

# BIRMINGHAM ARTS JOURNAL

Volume 2 ~ Issue 3



Kate Asson

Rebecca K. Brooks

Myra A. Crawford

Jill Davis

Tomas Gondi

Amy Griffin

Stan Holifield

Amorak Huey

Elizabeth G. Ivy

Evelyn Jackson

Joey Kennedy

Geoff Langdon

Mary Susan Lewis

Reilly Maginn

Eileen Malone

Branko Medenica

Charles T. Murphy

Debbie Parvin

Alana Price

Olen L. Pruitt

Jim Reed

Bonnie Roberts

Betty Spence

Ivan Sims

T.K. Thorne

Sue Walker

Joseph Whitten

Shea Wilson

Shane Young

A Birmingham Art Association Publication

# BIRMINGHAM ARTS JOURNAL

Front Cover Art: **The World is a Big Picture**, Photograph, 12" x 9"  
 Ivan Sims is a professional photographer based in Birmingham, Alabama.  
[ivan@ivansims.com](mailto:ivan@ivansims.com)

Back Cover Art: "**Leprechaun Lane**", Polychrome Steel, 11' X 4' X 4', Located at the intersection of 24th Street and 6th Avenue South, Birmingham.  
 Branko Medenica says, "The essence of my work evolves from an exploration of both the physical and psychological movement in man in interaction with the spectrum of influences inherent in nature." Branko lives in Birmingham, Alabama.  
<http://brankoart.com>. Photo by David Murray.

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## AGELESS

By Elizabeth G. Ivy

One morning I woke up and found that my eyebrows were missing. Not completely, I had a few dark hairs near the bridge of my nose, but all the rest were white. After breakfast, I walked across the street to consult my friend Lacey, a former beautician, now about seventy-five.

"Take this eyebrow pencil and make little strokes. Then blend them in. Practice."

I stared into Lacey's bathroom mirror, restoring my eyebrows with tiny strokes.

"Not bad," said Lacey, "but your eyebrows should be the same size and shape."

"They aren't in real life."

"Take my word for it. This is not real life. You are old. Your eyebrows have to match. And always use a brown pencil. It looks more natural."

A few days later I looked in my sister's powerful magnifying mirror and saw hundreds of tiny lines from my temples, around my cheeks, and to my jaw. I rushed to Lacey.

"How long have they been there?" I asked, showing her the lines.

"Probably for several years. You just haven't noticed." She sighed. "Use Maybelline Natural Defense make-up cream. Put a little on your pinkie and work it in slowly with long strokes. Don't get it on too thick. Now try some of mine."

I did as Lacey watched.

"Pretty good," she said. "You're getting there."

I didn't know exactly where I was getting, but I was on my way. After two hours in the sun and wind weeding in my garden, however, my eyebrows were white again, my nose was shiny, every wrinkle showed. Lacey shrugged when I complained.

"You have to fix up your face a couple of times a day. Come on, you don't have that much to do. Try a little powder under the foundation cream."

I groaned. I wanted sixteen hours of a flawless face.

On a visit to my doctor for a check-up, I asked about Botox, about plastic surgery, about sandpapering my skin. The doctor, half my age, snorted.

"Botox is expensive and will give you a stiff face. And it's temporary. Plastic surgeons can't guarantee anything. You might look worse, and sandpapering will cost you an arm and a leg." He frowned. "Vanity, vanity.

At your age you shouldn't care so much about your looks."

"At my age!" I cried. "I'm elderly, but I'm not dead."

"Humph," he said.

"Women always care about what they look like," I scolded. "Look at all the golden and red haired eighty year old patients you have. And who knows? I may get myself a beau." I hesitated. "Have you any single seventy or seventy-five-year-old men who are looking for companionship, really close if possible?"

The doctor rubbed his chin. "Yeah. Maybe. I can think of a couple," but he did not offer any names or addresses.

Then a grandchild asked me why my teeth were that funny gray color. The next morning I was at the dentist's having an impression made for a retainer to hold a whitening paste. I was to wear the retainer every night. And behold, in two weeks my teeth were an acceptable

white. But time is relentless. One evening while getting ready for a book club dinner, I noticed that my eyelashes had all but disappeared under the sagging skin of my eyelids. A friend had had surgery when her eyelids drooped half way down her

eyes, but Medicare would not pay for the same cosmetic operation for me.

"How about fake eyelashes?" suggested the ever patient listener, but I don't have the nerve to wear them.

"How about getting a body perm for that fly away hair? That's what you could really use." Lacey was serious. But I could not bear the thought of spending three hours in a beauty shop.

"O.K.," said Lacey. "Have it your way. But at least zip up your fly and tuck in your shirt."

One morning last week I walked into Macy's to buy a bathing suit on sale. Although I have boney knees and thin arms, I have given my body a B minus for years, and recently, as I study other women in my swimming pool, I have promoted myself to a B plus. As I strolled through the misses' department, my face made up, my heart content, I noticed an old woman walking towards me. She was stooped, her hair needed combing, and her shoulder bag strap was twisted.

"Old woman," I thought, and then, horrified, realized that looking in a mirror, I was walking toward myself.

.....  
*Elizabeth Ivy writes in Fairhope, Alabama.*  
 .....

**"At my age!" I cried.  
 "I'm elderly, but I'm  
 not dead."**

## LINK

By Eileen Malone

He was young and sky-blue with a necklace  
of miniature black baroque pearls  
would fly to my shoulder, nip my earrings  
act the boy, bathe in my cupped hands  
under the running cold-water faucet, splash,  
squawk outrageously while she watched  
she of the stone-wart on her deformed beak  
old yellow and chartreuse, always on her perch  
primly set on a seriously important mission

he died folding in as I held him to my heart  
and not much later, she died, slowly,  
one wing spread on the bottom of the cage  
angrily pecking my hand to the last

neither damaged me with expectations  
nor burdened me with personal light or darkness  
from behind their bars,  
they had set me free  
to cry copiously at their death and link  
all things I had always thought of as opposite

we buried her beside him, in the backyard  
under the beech tree dripping with nests  
where brown-grey birds teach their fat babies  
how to fly and hop and stir up fallen leafy bits

and I wonder how we will all finish up  
not knowing until the moment after it has happened  
I wonder, and in their auras shadowed on the graves  
I can sometimes see Fra Angelico angels  
a whole, brilliant, flapping rapture of them.

.....  
*Eileen Malone is the author of The Complete Guide to Writers' Groups, Conferences and Workshops and Founder/Director of the Soul-Making Literary Competition. She has taught with the California Poets in the Schools and for California Community Colleges. Her poems have been published and anthologized in over 300 journals and magazines. She lives in Colma, California, where San Francisco buries their dead.*  
.....

## MAMU'S PASSING

By Amy Griffin

7:40 pm  
no pulse  
heart beat: 160 beats per minute  
101 degree fever.  
Seven hours and fifty three minutes after bile+fluid  
rushed her system and excreted orally.  
waves of uncontrollable sobs echo.  
tissue boxes depleted..disposed..  
voices clammering the hardwood floors.  
she, stubborn ,too much to let go.  
8:11pm  
heart beat: 80 beats/minute  
breath weakens.  
eyes half open, then closed.  
lips moist. hands and arms, warm where we lay on her.  
jaw involuntarily moves up. close. down.  
breathing small. no sound  
8:28 pm  
eyes open ..one last glance  
mouth grimaces two smiles..edges of mouth turn white...  
breathing stops.  
she swallows.  
as timothy ryan says.."mamu went nite nite"  
(my nephew)  
she is dancing with papa in heaven.

.....  
*Amy is the Arts Education Program Coordinator at Space One Eleven. Her paintings, glass, and mixed media artwork is exhibited throughout the U.S. Amy also manages the Making Glass Gallery, in Chicago, Illinois, and teaches all levels of glass blowing and casting.*  
.....

**“Treat the world well...It was not given to you by your parents...It was lent to you by your children.”**

**--Kenyan proverb**

## FAITH

Photography, 10" x 8"  
Shea Wilson

*Shea Wilson is a student at Shelby County High School in Columbiana, Alabama. She was recently awarded 1st Prize in Photography at the Birmingham Art Association Annual High School Artists Exhibition. Her teacher is BAA member Laura Alvord.*



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## FINDING FAITH

By Joey Kennedy

I never thought I'd be a Sunday school teacher, but today one of the great joys in my life is teaching the youth at Southside Baptist Church in Birmingham. I teach middle-schoolers and high-schoolers, and we discuss all manner of subjects: The parables of Jesus, teen suicide, dealing with doubt, tolerance, the nature of hell.

I don't know what these young people take away from the classes I teach, but one thing I emphasize to them is that they must find their own faith. I can't give them mine. Neither can the pastor, nor their parents, nor their friends. They must forge their own relationship with God. I'll help them any way I can, but the faith journey is theirs.

I tell them this because, at their age, I was not allowed to have or develop or discover my own faith. Faith was hurled at me by a yelling preacher who

demanded that I take it, that I have it, and that I'd better not ask too many questions about it, or I was going to Hell. Sunday school back then was orderly and quiet, and we were fed verse after verse, with little context or grace, or we were pressed to memorize the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes, and we'd better be able to recite them on demand.

God was no fun, and he wasn't supposed to be. But I knew that already.

\*\*\*\*\*

I was 4 years old the first time I met God. My grandparents on my father's side attended a one-room Church of Christ in a small town in southeast Texas. The first time I went to church with them was the last time. Something happened that terrified me, even as I sat right next to my grandmother in a pew a few rows from the front. In that tiny church, none of the pews was very far away from the front.

In Church of Christ theology, when someone makes a decision for Christ, they're taken right then and

baptized. I know that now, but as a 4-year-old, I didn't have a clue. I was just enjoying myself, listening to the singing – no piano, just singing – pretending to follow along in a hymnal I couldn't read. I really liked getting down on one knee to pray, like the grown men around me.

After the sermon, a man wearing a dark suit walked to the front. He said a few words to one of the other men there, then was taken immediately to the back of the pulpit where, as I know now, the baptistery was situated.

The man in the dark suit was walked down the stairs into a hole, all of him disappearing except for his head.

I looked up at my grandmother, my eyes wide. "What are they doing to him?" I asked in a normal voice. She shushed me with a finger to her lips, then leaned down and whispered into my ear: "He's going to go to Heaven now."

I choked back a whimper and looked forward quickly, eyes still wide. Another man grabbed the dark-suited man's head, said something to him, and pushed him down, a splash clearly audible. Then the man stood up, his suit dripping water, his hair slick and drenched. He was escorted by two men quickly away, through a door behind the baptistery, and the congregation started singing a hymn.

Not me. I was scared and on the verge of shrieking. My grandmother noticed my unease and began gently patting the back of my head. But I kept thinking about what my grandmother had told me only a moment earlier: "He's going to go to Heaven now."

Up to that time in my life, "going to Heaven" meant only one thing. When one of our pets died, Mom would tell us it had "gone to Heaven." When my great-grandmother passed away, Mom said she was "in Heaven." My turtle Herbie had gone to Heaven, as had one of our puppies, right after Dad ran over it with his truck.

In my mind, I had just witnessed these people kill a man and send him to heaven, and I was absolutely terrified. Of course, I soon found out that the dark-suited man wasn't murdered by my grandparents and their friends, after all. Indeed, he was saved.

But after that, I was awfully suspicious of church.

\*\*\*\*\*

I remained that way, too, through my childhood and teen years, and well into my adult life; really, until I found my own faith, about 15 years ago. Yeah, sometimes it takes a long time. Sometimes it doesn't.

But I know this: You can't yell faith into someone; you can't order someone to have it. They have to find it for themselves. I'm a journalist, and I have what I believe is a healthy skepticism about many things. Maybe most things.

I spent much of my life being skeptical about God. Part of the reason was that terrifying baptism of the dark-suited man. Part of the reason was being yelled at and

damned by a preacher who eventually had to leave our church after he was shot in the leg by the husband of the woman with whom he was having an affair.

But none of that has anything to do with God. Too often, church doesn't have anything to do with God. I think the young people they let me teach at Southside Baptist Church know as much.

Still, my faith is mine. Only mine.

Those teens at Southside have to deal with their doubts. They have to ask a lot of questions. They must seek, and they must see. For themselves.

Just as I did, they must find their own faith. I hope and I pray that in some way I am helping them -- not scaring them away.

.....  
*Joey Kennedy, a Pulitzer Prize winner, is an editorial writer and columnist for The Birmingham News. Kennedy also teaches writing at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.*  
 .....

## BLACKBERRY PICKING 101

By Betty Spence

On the campus of a southern university  
 a sudden start of summer rain  
 pushes me past a hillside in berry.  
 As if turning from green to red,  
 red to purple –black just like that...  
 and that just for me, blackberries  
 holler out: "Wade in and start picking."

Berrying is a matter of touch and take,  
 you know. At the slightest fingering  
 black satin berries sweetly let go.  
 With all the feelings of the body spreading  
 like wild fire to finger's tipmost ends,  
 without being taught, fingers know  
 when fruits of the earth are ripe.

Like Stafford wincing his way wildly  
 from impulse to impulse, passing himself  
 back and forth through the bramble-cure,  
 I follow the trailings-up; the climbings-down  
 of the Rubus, the Trivalis,  
 and find momentary stays purpling  
 on the ground beneath my feet.

.....  
*Betty Spence was named Poet of the Year by Alabama State Poetry Society in 1998. She is president of the Alabama Association of the National League of American Pen Women. Betty lives in Mobile, Alabama, with her husband of 52 years, Pete, and their grown son Chuck.*  
 .....

## THE PAPER PROMISE

An Excerpt from the novel-in-progress, *Raggedy Angel*  
By Jill Davis

If you have lost a child, a time will come when you need help. Choose a therapist who has weathered something big. Find an angel who has earned his wings. Now is no time for unseasoned hatchling therapists.

The first phone call is the hardest. You have already called out to God and not heard back. What if you call the therapist and he does not call back? But, he does call back. After all, he's also a businessman. Once you get to the office, you tell him what you think you need to talk about. Then you take a psychological test. Do not check yes in any of the boxes that ask if you hear voices. These questions do not refer to starting in the night because you think you hear your dead child calling.

The test will come back and the therapist will tell you that you are essentially normal but tense. No schizophrenia. You experience a credibility let down. You know you are worse than you appear, or you wouldn't be here. He will tell you that you have masked depression, that you are anxious and that people become anxious because they need to be in control. This rings true because your child would not be dead if you were actually in control. He tells you that he doesn't see any anger. Do not slug him at this point. You have figured out that anger will not bring your child back. You'll have plenty of time to educate him about this later.

As you leave, be sure to ask for an appointment card.

You know that you will absolutely not forget your appointment, but you will learn to transfer clutching your child's teddy bear at night to holding that card. The teddy bear has gotten lost in the bed too many times and you do not have the energy to panic anymore. You put the bear on a shelf next to your child's picture. The card is a paper promise that someone who you just met will listen to you again and again. Put the card on the bedside table propped up on the lamp, to remind you that it is okay not to be okay right now.

The next session comes and the therapist asks what you did after your child died. You ask him to rephrase the question as if it was unusually complicated. You have drawn a blank. While he lay waiting to be buried, you lay in bed wondering why you couldn't sleep on the couch in the viewing room with him. After his funeral you put the spectators out of your house by telling them you were going camping. You came back at 2:00 AM to be more alone than you have ever been. You lost 20 pounds because for a month you only ate peanut butter graham crackers, Pepsi, and Cocoa Puffs, your child's last and favorite meal. What you did after your child died was wake up without him each and every time you woke up.

.....  
*This is an excerpt from The Paper Promise, which won a Tennessee Mountain Writer's Inspirational Award. Jill Davis, Auburn, Alabama, serves on the board of the Alabama Writers' Conclave and is a motivational columnist for Newswords. She suffers from chronic exuberance. www.jillangeldavis.com*  
.....

## KELLIE'S MOMENT

Watercolor, 30" x 20"  
Olen L. Pruitt

*An engineer by education, but always with a personal passion for art, Olen is a self-taught artist. Approximately two years ago, Olen decided to paint seriously. Most of his paintings are very detailed and require 200-300 plus hours to complete.*  
[opruitt2000@yahoo.com](mailto:opruitt2000@yahoo.com).



## SUBCUTANEOUS

By Kate Asson

We're conditioned to respect this-  
left to ourselves in the examination room.  
A kleptomaniac's dream:  
cabinets laden with medical trinkets and voodoo;  
illustrations of skinless faces, spaghetti-like,  
read and taunt;  
tiny jars of eight-syllable words ending in *-ic* or  
*-ide*.

A plastic card my cross and shield,  
I pay her hand over fist for my one insecurity:  
the mediocrity that is my beauty.  
Destined a butter-face,  
I went night-blind for this in high school.  
She drops the word Accutane like a solution  
to this hereditary taint and I rail.  
Shudder and rail. Not again.  
But how appropriate, I think,  
cut out the eyes to spite the face.

I mask myself with yellow-based foundation,  
tan shadow, black liner.  
Buy a cup of coffee before work.  
Outside I am shanghaied by a bum  
and there is always a specific amount.  
This time seventy cents,  
two quarters  
two dimes.  
Even in a cashless society there are  
plenty begging for the scraps.

Most times I offer a ride to the nearest shelter,  
but am always denied.  
We all crave instant gratification.  
Today I turn my expensive, imperfect face away,  
blind to the possible fallen god or angel  
panhandling among us.  
Ask the doctor, I say,  
I'm running late.

.....  
*Katheryn E. Asson (Kate) was raised in Huntsville, Alabama, by analytical and career-minded parents transplanted from California. Kate is currently living in Brooklyn, New York, where she is working toward a Masters in Art History at Pratt Institute. The author of two books of poetry, Parody the Parody and Much Calmer Now, Kate is currently in the process of compiling a book of dark and comical prose.*  
.....

## TWISTER

By Debbie Parvin

The train rumbled.

Mama's long and trembling arms  
pulled me deep in Daddy's closet,  
closed the door,  
and crushed me to her bosoms quivering  
to the drums inside her chest.

"Sing!" she cried.  
And sing we did –  
songs of Sunday School and Jesus  
as the train drew nearer  
nearer  
until the rhythm quaked the floor,  
creaked the rafters,  
resurrecting Daddy's shirts to dance.

It passed and left us  
hoarse and sweating,  
pressed between wool suits  
and heavy silence.

I've never seen the funnel winds of twisters.

I only know  
the smell of Daddy's leather shoes in darkness  
and "Jesus Loves Me"  
wailing like a train.

.....  
*Debbie W Parvin is a poet and freelance writer who currently resides in the mountains of Galax, Virginia. Her book When Stones Speak won Alabama State Poetry Society's Book of the Year for 2001. In 2004 Debbie was selected ASPS's Poet of the Year.*  
.....

**"The dead stay where we leave them. I suppose that is the real good in death, that they do stay; that it makes them immortal for us. Living they were mortal. But now they can never spoil themselves or be spoilt by change again."**

--H. G. Wells



## What Color Am I? ... Doesn't Matter

Oil on Canvas, 40" x 36"

Alana Price

*Alana Price is a student at the Visual Arts & Communications Academy in Birmingham, Alabama. She was recently awarded 1st Prize in Painting at the Birmingham Art Association Annual High School Artists Exhibition. Her art teacher is BAA member Olsen Ross.*



## COAL TRUCK WRECK ON THE MOUNTAIN

By Rebecca K. Brooks

I remember eyes—just eyes—no noses or mouths, but eyes of children looking at me through the school bus windows. Their eyes all traveled together as the bus moved forward. I remember that I was wearing a frail cotton dress. My mother would tell me later that she had sewn it for my older sister, but it was too small for her. I remember the bicycle, its shiny red paint still new, my haste in throwing it down when the black came, and my haste in jerking it off the ground to put it in the garage. I remember standing at the front door with my mouth open but no words coming out, and Mother looking at me with fear on her face. I remember the swing set and how the neighbor children and I swung higher and higher, thinking we could swing over the top, in a circle. Pam fell off the swing and broke her arm. Her mother swished her off down the highway to the doctor.

I don't remember the smell of the brakes on the truck as they ground through metal. Or the sound of screeching tires as they left their prints far up the highway. I don't remember the way a fully loaded coal truck sounded as its driver instinctively braked and steered hard enough to send it off the road into a yard. My yard. I don't remember the sound of coal spilling out onto the pretty green grass, black dust swirling in the early fall morning, around my head, settling onto my blond hair.

The neighbors all came. Brownie cameras snapped. Everyone had to hear the story of the little girl almost buried by coal. No one hurt, except the truck driver who sprained his ankle when he jumped from the cab of the truck as it lay on its right side. It was a day.

My mother gave me the details over and over through the years. I would beg, "Tell me the coal truck story." She would tell me again how my sisters had just stepped on the bus when the truck came speeding down the highway, and the driver realized he was going to hit the bus. He chose to crash in our yard. The bus went on to school, and my sisters told their grandmother, a teacher at the school, their small tale of horror.

"Rebecca was standing right there," they said.  
 "Was she hurt?" Grandma asked.  
 They didn't know. The bus had pulled out.

For months after, even though someone came and cleaned up the coal, Mother would take us out in the yard and we would find small chunks of coal. We put them in water and maybe some other liquid in aluminum pie pans, and in a day or two, the water turned beautiful colors. Sometimes, I drive by the house, no longer owned by family, and I want to take a spade and dig a little and find a piece of coal. I know it's there.

The coal truck wreck, as it forever came to be known in our household, was the deciding factor in my parents' decision to move away from the busy highway to a more rural area. There were, and have been since, many wrecks with fatalities on that stretch of highway.

When I drive by, on occasion, my mind sees a small girl waving at her sisters. I look to where the swing set stood, and I hear the untroubled laughter of children as they swing towards the sky.

It was a day.

.....  
*Rebecca K. Brooks lives in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where she is polishing a novel she hopes to get published. Her work has appeared in Migrants and Stowaways and The Louisville Review. She also has a story forthcoming in The Hawaii Review. She teaches freshman English at Tennessee Tech University and at Pellissippi State Community College.*  
 .....

## TRIPLE BYPASS

(for Dr. David C. McGriffin)  
 By Sue Walker

It seems as if the ailing heart did pray  
 did tend the words "now I lay me  
 down to sleep," for the doctor said  
 it was like a bear hibernating the winter  
 of its life. After the median sternotomy,  
 after administering the cardioplegic  
 solution that dared stop the heart,  
 after bypassing the blockage  
 that surely would have killed him,  
 the surgeon stitched new vessels from a vein  
 in the patient's leg, gave him back his life,  
 his soul to keep: psyche, spirit,  
 breath, blood, bone, body, Being,  
 revealed within the horizon  
 of human temporality  
 and immeasurable medical skill.

.....  
*Sue Walker lives in Mobile where she is a professor of English and chair of the English Department at the University of South Alabama. Sue is also the current Alabama Poet Laureate and the publisher of Negative Capability Press.*  
 .....

## FADED SNAPSHOT: 1938

By Joseph Whitten

She stands, heavy, unhappy;  
 head cocked against the sun,  
 face as plain as the black skirt  
 that touches her shoe tops;  
 unsmiling lips open, ready to snap words.  
 Her right arm hangs at her side,  
 the left one aggressively akimbo,  
 thick-fingered hand on her hip.

He stands, legs slightly apart;  
 arms loose by his lean body,  
 though one hand closes—almost like a fist.  
 He holds his head erect. Bushed eyebrows  
 shade eyes that look straight into the camera.  
 A faint smile plays about his lips.

Thirty-six years before, in 1902,  
 her hands had bathed  
 two little girls, dead from diphtheria,  
 and dressed them for the grave.  
 His calloused hands made the coffins for his little loves.  
 She stopped her ears  
 against the nailing of the lids  
 and closed her heart.

So, here they are at the house where the children died,  
 a man and wife grown old, and love long stifled  
 by words and harbored griefs.

The snapshot shows them side by side,  
 or so it seems, until a closer look  
 reveals the corner of the house  
 jutting in between,  
 cleaving them still.

.....  
*Joseph Whitten was born in the mountains of north Alabama but grew up in Glencoe, Alabama. He began teaching in Odenville, Alabama, in 1961, where he lives with his wife Gail. Now retired, Joe's poems have been published in numerous journals, two chapbooks, and a full-length collection entitled Mulled Memories.*  
 .....

**"Art hath an enemy called  
 Ignorance."**

--Ben Jonson 1599

*Author's note: Against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, an unheralded transformation also occurred in the sexual politics of the southern belle. This selection is from a novel in progress, Walking Through the Valley of Shadows, which examines the story of one young Birmingham woman whose life was redirected by both events.*

## VALLEY OF THE SHADOWS

By Myra A. Crawford

Summer 1956

"What are you doing here?" I asked Ron, as he walked into the small room in the basement of City Hall that we used as our press office.

"Oh," he said, giving me a smile, but not meeting my eyes, "staying home reading just didn't seem very exciting after you told me you were riding with Vice tonight."

"You ride with the Vice Squad all the time, Adams. It's taken me weeks of haranguing and gallons of coffee swilling to get Vann and his partner to agree to take me out with them. So, what? You afraid you'll miss something if you aren't along?"

"Something like that." He sat down and picked up a copy of Life magazine, flipping through the pages, still not meeting my eyes. "Maybe I'm curious about what you're curious about."

"Yeah?"

"All I've heard from you for months is how creepy you think Vann is, and you hate what he stands for."

"So?"

"What's this all about, Mary, Mary, ever so contrary?"

"It means I won't be backed down by a mangy dog standing between me and what I want to know."

"What in God's name could that slime ball know that you need to know?"

"I simply want to see what goes down on Fourth Avenue. Vann says he'll take me on a shot house raid."

"And why would raiding some juke joint have any meaning for you? That won't get you a line in the city edition."

"Look," I said, picking up my camera bag, "if you're slow-brained enough to show up at work on your night off, then move it. Vann and Sleigman are waiting for me."

Ron looked past me at some distant place on the wall. "And, that's the reason I'm here."

"You think I need protection? I can handle any situation those yahoos can throw at me." I gave him a wicked look.

"Consider me the guarantee," Ron said, opening the door to the garage where the detectives were waiting.

## Yellow Dress Dancer

Oil on Canvas, 18" x 24"

Evelyn Jackson

*Evelyn Jackson is a painter in Fairfield, Alabama and a member of Birmingham Art Association. artbyevelyn@aol.com*



\*\*\*\*\*

The car driven by Sgt. Tommy Vann was unmarked, and it moved like a shadow down the alleyway between Third and Fourth Avenues, heading for the sagging two-story clapboard at the far end of the block.

"Hold up," Sleigman said to Vann. "There's the tree. That kid's probably up there, watching?"

"Watching what?" I leaned forward and whispered. I slipped on my glasses, so as not to miss a single frame of what was about to play out before me.

"For us," Vann said. "Little bastard's the lookout."

The tree was an oak, hunchbacked, its lower limbs brushing against the fence below it. Behind the curtains in the upstairs windows, an occasional figure moved to be framed momentarily in the light. The sound of hot jazz and laughter floated out to reach us.

“Who’s running this place?” Ron asked quietly.

“Old gal named Valentine. She’s been operating here for about a year.”

“How come you’re zeroing in on her tonight?” Ron asked. “She forget to hang out the laundry?”

The two men in the front seat laughed. As I started to open my mouth, Ron’s hand clamped down on my wrist, hard. Then, I realized what had just been asked and answered.

“When we go in, you two, leave your cameras in the car,” Vann said. “No pictures. Understand?”

“Ten-four,” Ron replied, looking at me and nodding.

Sleigman reached for his radio microphone. “This is Car 42. Get the Black Maria rolling to 16th and 4th North.”

The voice of the male dispatcher mimicked a Negro dialect, “That be Miss Valentine you going to visit? How about picking up me a barbeque sandwich while you there.”

“The joint looks full,” Sleigman responded. “Send another car along to help with the wrapping. Aw, sonofabitch, we’ve been made.”

\*\*\*\*\*

What looked like a large gall deforming the skeleton of the tree suddenly shifted to a lower branch and dropped to the ground. It was the watcher, and he was running in the back door of the shot house at top speed.

“Damn it,” Vann said, gunning the engine to life and roaring through the flimsy wooden fence that spanned the back of the lot behind the house. He skidded the car to a stop almost at the back door. He and Sleigman were out of the car almost before it stopped moving, Vann to the back door and Sleigman running for the front. Ron was on Sleigman’s heels.

Vann rapped against the back door with the butt of his .38 special. “Po-lice,” he thundered, just before he kicked in the panels. Behind me, I could hear the sound of breaking glass as a drink was tossed out a window into the yard.



## FRENZY

Acrylic on Paper, 14" x 14"  
Tomas Gondi

*Tomas Gondi is a Mexican artist, represented in Alabama and the southeast by Laura Drain, Mexicoviva*

Upstairs, a small dark figure slipped out onto the roof and worked its way around behind the chimney, clinging onto the bricks, disappearing in the shadows.

\*\*\*\*\*

I followed Sgt. Vann into the house. The smell inside almost pushed me back out into the yard. The sweet aroma of bread baking in the oven was undercut with the fetid odor of unwashed bodies and the razor-sharp smell of radiator whiskey. The drain board of the sink was stacked with quart glass canning jars. Some, that had not been emptied as we were breaking in, were still filled with the illegal whiskey, the color of lemonade tinged with rust.

Vann had the woman named Valentine bent over a kitchen counter, her head almost pushed into the sink, so I could not see her face. Val was large and dark, and I was drawn to her like iron filings to a magnet. For a split second, I was back with Belle standing in our kitchen. Just as I moved close enough to touch her, Vann wrestled her arms behind her. The snap of the cuffs on her wrists brought me back into focus.

I stared, numb, as Vann plunged his hand down the front of the woman’s bosom and groped around.

“You like that, you fat black cow?” he whispered in her ear.

When Vann pulled his hand out of her dress, it was a fist holding a wad of bills. That hand went into his pants pocket, and then he flipped her skirt up over her head. Her ass was bare. At that moment, he turned his head and looked at me and grinned, watching my reaction. Then, he popped the woman smartly on her bare skin, before he snatched more bills from the garters around her thick, black thighs.

He barely had his hand out of his pocket the second time when Sleigman backed three men and two women from the living room into the kitchen, their hands held high over their heads. Ron followed them into the room. He was looking at me. I turned from his gaze and pulled the black woman’s dress down over her nakedness.

here. This sweet thing's got more educating coming upstairs. She wants to know what goes on in a world she don't know nothing about; I'm obliged to deliver."

\*\*\*\*\*

I followed the vice sergeant and Ron up the steps that creaked under our feet. Downstairs, the music abruptly stopped as Sleigman pulled the plug on the jukebox. I could hear the sirens of the paddy wagon wailing in the distance.

We stepped into the first room that held only a bed, a chair and a dresser. The hot, still air held an acrid smell, like bleach splashing on mildewed towels. Vann found the light switch with the beam of his flash. A thin, light-skinned black man was sitting on the side of the bed, too drunk to even pull up his pants that were draped around his bare feet.

"Get your sorry asses up, niggers," Vann said, waving his gun, then lowering it to draw a bead on the woman. "Now, or I'd just as soon put you out of your misery where you lay."

The naked woman on the bed was rolling back and forth, crying and screaming, "Oh, Lord, Jesus, save me, Lord, save my soul."

"Oh, shut up! You gonna pray, you best be praying for bail money," Vann yelled at her, as he led us back into the hall.

We followed him into an empty room. The curtains moved gently around the open window. I guessed that this was the room the watcher had left to climb onto the roof. I kept silent, while Vann stuck his head out the window, finding nothing.

"Hope the sonofabitch broke his goddamn leg when he jumped," Vann grumbled, not seeing the makeshift ladder nailed to the side of the window. He stomped back into the hall to fling open the door of the remaining room.

\*\*\*\*\*

In that small room was just a single bed. The person on it was hiding under the covers, shaking and coughing. Vann ripped back the filthy quilts. On the bare mattress lay a slight girl. She was naked and her skin was strangely blotched, black with large pale splatters, as if melanin in her skin had been blanched white. She had also vomited on herself.

"Christ!" Ron said under his breath.

"The house booby prize," Vann said, picking up a coat hanger from the floor and smacking the girl across the thigh. "Get your clothes on, Spot. You're going for a ride in my big black chariot."

The girl was crying, a high pitiful wail that sounded more like a cat caterwauling in the night.

Vann hit her again with the coat hanger, "There, now, you've really got something to holler about."

\*\*\*\*\*

The wails of pain and shouts of anger that suddenly filled the house connected with something deep in my

memories, and I ran for the room with the open window, hoping a breath of fresh air would stop my heaving stomach. When I burst through the door, I saw a small girl roll back under the bed. I stopped, forgetting my own discomfort, and squatted down to peer beneath the bed frame. At first, all I could see in the darkness were large brown eyes filled with fear. They belonged to a little girl, not more than twelve. She looked

**At first, all I could see in the darkness were large brown eyes filled with fear. They belonged to a little girl, not more than twelve.**

as if she were about to cry. I shook my head and put my fingers to my lips. She continued to hold my gaze. I smiled at her and she blinked back her tears, her hands sealing her mouth.

I stood up and realized that Ron had followed me and was standing in the doorway to the room, watching. To leave the room, I had to push by him, and his arms caught me on my way out the door.

"Slow down, Missy M," he said quietly into my ear. "Vann's waiting on the stairs for you. If he sees you fold, he'll spread the word all over city hall."

"I don't give a damn!"

"Yes, you do. Because, if that happens, you really will be known as just another skirt, and no one over there will give you the time of day."

"Then call for a taxi and get me out of here," I said into his shoulder. "Now! Or, I promise you, I'll puke all over your shoes."

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*Myra Crawford is director of research in family and community medicine at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She has directed the Hackney Awards, an international writing competition, since 1969.*  
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## AUNT BEE

By Stan Holifield

It was a Delta clay yard. It must have been gumbo that had dried and hardened and after years of packing and sweeping it was as hard and shiny as polished concrete. Each morning after sweeping the porch she would sweep the yard.

Nothing grew there and, by God, nothing was going to. No grass, no flowers, just the hard packed dirt front yard. Recognizing anything green sprouting in her yard caused her to stop what she was doing immediately and get it out!

It was swept so often that it looked polished. The only things allowed on her front yard were the children and by necessity, the chickens and dogs. Anything else was either swept away or dug up.

The old tin-roofed house was at least one hundred years old. At least the original first room was. Later a dog trot and another room were added and after that the dog trot was enclosed and a large room that went all the way across the back was added. That was her domain.

On one side of the large back room was her stove, her pantry and her kitchen table. There were chairs at the ends of the table and benches on each side. The other side was her private area where she kept the few mementos and keepsakes. Saying she kept anything valuable would be a stretch. Her only valuables were here family and friends.

There was a small fireplace, and a small table or two and a couple of rockers with pillows for visiting with friends and the preacher; and sometimes for rocking the new babies. When she wasn't working around the house or in the kitchen she would be sitting and rocking in her private place, often while knitting, tatting or crocheting. Sometimes she shelled peas or stringed beans or churned. Rest was not always exclusive to Aunt Bee.

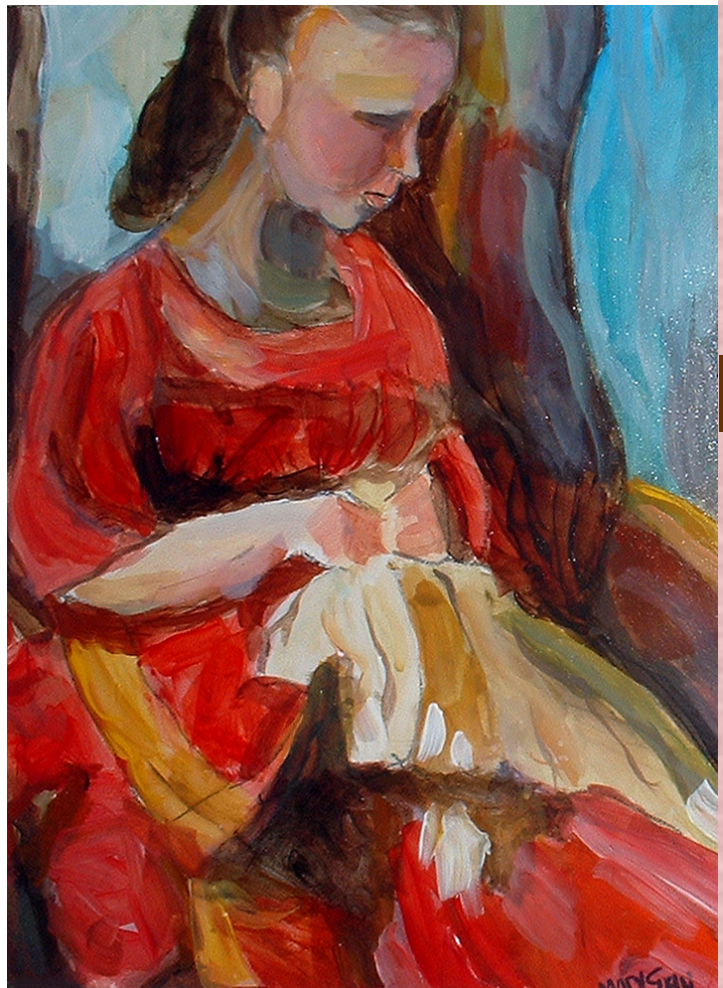
At the road in the front of her house was an artesian well. Wonderfully cold water gushed forth forever it seemed. The water was caught in a large catch basin that was covered with flowing strands of green algae. Most of the area residents used her well for drinking water and at any time there were several tenant farmers' wagons there being loaded with the cold, clear, clean artesian water.

She had discovered an accidental benefit to the well. Often the neighbors would run trot lines in the Yazoo and many times the catch was abundant—so abundant that they gave away the fish they couldn't eat. There was no such thing as keeping them frozen until needed; even if they wanted to there was no refrigeration.

Aunt Bee almost always had company so any extra

meat was welcomed. But once in a while she was there alone or with just a grandchild or two and didn't need the fish. She started asking the generous neighbors if they would take their live fish and put them into the artesian well catch basin. The fish would live in the clean artesian water undisturbed until she took them out to cook. It turned out that there were extra benefits to storing the fish in the fresh water.

The Yazoo gave up plenty of fish, both catfish and buffalo, to the trot lines. Many were removed alive so the well basin usually had an abundance of fish available. Everyone told her that her fish tasted better and different than anyone else's. For a while she just took it as a compliment to her cooking.



## Woman Sewing

Oil on Canvas, 8" x 10"

Mary Susan Lewis

*Mary Susan Lewis is a self-taught artist who volunteers her time and talent at Studio by the Tracks and Gate City School. In 2003, she organized the first annual Art in Avondale Park, an event sponsored in part by Birmingham Art Association for children of all ages.*

As more and more comments came she was asked for her recipe which she happily gave but it showed nothing unusual. She used what everybody used: corn meal, salt, pepper, buttermilk for the fish and lard for frying.

One fine Spring Sunday many of her relatives came to pay her a surprise visit. As usual she worried about having enough food for everyone even though she always had way too much.

She went to the well basin and got the several catfish that had been there for a week or so and while there one of her neighbors came by. He had run his lines and wanted to bring her some fish, which she appreciated because of the unexpected crowd.

She took the fish and took them along with the ones she had retrieved from the basin back to the house to clean and cook. At supper she dipped the fish into the fresh buttermilk then into the mixture of cornmeal, salt and pepper and dropped them into the boiling lard to cook. The leftover cornmeal was mixed with chopped onion and the leftover buttermilk, made into small balls and thrown into the lard to cook with the fish.

It soon became evident that some of the fish tasted much better than others. People began swapping bites around the table to show each other. Some of the fish tasted clean and fresh and others tasted...well, like mud.

"This is what everyone else's fish tastes like, Aunt Bee," said her brother Malcolm. "That's right," his wife Merlene said, "we ate with the Colvins on Friday and she was complaining that even though her fish just came from the river it tasted dirty."

The fish, mud cat and buffalo fish, were the normal catch on the Yazoo trot lines. These fish existed in a river that was sometimes as clean and clear as Aunt Bee's well but many times it was as full of dirt as the Muddy Mississippi. Those times when the river had been clear for a while, the fish tasted fine; not great but fine.

The fish, however, that spent a few weeks in Aunt Bee's clean, cold, artesian water basin always had a clean, fresh taste. It seemed the longer they lived in that pure water the better they tasted.

Uncle Malcolm realized what made the difference and he spoke up. "It's like possum," he said. "You don't go possum hunting and catch a big-un and bring him right home and cook-em," he said. "You pen him up for a week or two and feed him nothing but sweet potatoes. Soon all that bad stuff that possum's been eating has gone and nothing's left but a good, sweet potato tasting possum. Hell, we've know about that for years."

.....  
*Stan Holifield writes in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.*  
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## INTERVAL

By Reilly Maginn

Octogenarians both.  
 Waiting.

They sit at the bare kitchen table. He, with his thick walled mug of coffee laden with milk and sugar, reads the paper. She, with a small, blue and white cup and saucer with thin, see-through, black coffee.

Silence, save for the rustle of the turning pages.  
 Hushed quiet.

She, staring down at the tabletop, sits rigid, unmoving, but for the tremor of her right hand and the constant pill rolling motion of her thumb and forefinger. Her face, a motionless, inflexible mask. Parkinson's.

No words pass. After eighty years, none needed.

He nods, now and then, in assent or shakes his white haired head in disbelief as he reads, his brow furrowed. He shifts uncomfortably on the hard kitchen chair. An unrelenting backache. Prostate cancer.

"News?"

"None. There never is."

She neither stirs nor looks up.

"Bathroom," as he painfully hoists himself from the chair and shuffles from the kitchen.

Opening the door he raises the seat. It's the sixth time since arising. Only a dribble. His fly is saffron stained. His back aches.

Pill time.

His, thirteen. Cancer pill, heart, blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis, Alzheimer's, three multivitamins, a hormone, a narcotic and two herbs.

Hers, only six, but twice daily. Parkinson's pill, mood elevator, arthritis, a vitamin, calcium and aspirin blood thinner.

"Breakfast?"

"Maybe some toast."

"Cereal?"

"No. Never mind. Nothing. I'm already full. No room."

"Me neither. Not hungry. No appetite."

"I'm going to sit by the window."

"I'll do the cups."

He gingerly lowers himself in the recliner. Shifting repeatedly, he can't get comfortable. Prostate.

She sits on the couch, expressionless, trying to knit. Her tremulous hands and pill rolling fingers interfere. Parkinson's.

Silence. All the words have been spoken.

Waiting. For what?

Bedtime?

Relief?

The End?

Soon, please, soon.

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*Reilly Maginn, a retired transplant surgeon and master gardener, is a prolific tale-teller. He lives in Fairhope, Alabama.*  
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## TROUBLE

By T.K. Thorne

Trouble was coming. It hovered in the sweltering, breezeless air, crept closer with the sudden hush that spread through the brick apartments of the Trent County Housing Project.

Faye kept her head down, ignoring it. Trouble came a lot. She sat alone in the sparse grass of the front yard. On the porch behind her, the steady rocking of Gran's chair filled the world, as if its job were marking off time. Faye stared at the blood-stained peach pit in her hand before laying it carefully on the ground beside her.

She didn't need to look up to know that Tic was coming to tell Gran what the trouble was. The rhythmic thud of his bare feet on the hard, dry ground joined the creak of Gran's chair and the beat of Faye's heart.

Without speaking Tic dodged past Faye, his bare legs flashing, and leaped onto the porch where Gran rocked, humming softly to herself.

Even from the yard, Faye could hear Tic's gasping. Tic didn't breath right when he was scared, and he was always scared of something. Gran said it was because his daddy died of a cancer. Beneath his left eye, Tic's cheek would be dancing with the twitch that had given him his name.

Faye shifted her position so she could see the porch and the road at the same time. In the shade under Gran's chair, Yellowdog thumped her plumed tail, but didn't rise like she usually did to greet Tic. She didn't move much since her belly started to swell, just lay and panted in the August sun's bake. Sweat trickled down Faye's spine like a spider's crawl. She scratched her stick in the patch of dry, red dust where the grass refused to root, determined to make a hole deep enough to bury the bloodstained peach pit and grow a tree.

"He's here, Gran!" The words spilled from Tic's mouth like the rattle of pebbles dropped into a metal bucket. "C.T.'s here. He says this is his turf now, an' he's takin' over."

Gran leaned, spitting into the empty coffee can near her feet. It rang true without her missing a beat of rock. "Ain't," she said.

Faye rubbed her dirt-smudged hand on the shirt Gran had patched. She hated Gran. Gran was the reason Thomas was dead. She dug harder, trying to remember only the taste of the slice of peach Thomas had shared with her just before the black car came.

Eight years ago Thomas had found her playing on the bed where her mother sprawled, a homemade pipe in her lifeless hand. Nobody ever explained, but Faye

understood now--crack. She didn't remember a father at all.

Grownups called Thomas "slow." He'd probably walked into the apartment because the door was open and he heard her giggling. He liked babies. Thomas had taken her to Gran. Everybody took sick things to Gran.

Next door, Dorothy stepped to the edge of her porch, wrapping a red-nailed hand around the metal support pole and leaning on one hip like she did for a gossip. Mostly Dorothy talked about men, but not today. "What you gonna do, Gran? How many you gonna let get killed 'fore you give in?"

Gran rocked two beats before answering. "Many as it takes."

No match for the hard ground and her desperate digging, the stick in Faye's hand split. The sharp crack broke open the memories she had stuffed away:

Thomas handed her the peach slice and she bit into it, sweet juice trickling down her chin as a black car with tinted windows drove by.

Black car. Gunshot slamming her ears. Thomas falling, taking all the time in the world to fall. Then, in an instant, slapping the ground, cheek against the sidewalk, arms spread out like he was hugging the earth.

Tears dropped into the hole where Faye laid the peach pit. Thomas had knocked the dents out of the old bike someone had thrown away and taught her and Tic to ride it. Thomas pulled the weeds from Miss Johnson's tomato garden when her back acted up. Thomas brought every wounded pigeon or kid with stomach cramps to Gran to fix. C.T. killed him to scare Gran. Thomas

didn't even know what was going on. He didn't understand about C.T. handing out money to the corner boys to get them to sell crack for him. Didn't know Gran had made the boys give up the money to buy a new basketball goal and shamed them for taking it. He didn't think about things like that. He was just Thomas.

He had sliced off a piece of his peach for her. She didn't know where he had gotten it, but it was like Thomas to share his treasure.

The peach lay smashed beneath him in a growing stain of blood as the car sped off with a squeal. Thomas stared away into nothing, his eyes cloudy glass marbles that saw something she couldn't see and nothing she could.

Not knowing what else to do, Faye plucked the peach pit from the sidewalk, and slipped it into her pocket.

He had sliced off a piece of his peach for her. She didn't know where he had gotten it, but it was like Thomas to share his treasure.



Tic shifted his weight from side to side on Gran's porch in a dance of nerves, as a black car with tinted windows pulled up. "It's him!" he shouted with a ragged breath.

Yellowdog whined and retreated under the porch. She would probably have her pups there.

The driver opened the back door for a smaller man Faye recognized at once--C.T. Dark sunglasses hid his eyes. He moved in tight flicks, like the lizard that sunned on the concrete steps.

"We don't need this trouble," Dorothy muttered.

Gran squinted, narrowing watery eyes. "Trouble don't come 'cause you need it."

Two more men exited the car and followed C.T. They all wore jeans and denim jacket vests over bare chests. They didn't give Faye a glance. She was used to that, used to being invisible to grownup eyes. The denim-wrapped legs and high-top tennis shoes sauntered by. She wanted to crawl under the porch with Yellowdog, but her body didn't move.

Dorothy stepped back into the shadow of her doorway. Tic flattened against the far wall of the porch, sticking to it like a wad of gum. His cheek jerked on autopilot.

C.T. stopped respectfully on the second step. He pulled off the sunglasses, blinking in the summer glare. A whiff of breeze briefly unstuck the shirt from Faye's ribs.

"Afternoon, Gran," C.T. said.

Gran ignored him, rocking and humming to herself. She couldn't walk by herself anymore. Nobody knew how old she was, but nobody knew anyone older. Some, now with their own kids, had been born into her hands. She was "Gran" to them all, but only Faye lived with her.

"Don't know why we can't work something out here," C.T. said, smiling slow and warm.

Gran kept rocking. "Ain't nothin' to work out."

C.T.'s voice hardened. Sunlight glinted off the gold at his neck. "Everybody in this housing project looks up to you, old woman, runs to you with their problems, but all you are is a sick, old woman."

Yellowdog growled from under the porch. Gran was silent.

People were coming out now. Word had spread fast. Faye wasn't surprised. Everyone knew everyone's business here. The world was only six blocks wide.

"How many you gonna let get killed?" C.T.'s question echoed Dorothy's.

Gran squinted into the sun. Lines scored her face like cracked pavement. Gnarled fingers tightened around the worn chair arms, but she answered C.T. same as she had Dorothy. "As many as it takes."

C.T. stiffened, jerking a black gun from his waist. He pointed it at Gran. "Maybe it'll only take one more."

The crowd rippled like a yarn rug shook to air. Faye felt herself dissolving, pulled by invisible threads, a weaving that was all the people she knew. Thomas entwined through it, even though he was dead. Tic and Dorothy were there, everyone. Gran was the center of it.

C.T. wanted to unravel it all. Then the world would belong to him.

Gran stopped rocking. All of time stopped--all the breathing, all the heartbeats. Faye wasn't aware of standing; barely felt the brush of denim as she wove through the legs between her and the porch.

What was death like? Not getting to see Yellowdog's puppies. Never seeing the tree grow. Never tasting another peach.

When she reached the rocker, Gran's mouth was a hard line; her eyes harder. Gran wasn't going to give the world away, no matter what. Faye stepped beyond Gran's reach, turning to face C.T. and the tiny hole that had spit death at Thomas. Her mind shut down. Her legs were air. She stood in the tight silence between Gran and the gun.

C.T. looked confused, but the dark pit still stared at her. He didn't care about witnesses. Who would dare talk? He didn't care if he shot a kid. It didn't matter to him.

But Gran mattered to Faye. The weaving mattered.

After a long moment Tic stirred, easing off the wall. He moved like his bones were wet mud, his cheek twitching like fluttering butterfly wings. But he slid in beside her, his skinny arm pressed against her shoulder. Faye looked up at him in surprise.

Then Dorothy stepped across the narrow space separating the porches and stood on Faye's other side, her long, painted nails curling into the palms of her hands.

Behind them, the heartbeat creak of the old wooden rocker started up again.

The crowd began to move, slowly pushing through the denim jackets with the stubborn insistence of weeds growing through pavement cracks. More and more bodies packed onto the porch, squeezing the jackets to the outside.

They were still coming when C.T. got into the black car and drove away.

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*Teresa Thorne is a writer and retired police officer in Birmingham, Alabama, where she directs the CAP program.*  
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## CHAINED

Photograph, 12" x 9"  
Charles T. Murphy

Charles has been a photographer since his early teens and enjoys capturing everyday subjects in an abstract manner. He has been active with the Birmingham Arts Association since 2001. Charles is a native of California works as a Project Director for Doster Construction Company.

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## RUSTY UN-CHAINED

By Geoff Langdon

The rusty chain snaps taut as he lunges at the bucket of dirty, fly-ridden water.

The heat is unbearable and he is dog thirsty. The flies are maddening, attacking the open sores on his back and neck.

As he laps up the putrid water, he looks up at the house that the man and woman disappear into.

He's never been inside.

Didn't people once love him and call him by his name? Was it Rusty? He can't remember.

Maybe he never had a name or anyone who cared for him; maybe the flies and heat make him delusional.

Every once in a great while, the man from the house un-chains him and takes him to a wooded area nearby where he has a chance to exercise and explore something new.

And he doesn't even mind when the man roughly picks him up and throws him in the pond for his bi-annual bath.

Always he returns to the man, fearful of the unknown, or perhaps hopeful for some affection that he has yet to experience.

Today he'll take no work, no play, and no love, no longer.

This time when the man enters the enclosure and yanks the bloodied chain that cuts into his infected wound when he does not move fast enough for the man's liking, he viciously attacks him.

He runs towards the enclosure's exit before real harm is done to the man.

The wife cuts off his escape route and empties a pot of boiling water in his direction, fortunately she's too drunk to have good aim.

He tries to run down the cursing wife but she escapes screaming into the house.

He then makes his way to freedom.

This is where I come into the picture. I am the Animal Rescue Officer for the area.

I am called in to find this so-called half crazed dog before he hurt others and himself.

After a few hours of searching I find him in the nearby woods, the same woods I later learned the owner took him once in a blue moon.

He is a big guy, but much too thin for his red-coated frame. He is down by the pond lapping up the cool water; he looks up and spots me.

I approach but apparently not carefully, for I step into a hole, fall and roll within a few feet of him. My capture pole goes flying in the opposite direction. Startled, he lets out what I consider a werewolf growl. I just lay there.

He approaches slowly and sniffs my shoes, I softly say, "Nice boy," and hopes he recognizes that the void in my pants is a sign of submission. Apparently it works, he takes a few more steps and lies down next to me, with his back pressed against my thigh.

Soon after, we both return to the truck. I let him sit up front and I drive back to the Shelter. We are to meet his owners who are being driven there by one of my associates.

In these cases we have no leeway, euthanasia is always the applied remedy. This type of behavior cannot ever be tolerated. I go to the locked cabinet and get out two hypodermic needles, each filled with 2cc's of the life-ending drug.

This is also my job, and I never get use to it.

I try thinking of the happier times ahead for the dog, as he is going to a better place.

This helps somewhat as I inject the first needle into the vein.

The man is given the first dose and the second one is for the wife. It is fast and painless.

I return to the truck, where Rusty is waiting, [seems like the appropriate name for this sweet, red coated dog]. I rub his muzzle and tell him it's time for us to go home and meet his new family.

.....  
*Geoff Langdon is publisher of Avenues Magazine and owner of Advantage Marketing in Birmingham, Alabama.*  
 .....

## PEARS ARE THE BODY OF LIFE AND LOVE (THE CONCRETE SURREALISM OF LOVE)

By Bonnie Roberts

This is a tree,  
 and love is the oak tree by the farmer's creek,  
 the knotted branch  
 that forks toward the warm barn.

This is a cloud.  
 We give love  
 in the shape of a bird, though,  
 on second look,  
 perhaps a dragon.

This is water.  
 We receive love  
 clear, on the tongue,  
 from the blackberry jam jar,  
 rinsed twice.

The drip in the faucet  
 is as big as a river on a dry day  
 when we thirst.  
 We walk in the middle of love  
 sometimes  
 and see it only as something wispy  
 and thin.

We climb a tree only to find  
 apples or nuts,  
 but there is a vision of hills,  
 and a pear, for roasting.

Where do men go when they die?  
 Does the soul ask, in Heaven,  
 where has my chair gone?  
 Where is my pipe?  
 The soul does reckon on mangrove leaves;  
 and it breathes the oxygen  
 of the encounters of hands and eyes  
 where there are no clear signposts,  
 only vague and awesome whispers  
 that come from the stars  
 or other worlds  
 and sometimes there appears  
 a trace  
 in black Egyptian scrawl  
 on the back of a paper napkin:

Reality has gone  
to the seashore inn  
for the next twenty minutes,  
is spooning  
clam chowder from the russet bowl.  
So with a kiss,  
we know the fruit dessert,  
walk away,  
leaving tasty crumbs,  
then fly.

.....  
*A life-long resident of Alabama, Bonnie Roberts currently resides in Huntsville. A teacher, mother, and mentor, Bonnie has written poems that have appeared in numerous journals as well as in two full-length volumes of poetry entitled To Hide in the Light, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and Dances in Straw with a Two-Headed Calf. Her third book Little Girl Faces on Old Bones is due out later this year.*  
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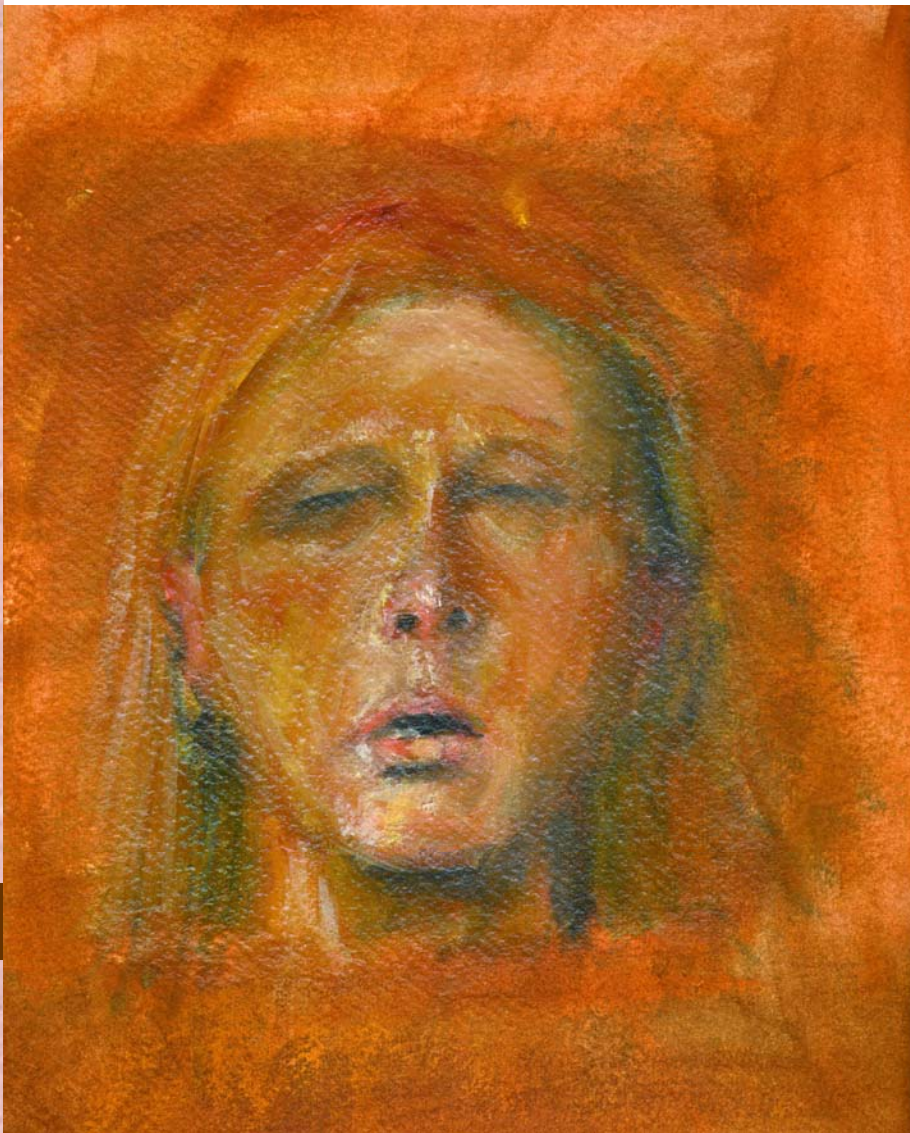
## ON FIRST LISTENING TO EMMYLOU HARRIS' RED DIRT GIRL

By Amorak Huey

The mind moves only back, it's the body  
carries us forward. Is it true music  
we've heard once plays inside us forever,  
in sound molecules that halve and halve,  
a world of noise within us,  
growing smaller to infinity?  
But especially music — take this song here,  
or this one: just a few notes  
in a voice barely of earth, it's that good, and I'm  
eighteen,  
or fifteen, eleven, eight,  
growing up down Happy Hollow Road  
outside my own red dirt town northeast of Birmingham,  
in love with a girl named Cindy Marie,  
and before that Amy with a why and Kristi with an I,  
before that Missy Watlington from up the hill  
and my friends drive muscle cars  
like Chargers and Novas, even I learn the language  
boys use to sound like men,  
how to die with Auburn football in autumn  
and again in the spring  
when I am cut from the varsity baseball team —

too slow, not enough power,  
like my tiny Civic hatchback —  
going back now, always back,  
to my first kiss in the creeping dusk  
beside a crepe myrtle bush in the back yard  
after catching a jarful of fireflies  
with a girl named Stacy who moved away that year  
and for two decades I failed  
to think about her  
until a song about a sad girl named Lillian  
and a blue tick hound,  
back to a swimming hole in the Cahaba River,  
across the road and the other side of Gillespie's pasture  
where supposedly DeSoto's army camped  
on its way to kill Chief Tuscaloosa —  
all those soldiers, their horses, so far from home,  
staking bloody claim in an unfamiliar continent,  
how thrilling it all had to be,  
and right here! on this very grass,  
to which they had no more right than me,  
in this land but not of it,  
climbing a farmer's rusted fence on the way to swim  
in water so cold I might be making it up,  
but there's something about this voice  
has the sound of that splashing,  
the smell of honeysuckle tangles and kudzu blossoms.  
That's not quite right, is it?  
I'm getting carried away,  
my body impatient, my body not  
in Alabama anymore  
but driving north toward an airport motel,  
my body already someplace new,  
that fast,  
an Econo-Lodge, a woman laughing  
at the way I close the blinds so carefully,  
her silver sundress, her mouth opening to me,  
but even the eager flames of the candles she lit,  
even that small light's in the past,  
music dwindling,  
mind unable to keep up.

.....  
*Amorak Huey lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan, but he grew up in Trussville, Alabama, and is a graduate of Birmingham-Southern College. He currently is studying in the MFA program at Western Michigan University. His poetry has appeared recently in The Driftwood Review, White Pelican Review, Spitball, and Steam Ticket.*  
.....



## Self, Eyes Closed

Oil on Paper

9.5" x 11"

Shane Young

*"One feels his alertness and quickly guesses Young doesn't miss much that goes on around him. That's a characteristic you'd expect in an artist and that's what Young is, by both profession and passion. He's quite good at it, too, for like the best of artists, art is a way of life for him. It's not something that exists outside his everyday life; it is the very essence of it. "*

*Howard Miller, Arts Editor  
The Huntsville Times*

## BEEN DOWNTOWN SO LONG THE BOTTOM LOOKS LIKE UP

By Jim Reed

My latest bookloft customer is a pleasant, attractive young woman who's dropped in to pick up an out-of-print book we've ordered for her.

As usual, I've placed the book in an obscure place and must spend a few minutes locating it, er, trying to remember where I put it.

The young woman stands at the bookloft counter, staring straight ahead, not looking right or left.

"It may take a little while for me to put my hands on the book, so why don't you browse through the store a bit?" I ask, fully aware that she's a first-time customer and has yet to be amazed at what we carry in our 6,000-square-foot museum of fond memories.

I continue rummaging about, but notice out of my peripheral vision that the young woman is still staring

ahead, not turning around to be astounded.

I repeat my invitation for her to look around, and she makes bodily motions as if she's going to do just that, but when Craig finally fishes the book out of obscurity and brings it to her, she's still standing in the same spot.

She's happy to have the book--just the one she's wanted for years--but she still fidgets a bit and doesn't leave the store. I've already gone back to my computer cataloging, thinking she's left the building, when she says, "I wonder...do you think...uh, would you mind escorting me down the stairs to my car?"

I realize then that she's got the FEAR OF DOWNTOWN SYNDROME, one we see several times a week, year 'round, one we keep thinking is going to go away, someday.

I immediately volunteer to escort her downstairs. I'm happy to do so, since it means she might feel less afraid, I might get a chance to propagandize her a bit about the wonders and safety of Downtown these days, and she will at least get to her car safely, as I promise she will.

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While we're walking around the block to the Water Works parking lot, I'm chatting away at how Downtown is so much safer than the humongous shopping mall parking lots of any of the overcrowded suburbs, but, at the same time, I'm trying to see the world through her eyes for a minute. We pass by the diverse group of people waiting for a bus, past the line outside the Water Works payment center, right by the corner where a panhandler aggressively walks toward us, past the bankers and office workers who are strolling comfortably to get a snack downstairs at Scott's Koneys and a little piece of sunshine, past the peanut vendor who's trying to hustle another dollar bag, past the boom-box-loud cars parked in the lot, drivers waiting for whoever's inside paying the water bill or whoever's crossed the street to pay the gas bill, past the car salesman who's hurrying a customer to a back lot to see a particular car.

It's a melting pot of folks, young and old, ethnic and not, poor and middle-class, bored and happy, employed and looking...but they are all simply doing their thing, their things, in Downtown Birmingham. A friendly security officer waves as he swooshes by in his silent vehicle, I help the customer into her car, she promises that, oh, yes, she'll be back one day when she has more time, she throws the electric locks on the door, checks to see if windows are secure, and drives nervously away to more familiar territory.

There are thousands of stories in the naked city, and this one feels and looks like a whole lot of stories I've experienced in all the years I've lived and worked Downtown.

I know Downtown is safe and fun. How do I convince this woman and all the other customers who furtively run up the stairs, their drivers running the getaway car motors all the while, waiting, then run down the stairs, never having experienced Mister Reed's Neighborhood the way Mister Reed does.

All I can do is keep trying.

Because, my special place, Downtown Birmingham, is just another place. If you work and live here, and then visit the suburbs, you're apt to be just as nervous as that young woman, just as anxious to get the heck out of Dodge and come back home to here, the center of the universe.

.....  
*Jim Reed is president of the Alabama Writers' Conclave and editor of Birmingham Arts Journal. He started writing, crayon on walls, at the age of four. www.jimreedbooks.com*  
.....



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