt that way?" I assumed that in the middle of his psychotic breakdown he was parroting his Rogerian psychotherapist or perhaps he was feeling inappropriately empathetic with the stale English muffins! He was probably experiencing auditory hallucinations, or voices, most likely receiving commands from his neighbor's dog or from Bill O'Reilly. Now being a psychologist and being well versed in the vagaries of schizophrenia, I of course was very sensitive to this gentleman's predicament. I reminded myself that I shouldn't stigmatize him by staring at him or drawing attention to his florid psychotic episode. After all, the muffins were not in any danger and the episode was not his fault--brain chemistry and all that. He was not crazy, just different. Intrigue got the better of me and under the guise of finding the Dr. Pepper on the other side of the aisle, my gaze swept past his face. Lo and behold, he was talking into this tiny microphone that was part of a hands-free headset. Just as a lark, I felt like starting to talk aloud myself: "Yes, I'm feeling really angry now. I've been feeling this way ever since I murdered the old lady across the street." Wasn't I entitled to talk aloud in the bread aisle also? When you think about it, with all these people talking aloud to themselves in public places, the real schizophrenics might become chronically underdiagnosed!

.....
Mike Sloane is director of the Honors Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.
.....

KRYPTONITE NEVERMORE

By Dr. Michael S. Vaphiades

This planet is so lonely, what will I ever do?

As I watched her preparing to depart, I protested as much as I could without appearing weak or vulnerable. Yet I was weak and vulnerable. I felt like Clark Kent exposed to Kryptonite. We were both physician-scientists working on a terraform project that was designed to provide this dustbowl of a planet with water and life. When we arrived 2 solar cycles ago she commented how dreary the planet was. Without protective gear, its close proximity to the sun made the environment nearly uninhabitable. This world didn't even have a real name. It was simply referred to as planet 34721.

Our outpost was centered in the Gustev crater on the north side of the planet to afford at least some protection. The indigenous population of this world was not replete with war, slavery and despotism as ours was. The most common animal encountered was a cross between an Earth turtle and one of the giant eel birds of my planet, Orion. These creatures were the main source of sustenance for the natives of this world, yet it wasn't enough to quench the ubiquitous poverty. I remember quipping, "If this is the best they've got, in 6 months we'll be running this planet." An arrogant statement, even in jest. Were we emancipators or invaders? That's a judgment best left to historians, after all who am I to question 900 million years of evolution?

My colleague didn't speak very much; Earth women were not telepaths and I could not read her thoughts well. I guess that may have added to the mystery somewhat. The females of my species make their intentions known instantly by their thoughts (telepathy) and actions. They are very aggressive both socially and sexually. They have their bodies altered at a young age to appear more appealing to the males. You would think this social situation would be perfect for the males of Orion, and it was for most. I always had trouble with the way things were though, maybe because I felt copulation without love was somehow wrong. There is no love or commitment on Orion and most of the reproduction is accomplished in a laboratory with test tubes and Petri dishes. My parents were an exception because they did love one another. I imagined that his Earth woman would love also. That maybe my alien-ness did not repulse her? I am considered handsome on my world. Maybe I am only projecting and she really finds the concept of interspecies intimacy revolting.

One cloudy day on a survey of the planet, she walked by and brushed against my arm. Even through our protective gear, I felt this warm sensation move between us. Is this what is meant by the word "attraction" which the Earth movies refer to? I was hesitant to offer my interpretation to her for fear she would think me rude or inappropriate. I did say however "Did you feel that?" "I did," she responded in a quiet voice. "Oh, OK," I acknowledged.

The next day, in the lab, she was more quiet than usual. I broke the silence with a question. "In your professional opinion, could an Orion male and an Earth female copulate successfully?"

"What do you mean by successfully?" she asked. "Biologically, could they produce offspring?" I asked. "I very much doubt it," she said in a very authoritative way.

Sure, all the anatomy is similar, and I suspect the pleasure centers would be stimulated largely in the same manner, however, offspring is genetically impossible." I then asked, "Do you think an Earth woman could fall in love with an Orion man?" There was a long silence. She turned and explained, "I guess it depends on the man." Well, that was it. I was really going to be more specific with my next question. I felt like I was on some type of Earth 1950's game show trying to solve the puzzle. But before I could offer my next question, the Earth woman gestured with her eyes to one of the surveillance cameras, advising against any further conversation. She then turned away, however, I did spy a half smile partially hidden by her light colored hair.

My planet Orion prohibits any kind of intimate contact with other races and no one dare violate this dictum for the consequences are too terrible to imagine. No union between an Orion and Earthier has ever occurred.

The next day the unthinkable happened. A satellite transmission arrived assigning her back to her home world, Earth. How do you say goodbye to someone that you've grown to rely on every day for years? Someone you may be falling in love with. Physically, she was elegant, disarming in her beauty, both in body and soul. The line of her neck alone was enough to transform a simple sketch into a Renaissance masterpiece. This only accessorized her thoughtful nature and cheerful demeanor, a unique juxtaposition to the barren ugliness of the planet.

Over the next few days the Earth woman prepared for her journey back home. Each day she would pack a little more and each day I would notice some of her things missing which I found very upsetting.

One afternoon, as she put the finishing touches on her packing, she leaned in toward me and I kissed the top of her head. It was unthinkable that I did this. Yet it happened so quickly I couldn't stop myself. It was an innocent kiss though, the kind you would give a child after reading a bedtime story. I am still unsure if she realized it was a kiss or not. I probably will never know. I hope the surveillance cameras didn't record it.

That night we worked outside collecting soil samples as was customary for that time of year. During the day, the sun was so hot; our naked flesh would burn if exposed for only a few moments. I enjoyed watching her work.

The dirtier she got, the more beautiful she seemed. Her hair was a light color that I had never seen before on the women of my world. Her natural skin color was fair; she only had a slight tan that she could not avoid by virtue of being on the planet, no matter how much skin protection cream she applied. As I watched her with desire in my eyes, the kind of desire every female recognizes regardless of her planet of origin, she glanced at me and smiled. Her eyes fixed on mine and at that moment I knew I would never be free again.

A week passed without mention of her departure; then the day arrived when she was to leave. That evening we retired as usual to our respective quarters yet I knew I had to see her one last time before her transport shuttle docked. I arrived nervous at her door and rang the buzzer. She answered, freshly

showered, prepared for the long hypersleep back to Earth. The surveillance cameras were all seeing and I could hear a ship's engine purring in the distance; time was running out. Nervousness gave way to grief and desire and I could feel the veneer of my self-control slipping away.

I told her that she belongs here with me and wrapped my arms around her lean torso. I knew she could feel the strength of my body against hers. Perhaps if I held long enough she would stay. I relaxed my grip slightly and she turned away. I put the palm of my hand on the small of her back and worked my way up to her neck, I could feel some of the soapy residue from the shower on her skin, which was now especially smooth. I gently turned her toward me. I was in close and could see the fine detail of her face. It was flawless. The internal debate was over, there had to be a God to create such beauty. I leaned in and kissed her. It was no ordinary kiss but the kind you only see in black and white Earth movies. Meanwhile, the cameras were documenting every move, every emotion, no doubt to be used in my trial.

She left that night.

It was finished, Kryptonite nevermore. I was severely punished by the Orion high council for my transgression, but it was worth it. Over the next few years I would periodically stare into the sky waiting for her transport to return, but of course it never did. I remember thinking that if God made her, then he must be in love with me. So was her leaving some cruel cosmic joke? There is an old Earth saying, "time heals all wounds." Since Earth physiology is so similar to mine, why doesn't this rule apply to me?

I was eventually successful in transforming this world into a virtual paradise. With its posh, carefully controlled environment, shimmering glass buildings and convenient flying transports, it has become a playground for the privileged and the beautiful. Even the indigenous population revels in the lack of hardship. But despite all that, and more, I would give it all for just a few more moments with her, in that isolated lab, on that barren planet a lifetime ago.

You see, even after all this time, I find myself resisting the urge to think that this planet is so lonely, what will I ever do?

Earth, 17 years later. In a sleepy suburb of Alabama, a home computer screen activates and a message is received. A teenager exclaims, "Ma, it's a message from Orion! I thought all contact with that world was prohibited?" Little did he know that

his mother was the reason contact was prohibited. Physically, the boy bears a vague resemblance to his mother, yet on close inspection his features betray his bloodline. His stature is thin and muscular. His hair is black with a thick wavy texture, unlike the people of Earth in this time. Most people are a product of genetic manipulation to accent the "best physical traits." These usually included fair skin, medium thickness light straight hair and subtle facial features. This boy had a prominent brow ridge, and a larger nose, jaw and lips than his classmates. He would have looked like a product of the union between the ancient Negro and Caucasian races, which no longer exist in this time. In this society the boy is an outcast by virtue of his appearance, yet he may be comforted by the fact that 300 years ago he would have been considered very handsome.

"Well mom, are we having a visitor?" The Earth woman smiles at the son that she reared, a son that she never thought could possibly exist, and confesses, "It's time I told you about your biological father."



TROPICAL BOUQUET

40" h x 30" w, oil on board

Ione Citrin, a native of Chicago, is an avant garde artist whose artistic expression takes shape in diverse oil and watercolor paintings, bronze sculptures, found object collages and mixed media assem-

.....
Dr. Michael Vaphiades is an Associate Professor in the Departments of Ophthalmology, Neurology and Neurosurgery at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. There, he is the Chief of the Neuro-ophthalmology and Electrophysiology Services working at the Callahan Eye Foundation Hospital and the UAB Hospital. He recently received a Best Doctors in America award and the American Academy of Ophthalmology Achievement Award. He has published extensively in his field.

ON FINDING THE GENERAL

VICINITY for S.

By Glynnis Ritchie

Lately I have been pregnant
with the idea
of tomorrow,
less worried about who I will be
and more about whether my pen will work,
if my shoelaces will still bend
and fold and tie
so I can leave the house,
walk home in the rain.

I have come to know the restlessness of sleep
and the ineptitude of insomnia,
but I can't measure the weight of my own head on a pillow,
can't say which parts of me ache the most
when the sun rises
and I haven't slept.

There is nothing of complacency in me.

When I taste the emptiness of coffee
I know more about myself
than the lights I leave on,
more about my own movement
than neighbors peering in my lighted windows
from across the creek.

(This is more about knowing than remembering.)

All I can give you is the scab on my knee
and a little something of American cinema.
I have nowhere to take you
with line breaks or word choices.
I have nothing
but normal sentences

and I eat the same, dry breakfast every morning
while you are still asleep.
Sleep follows you out of bed
into your own, waking life.

And I wonder when we will resign ourselves
to the fact that we write the same poem
our whole lives,
that our existence is a poem
that merely revises itself;

no matter how much we change
we have only twenty-six letters
and a teaspoon of punctuation.
We are our own memories
rearranged.

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Glynnis Ritchie lives in Birmingham, Alabama. Her poems have been published by the University at Buffalo and appear in Hollins University's Cargoes.
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FROM A LETTER GOODBYE

By Andrea Jenkins

My life is made up of letters. I send them at beginnings and endings, occasionally in between. People used to tell me it was a cowardly way of doing things, a way of avoiding a face-to-face meeting, a tête-à-tête. But I have already faced you, so now I use this letter. It is at once the most formal and most personal way of saying goodbye.

I do not want to talk about us.

I went to Tennessee two weekends ago. My six-year-old cousin wanted to make up plays or pretend to be Peter Pan. I wanted to sit down, float in the pool. I used to pretend that the pool was the ocean, and my cousins who were close to my age and I would film movies where we got lost in the Jungle. We'd sometimes forget to film and spend hours out by the creek with only a piece of bread, trying to build a house or raft out of the sticks. We made another movie where we were cowboys and Indians. It was rather low budget; we used the green bedspreads for grass and the brown carpet for dirt, and our costumes consisted of bandanas. We were so active. We would say that we hated how adults would underestimate us kids, that we could do anything they could, and more. Growing up did not seem an option. Our goal was to dominate the world before people began considering us teenagers. Adults and teenagers seemed to have lost their spark, or worse, their imaginations. I forget when it was that my cousins and I lost interest in these movies. We still only have one scene of our Jungle Movie filmed.

I will say one thing about you and me: we thought we could do anything.

.....
Andrea Jenkins is a student in the creative writing department of the Alabama School of Fine Arts. She will graduate in 2006. Her writing interests lie primarily with fiction and creative nonfiction.
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A POEM IN THREE PARTS ABOUT JOHNNY CASH

By Dale Wisely

I. Johnny Cash was hypnotized
by Johnny Horton after Cash told him
that he had heard a song in a dream
that he, Johnny Cash, was supposed to have written.
But Cash could not remember the words.

Johnny Horton hypnotized him and, from the trance,
Johnny Cash remembered all the words
to "I'd Still Be There."

People alive and dead appear to each other
in visions, dreams, and trances,
with messages of comfort and warning
and songs of love and loss.

II. Johnny Cash was attacked by an ostrich
on his animal farm at the House of Cash.
The mate of the ostrich had been killed
by a hard freeze and he was crazed with grief.
So, he attacked Johnny Cash unprovoked,
wings out, head forward, beak open, hissing.
Johnny, not one to be bullied by a bird on his own property,
took a wild swing at the ostrich with a 6-foot stick and missed.

For a second, it looked like the bird had vanished
but it turned out the ostrich leapt in a high arc
and came down on Johnny's belly with its lethal big toe.

It would have disemboweled Johnny Cash
but for the grace of God.
Johnny Cash was left with broken ribs,

a severe laceration of the abdomen and,
then, an addiction to morphine.

III. Johnny Cash was led by a spirit
out of a Nickajack Cave in Tennessee.
Johnny had crawled deep
into the absolute darkness to lie down and die.
He was crazed with grief because, years later,
his wife June Carter will die
and then Johnny will die a few months later,
as everyone will have predicted.
This is not the sequence in time
but it is the sequence in the heart,

in which all time collapses into a single node
somewhere among the muscles and chambers.
Those things that measure out the pulse of time--
hearts, clocks, dripping water in limestone caverns--
know nothing of time.

So Johnny crawled hopelessly far into the cave,
which holds the bones of Confederate soldiers
and generations of hell-raising teenagers
who lost their way.
And he was touched by God
and saw a light and was guided out by the Spirit
by a sliver of sunray and the faintest of breezes.

I'd still be there, he might say,
but for the grace of God,
which leads people into caves and then out of them.
Into deserts and then out of them.
Into love and then out of love.
Into despair and then out of despair.

.....
Dale Wisely is a psychologist and writer in Birmingham, Alabama. He has poems in America, Birmingham Poetry Review, Blue Collar Review, Amaryllyis, Poet's Canvas, Main Street Rag, and elsewhere. With Birmingham writer Sandra Agricola, he operates Mercy Seat Press.
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"The first important financial advance for newspapers came in 1451 when Johann Gutenberg...invented the printing press, which made it possible for a newspaper to cheaply and accurately reproduce every single error thousands of times."

--Dave Barry

WAITING

By Tom Gordon

I'm sure I seem like a loiterer in this spot
But it's the only place near my house where the cell phone works
And where the light from the street lamp overhead is bright enough
To allow me to read to you from this book.

The problem is that our opportunity to talk, and my chance to read
Do not coincide with the timed illumination of the lamp.
For maybe two minutes, it brightens the street corner and the pages of my book
Before fading to dull amber, like charcoal past its fiery prime.

As I wait for the light to return, I notice the bright green of a computer screen
In the second story room of the yellow brick house across the street.
I frequently walk or bicycle past this house and usually draw barks and curious stares
From two black poodles, now shaved for the summer, who roam its premises.

Like most beings, Natasha and Ella are in for the night,
Except for the roaches that make
Like drunkenly driven speedboats along the sidewalk as I approach,
The dog with the erect feathery tail who suddenly bursts out barking
Into the street below and then seems to think better of it,
And whatever it is that, in its tiny way, is scaling the front part of my right leg.

We've agreed that I should call you at a certain time
But I've been overly eager and called two times too soon.
You've gently informed me that The Simpsons is not over
And so the kids are still not bed-bound,
So I look around and think about my neighborhood, my house
The length of time it takes me to get going on workday mornings
And how long it sometimes takes me to remember to zip my fly.

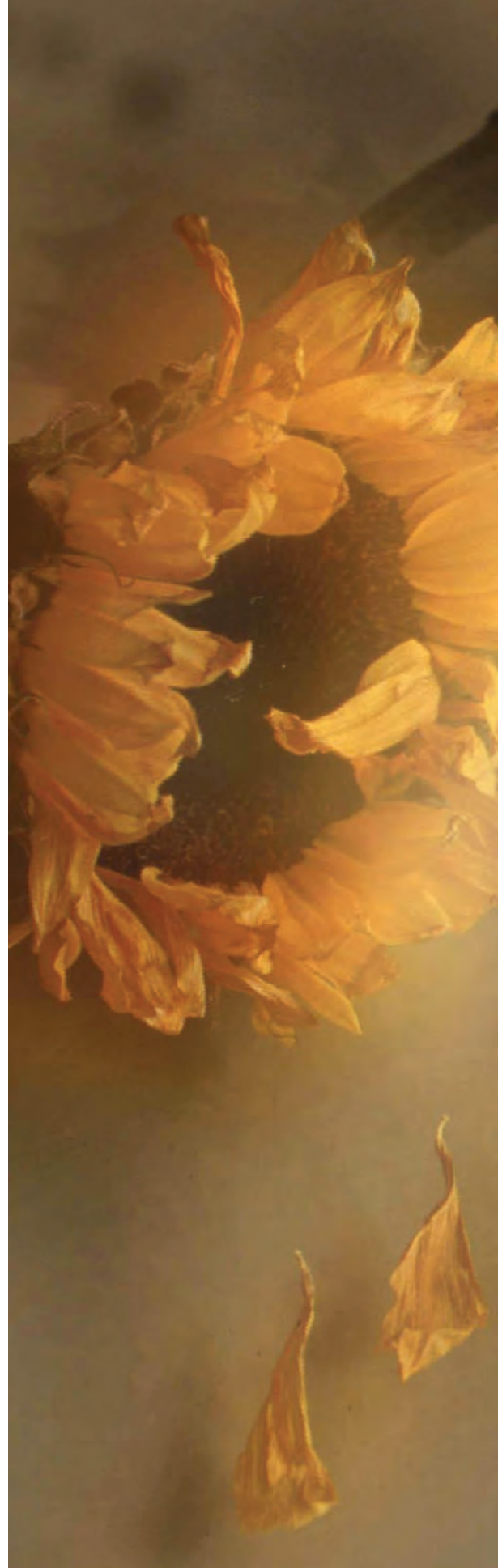
But now I look across the street and notice the glow
From the top of a stone edifice that is wide at the bottom, narrow at the top.
Kind of like a mini-Mayan monument without the surrounding jungle.
Its light is not as bright as that from its gawky, high powered cousin

Keeping me company on the opposite corner – but it doesn't go amber on me.
So I walk to its base, sit down cross legged and put the phone to my ear
As my neighbor Charles appears in the distance, walking his spaniel Pete.

I'm a little nervous, but not because Charles and Pete are passing by.
It's just that now I know that The Simpsons are done, your kids are in bed.
And I'm ready to read to you a poem about Paris.

What will I do when I've known you for more than two days?

.....
Tom Gordon is a state reporter for The Birmingham News, where he has worked for 22 years. He holds degrees in political science and journalism and has spent time in Europe and West Africa.
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GOLD DUST

By Carolyn Brett Kerchof

I walk into the kitchen and grab a banana, crack the stem and pull off the first peel. Samantha's lying on the floor again, copper hair laid out on the warm linoleum, talking on the phone. She's smiling, in that kind of seismic way she does when she gets a new boyfriend, and I feel this urge for movement inside that I think I inherited from her. I wanna dance. I wanna put on a record. *Boston*, maybe, or *Chicago*. I wanna grab the girl and whirl her around and watch her bright copper hair flash in the sunlight that's streaming through the curtains. I want to laugh beautifully.

She's noticed someone's entered the room, I'm sure, but she hasn't tilted her head back to identify who. She's staring at the ceiling. That kind of apathy's perilous – I could be a danger, I could be a strange man, I could be holding a knife in a gloved hand. Not that I don't carry a knife. I've got a dull gold knife that I bring almost everywhere. That I'm bound to bringing almost everywhere. When I feel overwhelmed, I take it out and spin it in my palm and just when I'm about to plunge it into someone it falls apart. Gold dust, like.

I take out my knife, I want to stab her. She might have sensed the flakes of the knife shimmering in that streaming light. She doesn't know until I step over her to throw the banana peel away that it's just me.

.....
Carolyn Kerchof, a Hoosier, walks and reads, but rarely at the same time. She lives in Birmingham.
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SUNFLOWER TEARS

10" h x 8" w

Photography

Andrew Tyson is a recent college graduate with a degree in computer imaging and visualization. His background is in photography and he has worked on a professional level for years and received a total of 7 awards. At present, photography, pencil drawing, and 3D imaging are his three avenues of artistic expression. Visit him on the web at: www.dragonfly3d.com.

WALTZING MAMA

By Margaret Spruill

Pull, step, step. Pull, step, step. I shoved open the heavy paneled door to the dentist's office, then stepped back where my mother, Claudia, white-knuckled, grasped a rattling walker. She swayed until I nudged the walker; and a bit off balance, she shuffled forward. I had a mantra I repeated as we shuffled along called The Waltz, Puuuull, step-step, Puuuull, step-step. I pulled, and she stepped, stepped.

The door swung shut before we could move a hair. Again, I pushed the heavy door to Dr. Hightower's office and rammed one foot just inside the doorframe to brace the door. I turned and reached both arms the extent of my grasp and pulled Mama from the warm corridor toward the chilly tomb-like room.

Mother leaned over her walker and peeked around me into the room. Her head stretched and contracted in slow ducking movements. She said, "Margaret Ann, are we at another doctor's...?" (gasp, deep breath).

I said, "Darlin', come along. Watch your step."

My thigh and calf muscles cramped. She announced, "I don't need..." another audible breath, "...no more doctors." She glared at me. Drawing another deep breath, a sucking noise like a drowning animal, "...I swanny', Margaret Ann."

"It can't hurt anything. I want to do this. Maybe he can fix your beautiful teeth. You have always had such a pretty smile." She was unconcerned about the broken teeth she got when she fell twice beside her bed, her face and teeth smashing into the end table. But that was the straw that broke me. I could not bear the sight of her jagged broken teeth, and the horrible bruises that did not heal. I simply could not bear it.

I had not told Mother about this appointment to avoid a confrontation. To divert Mother's attention, I warbled, "Let's sit over there in those comfortable chairs and talk about it, we're blocking the door."

Mother's large cloudy eyes shot daggers into my own. The aluminum warmed in my hands.

I recoiled every time I looked into the alien face that should be

my mother's. That old face, once soft and beautiful, was now a sharply defined skull wrapped in a purple, blue and greenish membrane that was parchment skin. I could see Death lurking behind her huge, hollowed-out eyes staring out from under her wide furrowed forehead. Desperately this creature latched onto my eyes, she held my gaze hostage to the nether world, death's coup d'état. Unable to recognize any sign of Mother, I fought down panic and revulsion. I curled inward into a ball ready to roll with the punches of anguish and grief that rose from my gut and clutched my throat.

Once I had sought refuge and laughter there, in that face. The Grim Reaper has finally won, I thought, broken my mother

to pieces and incised itself on this helpless old face. I longed to turn around right then and see Mother standing next to me. This alien creature is small, I tower over her. It can't be Mother! Mother was tall, taller than me. I always felt her love and delight surround me. Where is my mama? I want my Mother! Now I felt despair, my heart desolate. This spidery creature with the tell-tale sickly odor of old bodies was an interloper, not the familiar scent of Avon hand cream and Estee' Lauder, with undertones of fresh-brewed Maxwell House. I felt myself teetering on the brink of madness. I curbed the urge to break tethers and run pell-mell in all directions to get away from this poor scrawny half-creature whose voice sounded like a rasping gnome.

On the other hand, I believed that I could make Mother pull through. I could reach through her growing rage and shrinking body and breathe life from the four winds and she would stand strong as before and live because her first-born child loved her. I wanted to make life beautiful for Mother, obliterate her pain. Find the right doctor and all would be well. If Mama had to die, I wanted to comfort her when she drew her last breath. I imagined her old face peaceful, angels singing round about us, and Mother dying peacefully in my arms. Surely that isn't too much to ask, I thought.

Mama, now with a firm grip on the situation and her walker, stood rooted to the floor. She glared at me, her hollowed out eyes blazing fire. She still could pin me to the wall with that look. "You didn't tell me you..." deep breath, her head slowly lifting like a swimmer breaking the surface of the water... "tell me... we were going to see another doctor," her voice rose in pitch. "I don't need another doctor." Exasperated, her bony shoulders slumped a bit and she retreated into silence shaking her head.

Out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed the receptionist watching with amusement the fracas we caused in the doorway. In a loud voice she spoke, "What a pretty basket! Did you get it at Wal-Mart?" Condescension fluffed up her every word. I knew mother was doing a slow burn.

I had found the bicycle basket several years ago in a market just outside Paris. Later when Mother became unwell and needed special care and a walker, I dug out the basket and added a small silk tussie-mussie. Then I wired the flower adorned basket to the front of the deluxe walker. This would help her carry the facial tissue, the butterscotch mints, her key and other treasures as well as dress up the cold, metal apparatus. I was elated.

I saw that Mama too, was thrilled with the basket. However, she had another notion for its use, a fringe benefit; it became a shill to make off with contraband she smuggled from the dining room. In Mother's nicely appointed room she had a stash of food, milk, silverware, butter, dozens and dozens of packs of Sweeta, crumbling cookies, molding muffins, apples and bananas in various stages of rot, rolls and tiny coffee creamers.

She still could pin me to the wall with that look.

"You didn't tell me you"

There was a time when Mother graciously hosted dinners anticipating her guests' every need, piling their plates, making sure no one left wanting. Now when we visited her and she couldn't get about, instead of scraping it on our plates as she served, she tossed the unwanted food to us and we either caught it or wore it home. Over the months Mother's little quirks became more bothersome. "Eat this banana... I have saved it for you for a week. Take these muffins for a snack tonight. That little bit of mold won't kill you." We took the easy way out and stuffed it in our pockets and purses. Yes, Mother loved that basket.

I frequently visited Mother at Regal Oaks Assisted Living Complex over in Vestavia, usually staying over for a meal. Every time I would eat with her, she would expansively introduce me to the residents at their assigned table. "This is my daughter, Margaret Ann. She is an artist and she paints in France and Mexico and just about anywhere you can imagine! She should be in Paris this very minute but she stayed to be with me. I am perfectly fine but she worries so."

Mother filled her basket and demanded that I fill my purse. I held my ground, "No. I will not." Like the well-bred southern lady, Mother strolled out—dignified and poised—greeting staff and residents alike, introducing me again and again while the fixings from her table spilled over the basket. I was mortified.

"Her basket overfloweth," a nurse teased.

We often discussed this hoarding; I did everything in my power to convince her to stop. Mother always smiled a prissy smile, folded her hands just so in her lap and croaked, "I only did it for you. Please take these rolls and bananas home to Adam; I have saved them for him all week." I was beside myself. Mama was the hustler of the Regal Oaks lovely dining room.

Over the months, I saw Mama's frustration mount as she became incontinent, her weight melted away and she grew wobbly. That walker

she leaned on became a weapon of some consequence. She flailed out against the administrator of Regal Oaks Assisted Living Complex, bopping her with her walker—French basket, tussie-mussie and all. Her day's stash of Sweetea, muffins, fruit, and silverware flew about the living room causing her immediate dismissal. From then on, I spent sleepless nights worrying about the shortage of places that would accept her. Try as I might, I could not convince Mother to stop whacking folks with that whup-ass walker. We bounced around the Assisted Living homes all over Birmingham. I kept Mama on several waiting lists at all times. She was now at Lake Village Independent and they assured me that no matter what, they would take care of her, and she would never have to go into a nursing home.

I shepherded my scattered thoughts and focused on the moment. Mama, now angry, jerked the walker which made a piercing screech, a deliberate act of defiance. I understood the deft voice of the walker railing against the calamities closing in on her. The squawking walker, her last means of self-reliance,



WOMAN OF MYSTERY

35" h by 29" w
Acrylic on Canvas

Esther Levy is a wife, mother, and soon-to-be-empty nester. Her artwork is an expression of her own spirituality and sense of connection with her culture and history. "Women are very soulful," Levy says, "and I always feel that I know some part of the women who appear on my canvases. I hope viewers find them as intriguing."

Contact: shalommom@aol.com.

was a strident, full orchestral passage, composed and played brilliantly to bully, irritate and ruffle her audience.

Holding the door with my foot, we continued The Waltz to the song of the squalling walker. Puuuuul, step-step. My purse slipped off my shoulder and yanked down hard into the crook of my arm, almost unbalancing me. It swung wildly. "Drat." My stylish French twist was undone, my hair fell loose and wild.

Mama was dressed in her pink double-knit, bullet-proof pants suit, as Erma Bombeck called it, a white sweater and red Keds with crinkly white rubber soles. I held her coat. Oblivious to the task at hand, she now lived in a realm where time was not measured exactly in minutes and hours. No more did the whirl of lost chances bother her, or the shouldas and the couldas. She wasn't compelled to answer demands of community--the give and take for harmony's sake. She was both silk stocking and rabble-rouser. Angry, she had told me never come back. In short time, our lives were no longer a three strand cord, strongly knitted together in setbacks and triumphs. Instead, we were now like two yearlings tied at each end of a rope, pulling and bolting against the rope and one another.

Straddling that doorway between the dentist's office and the corridor, I wished I had worn pants instead of the slim skirt. I continued to gently inch the wailing walker into the room. Puuuuull, step-step. My shoulder bag still swung crazily from the crook in my arm.

Mother barely cleared the door. I released it and it shut with a weighty thud. Mother and her walker trapped me in a corner smack up against the heavy door. "Oh, God, help us! The door is in a corner!" Our little twosome choked in rattling aluminum stood huddled, stupefied in the corner of the refined reception room. At any moment, that formidable door could swing into us and bring down the whole shebang.

Mother studied her red shoes. I hurled into an out-of-body experience viewing the two of us broken castaways

from a spot high above the maze of Eastern Medical Plaza Professional Complex. From afar I heard the strains of an almost-familiar tune, something catchy, and something to dance to... *Tip-Toe Through the Tulips*. Back to the corner, I was sweating like a field hand.

"Drat!"—I rummaged around in my head for swear words to express my vexation. I suddenly remembered Daddy. When he was frustrated he would yell, "S___ balls of fire and ice," wherewith we girls would collapse in a fit of laughter at the absurdity and the dynamics of the execution of this curse. Irrational deranged hilarity rushed up, broke loose, swamping me... Oh God, please! Your children are in a real fix! If that door opens it will knock Mama flat out in the floor! I prayed to the Prince of Peace occupied elsewhere.

But love, that's another matter. It starts out a tiny speck and it never stops growing and it gets stronger and lives forever.

Pressed flat against the wall, I hauled the swinging shoulder bag back up on my shoulder, and sucked in my belly to squeeze past Mother and her walker without knocking over our house of cards. Again the hateful shoulder bag slipped and jerked down into the crook of my arm, swinging violently. I let fly that maddening shoulder bag over Mother's head clear out into the center of the room, contents flying... why do we women drag this atrocious, cumbersome baggage around? I gripped the side of the walker and gently inched it out of the corner.

Free, I picked up the aggravating purse and gathered the scattered contents. Chirping, I urged Mother, "Why don't you sit over there in the chair? It is nice and high. Isn't it pretty?" Mother stared at her red shoes and shook her head in disgust, unimpressed.

I bounded across the few short steps to the receptionist's window while pasting on a smile and patting my hair in place. The peacefulness of the softly lit cocoon settled around me. Musak trilled away. The back wall was lined with five plush leather arm chairs. A fine large English chest topped with matching lamps flanked a gold framed Monet rip-off, a sunny field dotted with small figures. Oh, how I wanted to be in that field. "What a lovely day for a stroll. So kind of Mr. Monet to invite us to lunch. Did you know he built a Japanese bridge? Giverny is a heavenly dream this spring. I do hope we dine in the garden."

"May I have your insurance cards?" The poised receptionist voice propelled me back into the moment.

I gave the cards to her.

"Please fill out these forms back and front." She passed over three pages of questions clipped to a writing board.

"Thank you." I turned to the Oxblood chairs expecting to see Mother. But she stood planted in the corner where I left her. She was looking around the room as though she were looking at a train wreck.

I shifted around my purse, clipboard of papers, wallet, and insurance cards and crossed over to Mama. "Come, Mother, let's sit over here, it will be easy for us to get up," aiming the walker toward the chairs.

"I can do it for myself." Mama stamped the jangling walker and slowly turned to the chairs. I stayed at her side coaxing her. All the while Mother emitted audible sucking sounds with each breath.

Reaching the chairs Mama slowly turned the 180 degrees continually jabbing the walker to the floor, a variation on the orchestral movement--deliberate squawks and rattles. She looked behind her and made a couple steps in place, aimed her backside at the chair, paused again, checked out the location of the chair, aimed again, relaxed, and free-fell into the chair. She jerked the walker to her, which gave one last squawk. She draped herself over it spent, her arms hung out over the frilly basket cushioning her head. She breathed heavily.

I began to write.

Mother spoke into the walker her head bobbing, no strength to turn to me.

"You...have...got...to...let...me...go. You... must...say goodbye. You must."

"Mother, what year were you born?"

Deep breath, "Nineteen and fifteen," she shook her head, "That was a long time ago. Everyone has already died. They are all gone but me. I am stuck here. They just left me here." Her breath, a sucking and rasping racket, filled the small elegant room.

In a phony cheery tone I chirped, "Now, Mother, don't carry on so. You know you will always have me and Adam. You aren't alone."

Mother spoke sharply, "Child, you gotta let me go, you're holding me here."

"Mama, Mama, don't you want to stay here with me?"

"No. They are all having a party up there, and I'm the only one not there. There's my mother and father," she drew a ragged breath, "There's Albert, and Lloyd, and Lizzie." I looked over. Mother, childlike, was counting on her spider-like fingers. She drew another labored breath, "...And Jesus."

"And there's Levert. Ohhh, how I love that man. He was the best looking...man in the country. Everybody wanted him." Mother smiled her wide smile that now showed jagged, broken front teeth, one broken off at the gum. Her hollowed out eyes twinkled, "He always loved just me." 'Just me' was emphasized with her bony index finger twice jabbing her heart. "You're holdin' me here, Girl. Let me go. I want out of this old body. This pain is terrible." After a pause she said, "You have to say goodbye, and now."

Tears streaked, I whimpered.

"These legs dangling from this walker used to dance and run up the steps and take me wherever I wanted to go. I didn't have to ask anybody to take me anywhere...Did I ever tell you I had the pick of Green County?"

"Yes Sweetie, everybody says so. Let's see what the dentist says. Remember you fell twice and broke them? You had beautiful teeth."

"All mine too. Parts of this old body are falling off me like old pieces of junk jewelry." Mama took a long pause, her whole body throbbing like one big heart, "Honey, it's way past time for me to go, and you keep trying to patch me up. You can't let go until you say goodbye."

I scrounged in the bottom of the voluminous purse, found a crumpled tissue and dried my tears. I walked the few steps back to the receptionist returning the mound of papers.

"Margaret Ann! I've got to pee right now."

Dread rising, I turned back to the receptionist. "Where is your bathroom?"

"Can she wait? The assistant is coming soon to take her back to the doctor's office."

"No, she isn't able to wait."

"Well, then, you go out through this front door to the left and down the hall, turn at the first hallway. Go about half way down that hall toward the crosswalk and the women's rest room is on the left."

My knees buckled. There's no way on God's green earth we can get that far. "Can't you help us out here? Look at her! It takes her five minutes just to stand up! There will be s___ all over this office!" I was shaking. A Cheerful Print Smock stepped smartly from the back hall into

PATCHWORK SERIES #2

Cone 9 Glazes & Oxides
30" h x 10"w x 10" d

Alan Burch is a ceramic artist living in Florence, Alabama. His work focuses wheel-thrown traditional forms with a modern approach to surface decoration and construction. Alan earned a BFA from University of North Alabama in ceramics, and though he has lived most of his life in Texas he considers himself an Alabamian because of the formative years spent here. Contact: abnxs@bellsouth.net



the waiting room and announced, “Claudia Moody, please come with me.”

Mother piped up again, “I have to pee right now,” frantically trying to get up from the Oxblood. Cheery Print Smock and I scurried over to help the struggling old woman.

“I have got to pee right now,” she mumbled, her old hands quivering. We lifted her up, placed her at her walker and led her toward the hall, dogged by farts like young hound pups at our heels. Hurried motions but hardly any progress, my crippled eighty-seven-year-old-mother drove the screeching walker across the reception room as thoughtfully as if it were an eighteen-wheeler. Our wad, little by little, made slow haste toward the bathroom, leaving behind a putrefying odor. An odor mocking fools convinced they will never grow old. Mockery hung there in that elegant waiting room like a corpse from a noose.

The receptionist fanned the air around her face with copier paper.

“There’s a bathroom right here on the left.” Cheerful Print Smock pushed the unwieldy door for us. Our little parade dragged into the small white bathroom. The door thumped closed. I helped Mother manage the pink pants, Depends, turned her around, moved the walker out of the way, and finally held her over the high, ‘for the disabled’ commode. My hair was flying in all directions, mirroring my battered soul. With a rumble of bowel movement long before she could get onto the commode, Mother plunked down.

“I hated to say I had to doo-doo,” she confessed.

“I could tell by your face you were in a heap of trouble. We made it just in time. God is merciful.” I leaned back against the sink to steady my tense body and pounding heart.

Loud blasts again, thundered, bounced around the cold sterile tiles. Mama shook her head in dismay. “Find some spray freshener.”

I retched, “Mama, you’ve been into milk again,” I rummaged under the sink and found Lysol Spray and sprayed the small room heavily. She tried to reach the handle to flush. With a quick movement I executed the flush hopeful for relief. I cleaned the floor with wads of paper towels.

Mother announced, “I think I am finished.” She continued sitting and talking.

“You paint such pretty pictures. You should be doing that instead of always tryin’ to stick this old woman’s body back together.”

“I swann, Mama.” I started to cry again.

“Honey, I know you will miss me. You will hurt bad and cry. It will seem a very long, long, time for you. But for me it will be a blink of my eyes and you will be there with me-forever.” Mama brightened up with a snaggle-toothed smile that twisted my gut.

After a spell of silence Mama said, “Now, dry your tears. Your makeup is running. You don’t want the doctor to see you like this.” She paused, drawing in shallow labored breaths.

“Powder your nose. You have been a good daughter.” More ragged breaths.

I leaned back on the sink. The small white room seemed suspended somewhere between heaven and earth. There was no past or future, only the now. It felt like holy ground. I prayed. I don’t know what I said but with mama’s voice flowing over me and around the white room, I remembered myself that morning, tricking her into coming to the dentist because I couldn’t stand to see what had become of her. It was all about me. I dragged her and that walker through the cold. I saw myself trying to turn her back into someone I used to know.

“...And I love you so much, but you are holdin’ me here. You are holdin’ me back, I want to go, now. But you must say goodbye.”

There was a long pause. “I am so mad at God.” Mama dragged a ragged deep breath.

I sighed from my perch on the sink, “I am mad at God too. I want it to be like it used to be.”

“Now, Girl, you do go on so.” Her irregular breaths became more stable. “What I want now more than anything in this world is for you to let me go. Say goodbye. Just say it, girl. Say goodbye. Let me get on with my own business.” Her breaths were slow and hoarse.

“You go home and paint. And, don’t you forget...,” she clutched her chest and took a deep, slow breath, “...don’t forget about your music. Making music is in our bones—has always been.” Every breath seemed planned.

I thought Mother was daydreaming somewhere deep in her memories. I relaxed, letting Mother ruminate.

I was startled when she broke the quiet. “I remember Lizzie playing the piano and singing at the top of her lungs. We would gather around a piano and sing way into the night... All the parts...four part harmony, Lloyd and Albert on bass, the rest found what we felt like singing. Ha! We had so much fun in those days.” She noisily sucked two deep breaths.

I caught myself counting those breaths, one...two....

“I wrote some pretty good gospel myself. Stop all this fussin’ over me, tryin’ to patch me up. This body wasn’t made to last forever!”

After another long pause Mama went on, “You have been thinking that I am a crazy old fool. No.”

Suck, one...two...pause, three.... “No one is a fool who gives up a broken down old body. Do you understand?” I felt her eyes keenly watching me.

“Not really.”

Mother shifted on the commode, stretching up, dragging on precious oxygen higher up, “I cannot keep, and you cannot keep this old body; it is almost useless to me, it’s wasting away.” But love, that’s another matter. It starts out a tiny speck and it never stops growing and it gets stronger and lives forever. I see your love, and I feel it.” Long pause, then several ragged breaths, “You and I have love that we can never lose; ever. Same as I still love your father, and he loves me, that love didn’t go away just because he died; it just keeps on growing stronger.”

"Margaret Ann, you are a stubborn woman just like me. You have been running me from clinic to clinic, dragging me and this stupid walker from doctor to doctor, tryin' to fix me."

"I'm sorry I dragged you out in this cold. James Spann said it might snow, you know."

"Do you know what I really want?"

I shook my head; giving in to the dying of hope.

Mama said, "I really want to drive over the mountain and watch a sunset, and I want some French fries."

"You are a crazy old woman." I smiled into the old skeletal face, making peace with it, for once not searching for the face of the Mother who long ago rocked me and sang those silly songs. I didn't see the Mother who snuggled me close saying, "Gimme sugar." I remembered her warm sweet breath on my skin, her Estee' Lauder only a memory. A stone in my heart lightened, became fleshy.

I paused for a moment and then rocked forward away from the sink and said, "What you say we break out of this joint?"

Mama cackled, twisting in delight on the commode. "Only if we can get French fries."

I turned to the mirror, patched up my face and pinned up my hair. I turned to Mother sitting helpless on the high, throne-like commode. "You could use a bit of foundation yourself. You look awful."

She said, "You say I have to get new teeth. But I think that your foundation will do the trick." I sponged foundation lightly over the fragile skin and the bruises. I dug around in the purse and came out with a blusher.

"Not so much of that. Remember, I am a natural beauty. Could do with a little lipstick," a long difficult breath, "pink, not that red you're wearing, you hussy." We gussied up.

I impulsively snatched the extra roll of toilet paper and dropped it in Mother's French basket. She stared at me like I had just shot a dog, then seeing the twinkle in my eyes; mama grabbed the second roll of toilet tissue and tucked it in my shoulder bag. I tucked the soap bottle in Mother's frilly basket. As an afterthought, I tucked in the Lysol spray too. "We will definitely need this."

"I am ashamed of you, Margaret Ann. You have never taken anything in your whole life." Mama was laughing merrily. "Is there anything left?"

"Nope. That's all she wrote. We cleaned them out big time!"

We worked together hurriedly getting her dressed and locked on to the walker.

I pushed the heavy door open and peeked out, seeing no one.

I said over my shoulder to Mother, "It's all clear. You will have to shake a leg if we're going to get out of here in one piece." Mama snickered as I flung wide the two-ton door. We two made a clattering slow motion get-away, a snail's pace get away, leaving a long lazy unwinding trail of toilet paper unrolling from my infernal purse as we made our way out to the parking lot.

"You promised French fries."

"Says who!"

LORD OF THE TRENCH

36" h x 48" w, oil on canvas, 2004

Tom Wegrzynowski is currently a graduate student at the University of Alabama. A native of South Carolina, Tom has been greatly influenced by the history of the region and uses historical themes of culture, mythology, and identity in his work. He is also a writer, and is interested in the many facets of narrative that exist in both painting and writing.



The glass doors to the parking lot flung open and Mother exclaimed, "It's snowing!" I bundled her in her coat and we started across to my Jeep. I stopped and took the roll of toilet paper from Mother's full basket and chunked it as high as I could. She laughed in delight as the paper swirled around the parking lot. A heaven-sent breeze picked up that trail of toilet paper, and it encircled us. She laughed a toothless laugh and I felt my face crack into a grin. Still laughing she said again, "Say goodbye, Margaret Ann."

"Goodbye, Mama."

.....
Margaret Spruill is a senior at University of Montevallo majoring in Fine Arts. She studied creative writing with Sena Jeter Naslund and Carolynne Scott. She is writing a novel about the "old southwestern frontier," now the Gulf States. She lives in Birmingham with her husband, David, a physician.
.....

TIME

By Stephanie Wheeler

Today I've been filled
with pepper and honey and hoping
to grow old with you.

I will paint my cheeks
pink as wrinkled tulips,
and you will wear suspenders
and a sunken smile.
We will always walk arm in arm.

It will be strange when sex disintegrates,
and with it, boundaries, embarrassments.
When the fears and fascinations,
the struggles and surrenders of adult love
mean nothing to us anymore,

and we are pulled together because
we breathe each other's skin
so deeply
our nerves have worn off,
smoother than unbroken eggs.

.....
Stephanie Wheeler lives in Rhode Island, and in spite of her recent marriage has decided to keep her pen name. This is her second appearance in Birmingham Arts Journal.
.....

ICE BIKE EVENING

By Tim Lennox

I'd be so cold
from forcing bike
to beat the wind,
my hands would sprout
old man cracks.

*

Our door
would argue with
my key,
keeping me from you.

*

After I'd touched you
once
with frozen fingers,
you'd fill me in
on what I'd missed
in your life.

*

That's what
ice bike evenings
meant to me.

.....
Tim Lennox anchors the news program For the Record, broadcast statewide each weekday night from Alabama Public Television in Montgomery. "Ice Bike Evening" originally appeared in one of three poetry chapbooks he published, starting in the mid 70's.
.....

**I've been directed a poem to write,
And if I did 'twould be a sight;
The fact, as you can plainly see,
Is poets aren't made of stuff like me."**

**--Eleanor O'Hara, Age 13
(1930 at Avondale School
in Birmingham, Alabama)**

YOU'D NEVER GUESS

I HAD MS

By Ginger K. Nelson

People diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) have different symptoms, different problems, different severity issues, but we all know one thing: if it's broke, fix it. And hurry, please.

We've all heard:

"Wait until there is a cure."

"Wait until there is a medication that can reverse the disease."

"Wait until all those trials, successful or un, are past, the FDA approves the medication and then, if you aren't dead, you'll have a nice life."

Actually, my general practitioner only recommended the first "wait," but I couldn't. Better take a drug that was legal and take my chances, I said.

There are some who recommend marijuana, but I hate smoking. I hate the thought of dependence on a substance like "that," and I hate the thought that I might go around snatching pots of weed from everywhere, hoping I wouldn't have to take a nap while I figured out what to do with them.

Some recommended bee stings. Pardon me while I laugh. Let an assortment of hungry bees have at you and then return to your assistive devices, bladder control pads and naps. No, thank you.

It seems like only 65 years ago that my mother was easing me into a crib with my favorite shredded blanket and saying, "Sleep tight." Now I want to take that blanket and strangle anyone who stands in the barreling path I take each afternoon to my king size. I'm tired, my body cries. I'm tired, my mind cries. Just think of all the things I could be doing. But I need those hours of sleep; if I don't get them I am cranky.

If only salesmen wouldn't call in the afternoons. If only Jehovah's Witnesses wouldn't ring my doorbell. If only I could sleep through the din, I wouldn't get up ready to slice and dice. Not meat and veggies for supper. People who smile and say, "I wish I could take a nap, too."

I have friends with MS. Our support group meets once a month to moan in various harmonies. Our meetings probably sound like an out-of-tune choir. Actually, we compare symptoms, offer suggestions and laugh. Why not? What's the alternative? And who wants it?

Temperature is a big concern. Some like it warm. Jan sits on her heating pad anywhere she goes; that includes plugging into an outlet in her car. Anna drives to work with a bag of frozen peas on her neck during the summer. Sharon said that the hot and cold spasms she feels are like living with a five-year hot flash.

Heat is usually our enemy though. Too much of it wilts us like week-old lettuce. The Jacuzzi filled with hot water, jets pounding out tension in our spastic muscles might feel good on

a cold night, but it's the aftermath we dread. If only we could automatically land in our beds with those noodle-like muscles.

"Will you join the MS walk?" That's an oxymoron. Some people actually can walk a few steps, though with the aid of a cane, walker or wheelchair. Those who don't need those assists, limp and keep asking, "How much farther is it?" right out of the starting gate.

We all, including our neurologists, agree on the need to exercise. Have they been noticing that our limp increases with each six-month visit? We can swim, though. In water, you can use your muscles to do things they refuse to do on land. There are two kinds of pools in our city: warm and cold. For me, it's the warm one in winter, the cooler one in summer. Today we told a new member which was which.

When you have ocular problems like neuritis (another common MS "thing") you long for the day glasses actually helped you see that handsome guy or good-looking gal across the hall not five feet away.

Another common problem area is the excretory system. My bladder has eyes, two of them. One sees the sign "Women" and says, "here we are, it's o.k. now," and the other stays closed so it doesn't see the disaster that lies ahead. Whoever designed Depends has my undying thanks.

Another favorite saying that I don't like to hear is, "But you look so well." Sitting on a velvet cushion in front of a gas log while not seeing the dropped stitches in your new afghan probably does make a nice setting for a portrait. Then the moment you speak in cluttered, hardly recognizable sounds, you hear, "Pardon me?"

I often mentally say that to myself when I can't find the right word (devastating to a writer) or struggle to remember what I started to say.

"Ha. Ha. That's just age."

"But I'm only 24!" says the young person next to me.

Older people can recall fabrics and textures and shades from their childhood but need notes to tell them when to take their pills or where they put the keys to the car. I can identify. There's a woman in our support group who e-mails reminders to herself from work to home computer. Sticky notes have revered places in all our lives.

The most difficult thing about having MS is not that you're going to die from it, but that you're going to live your life on the downhill slope. What's ahead, we ask our neurologist on each visit. He never knows, of course, but at least we tried.

The best thing about having MS is, well, I don't know, but I'll think of something.

.....
Ginger K. Nelson wanted to be a writer since she was in fourth grade. She has published short stories, articles, poetry, and three books. Her latest in-the-works are a romance and a ghost novel. She developed Multiple Sclerosis in 1993.
.....

THE CHRISTMAS EVE TIME-TRAVELER

By Jim Reed

HE SCURRIED INTO THE BOOK LOFT, BARELY ESCAPING the 1940's time-machine he had invented to transport himself to this specific spot.

He wore a long gray overcoat and a gray suit and a gray vest and a gray-striped tie and atop all this was a Bogart-gray hat just like my father used to wear in the 1940's. Only the difference between this gray hat and the kind of gray hats we see in modern movies is striking. This gray hat worn by this time-traveler exactly matched his body, his head size, his gait. It had been lovingly selected in a department store many years ago, with the help of a salesclerk whose job it was to make sure no man purchased a hat that did not look exactly right for him. The size had to be right. The tilt had to be right. The shade had to be right. The social class to which the man belonged had to match the hat's social class and price. Thus, this hat looked right for this man and this man only.

The slender, hunched time-traveler came in out of the Christmas Eve cold and spoke hesitatingly and clearly and politely, the way your family taught you to speak at the nightly dinner table back in those days before television and video and computer games sucked the family-dinner-conversation tradition right out of several generations of families.

The time-traveler had heard that I might actually know who Willie and Joe were--you know, Willie and Joe--the G.I.'s who were featured weekly in single-panel cartoons by Bill Mauldin, the guys who gave us folks back home during World War Two some idea of what it was like to be in a muddy foxhole with a green second lieutenant in charge of your very life, the guys who showed us how to laugh in the very worst of circumstances.

He was right, of course--I did know who Willie and Joe were, and I always carry copies of their book in the shop. UP FRONT by Bill Mauldin was the first adult cartoon book I'd ever seen when my uncles brought copies of it back home from the war. Even as a four-year-old I enjoyed seeing the cartoons, and later on, when I could read the accompanying words, I wasn't at all surprised--since Mauldin had drawn characters and situations so clearly that you hardly needed to read the captions to know what was going on.

The time-traveler was excited and grateful, and he pulled out an old leather wallet with a large rubber band around it, extracted \$20 from it, carefully replaced the band, and asked me to place the book inside a snapped satchel that hung from his cane.

I never saw more than one arm darting from inside his overcoat, and I suspect that he had but one.

The Christmas Eve time-traveler tipped his hat and disappeared onto the gray street that matched his gray outfit, got into his time machine, and went back to those days when he knew why he was fighting and who he was fighting, when he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that his enemy was worthy of defeat.

I worried about this frail specter for a while, since the streets of Birmingham are not always friendly toward gossamer figures with canes bearing the post-war years upon their hunched backs.

But I like to think that the time-traveler is sitting safely in a nice old armchair near a warm fire this chilly Christmas Eve, reading about Willie and Joe and remembering a few chuckles he and his buddies shared so many years ago.

.....
Jim Reed is editor of the Birmingham Arts Journal and author of hundreds of tales about being and doing in Alabama.
www.jimreedbooks.com
.....



SANTA

15" w x 12" h
Charcoal

Gwen Gorby Carder was awarded Best in Show in the 2005 ENERGEN Show, for her portrait of Orzelle Spencer who is also the model for Santa. She, her husband, Mark Carder, and son, Gorby, live in Vandiver, Alabama. Gwen is represented by the Loretta Goodwin Gallery in Birmingham, www.lorettagoodwingallery.com.

**BIRMINGHAM ARTS
JOURNAL**

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