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Table of Contents

		Page
THE HIT MAN	Tommie Willis	1
DANCE VORTEX #1	Suki Grimes	2
EXCERPT FROM SIX BLOOMS	Jeff Faulk	3
GROW EDEN		
KNOCKERS	Linda Walden	4
THE SKELETON POOL	Marian Lewis	5
THE RUNNER	Annell Gordon	11
I WOKE UP ONE MORNING AND DECIDED TO LEAVE	Anna Greene	14
LIFE AMONG THE LILLIPUTIANS	Judy DiGregorio	15
HORIZON BECKONING	Robin Jackson	17
LAST SWIM	Jennifer Horne	18
SARTRE & PEANUTS	Nathan Radke	19
	Lana Fuller	21
MAGIC CITY	Larry O. Gay	24-25
THE WEB	Hank Siegel	26
EXCERPT FROM NOVEL IN PROGRESS, <i>MOODY'S TRIP</i>	Andrew Glaze	27
LAST NIGHT	D.S. Pearson	31
SNAP SHOT	Joy Godsey	32
DEATH TO HEMINGWAY	Rachel Saxon	33
ROCKY POINT (WITH CLOUDS)	Melanie Sanderson Morris	35
FACING GIANTS	Irene Latham	36
MUIR WOODS	Irene Latham	37
A SQUEAKY PORCH SWING IN TUSCALOOSA	Connie Foster	38
ALABAMA	Mark E. Wadley	40
JOSIE	Christine Cox	41
LIVE ANOTHER DAY	Sharon M. Haley	42
MY SUNS	Krissie Allen	47
AN UNDERTAKING	Jim Reed	48

Front Cover: **WOMAN OF MYSTERY**

Birmingham, Alabama artist Kay Vinson, arranges textures, shapes, and found objects, then adds layer upon layer of glazes to create multisensory experience for the viewer.

www.wildwoodarts.net

Back Cover: **KRISTEN ANN**

Pelham, Alabama artist Lana Fuller is a photographer and graphic designer. To see more of her photographs: www.fuller-photo-image.com.

THE HIT MAN

Tommie Willis

I glanced up when I heard the knock on my office door.

"Mr. Goodman, do you have a minute?"

"Sure. What's on your mind, Judy?"

Judy closed the door and pulled a chair up close to my desk.

I thought, "What now!" I managed twenty-five women performing warehouse administrative functions. They were still training me.

Judy leaned in over my desk and whispered, "We want to hire a hit man."

Instinctly, I had leaned over toward Judy. I jerked back and yelled, "What?"

Judy laughed and continued by asking, "Did you know Mr. Devil volunteered to sit in the dunking tank at the company picnic?"

Mr. Devil was our district manager.

"No. I didn't know that. I will certainly throw a ball or two."

"That's why we want to hire a hit man. My nephew is a minor league baseball pitcher. He has agreed to come and do it. I've already collected over eighty dollars."

Resisting a smile I thought, "Perfect." I had just had my annual evaluation. As I retrieved my wallet I said, "Officially, I don't condone this...but, here's twenty bucks toward our group's activities at the picnic."

Mr. Devil never volunteered for the dunking tank again.

.....
Tommie Willis writes and paints in Birmingham, where he is secretary to the Alabama Writers' Conclave.
.....

**"Laughter is the outward expression
of a nerve well-struck."**

--Larry Gelbart



Dance Vortex #1

Suki Grimes

16" x 16"

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*Suki Grimes has recently moved from Birmingham, Alabama, to Berkley, California.
Most of her abstract works are acrylic on canvas.*
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EXCERPT FROM *SIX BLOOMS GROW EDEN*

Jeff Faulk

Raindance
Groundswim
Rootsuckle
Water seeks the embrace

Compelled to reach to core incite
The root seduces the fountain to spring
Life enthrall to quench a nourishment bring
Through center stem expectant rise

In deed complete the sated reap
Tribute tarries in veins one hundred fold
Grateful steps a vibrant pulsing slow
Filling needs of hungered leaves

Thorough water does aspire
Further rise through stem to opening face
Of saturated petal soft embrace
To beauty full respire

Pass through root
Evaporate from bloom
For skin thus does sensation flow
From hearts' core
To edge of world

.....
Jeff Faulk is an artist and illustrator in Birmingham, Alabama. His drawings are soon to be published in What Came Before, by Irene Latham.
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Knockers
Linda Walden

.....
Linda Walden is a sculptor born in Tallassee, Alabama. She utilizes bronze casting, steel fabrication, wood, stone, and found objects as well as other experimental materials. In the past three years she has had sculpture and digital prints juried into group exhibitions throughout the Southeast. Contact: LINDAGWALDEN@aol.com
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THE SKELETON POOL

Marian Lewis

"For twenty-five years, you've dedicated your life to defending children at the advocacy center; weekends, nights, holidays; always the children. I haven't complained. You promised you'd make time for us when you retired from your practice. Now you want to pop off to the jungles of South America, or New Zealand, or Borneo or somewhere."

"It's Costa Rica, Jeff, and it's only for two months."

"But when, Becca, when will you make time for us, for our marriage?"

"I need to get away from this confining New York apartment. I want to think about my life, sort options. I feel numb, emotionally frozen."

I'm shivering. February snowflakes drift past the window. Not even the aroma of hot coffee escaping the maker's dramatic rattle warms me. Snow glistens red, green, orange under the traffic light on the snow-covered street below. The weatherman predicts snow for two more days and I feel no warmth for this man I married thirty years ago. I wish I could remember how I once cared. Handsome Jeff, smiling brown eyes, dark-hair, gentle, yet strong—we knew love then. We were a team; Jeff a third year medical student and I just entering law school. Four years later, our son was born. Then something changed. The event, long buried under accumulated detritus of our marriage, is forgotten.

"You're not young, Becca. You could be hurt, or worse."

"I'll be perfectly safe. Remember Dr. Radbury, the professor we met at the museum fund-raiser last month? In May, he and his wife are taking a group of college students to study entomology in the Monteverde Cloud Forest. He said I could travel with them. Please, Jeff, understand; I don't want to alienate you. Our son has a family of his own, you're happy in your medical practice. I so want to do this."

"You don't need my permission and my opinions no longer count with you anyway. Do what you like."

Sitting here in the open-air dining room of the Hotel del Niebla, an accurate appellation for a hotel in the clouds, I sip a delicious drink made of blended watermelon and pineapple juice. The conversation with Jeff three months ago echoes in my mind like a whisper from another world. Just outside, a violet sabrewing hummingbird steals nectar from a Heliconia. Fragrant with volatile essence of trees, vines, garish blossoms, and tiny orchids, the air is sweet, heady, delicious. A symphony of insects provides

background as Dr. Radbury prepares his students for their first foray into the cloud forest. My pulse quickens at the prospect of going with them.

Dr. Radbury glances in my direction. "Tomorrow we'll be hiking into the forest. Bring whatever you like but be sure to bring water and mosquito repellent, and don't forget your camera. We'll hike about eight miles up and down steep trails at an altitude of forty-six hundred to five thousand feet. A word of caution—disks sliced from tree trunks serve as steps. Since the forest is wet most of the time, these steps are covered with algae and they're slippery. Any questions?"

The conversation drifts from discussion of tomorrow's activities to the history of the area. Dr. Radbury seems to have an unlimited repertoire of local folklore. He lowers his voice. "Have you heard the story of the ghost of the mist?" he asks. I move closer as he continues.

According to local legend, the wailing of a child may be heard echoing through the mist on dark nights.

"This area was settled by Quakers from Alabama in the early fifties. They explored the cloud forest, recognized its uniqueness and later helped establish the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve. They set up schools and started the cheese factory. It's still in

operation today. By the way, the cheese is excellent. You should visit the factory while you're here."

Dr. Radbury pauses to take a cube of pale, yellow cheese from the dish in front of him, then he continues. "Occasionally, religious leaders from various denominations visited the settlement. One day, a missionary, Reverend Bennett, his wife and five children ventured out to explore the high forest trails. Somehow, the youngest child wandered away. Reverend Bennett stayed behind to search for the child while Mrs. Bennett and the other children went for help. People from the settlement searched for days but found no trace of the child or her father. When you checked in yesterday, you met Mrs. Bennett. She's managed this hotel for many years. She refuses to leave because she believes that some day her husband and child will be found. According to local legend, the wailing of a child may be heard echoing through the mist on dark nights."

As I walk back to my room, I listen to unfamiliar night sounds and wonder if any could be a wail. My palms are sweaty, mouth dry. I stifle a

sense of foreboding. What's the matter with me? That story shouldn't distress me so, I think as I latch my door.

I'm awakened at dawn by loud, shrill whistles and metallic, rattling calls. It's a flock of raucous grackles in the trees just outside my window. I lie still, absorbing sounds of the Central America morning. Today I will hike into the cloud forest.

We load our backpacks and by ten o'clock, we're on our way. We walk several miles along a road that leads to one of the cloud forest trails. I follow behind as we hike deeper into the forest. We enter a world of vines, giant philodendrons and trees so tall that they seem to puncture clouds to release the mist that condenses on everything. We walk for several hours. Perspiration soaks my shirt. My backpack rides, a wet mass, across my shoulders. I stop to photograph a clump of red berries and notice a faint path to my left. Vegetation almost obliterates its entrance.

Dr. Radbury and the students are ahead on the main trail. I can catch up with them shortly. But first, I want to explore this path a little way. Sunlight dapples its faint outline as I push foliage aside and move along the narrow trail.

The scent of decaying vegetation mingles with the fragrance of myriads of blooming plants. Birdcalls resonate through the trees. I feel as if I'm inside a huge drum. Giant philodendrons decorate tree trunks and orchids rest atop the cloud-soaked limbs. Lianas cascade downward a hundred feet from this Neotropical forest's upper story. On my right, a ray of sun dazzles a pink bromeliad resting in the limb-trunk junction of a large fig tree. Everything drips. I close my eyes and turn slowly, around and around. The eerie notes of a bellbird ring through the forest; I can almost feel the tones. On my right, the trail's edge falls sharply downward through a tangle of vegetation. The trail is becoming steep, slippery. I'll go just a little further ...

"Oh, damn!" I'm falling ... vines snagging ... down, down, down ... rolling, like a rock in a tumbler. Finally, I stop against a huge tree in a moss-covered clearing beside a stream. I'm still clutching the strap of my backpack. I gasp, try to move my arms, legs, neck; attempt to stand.

"Ow!" Right ankle won't support weight. I fall back onto the moss and call for help. There's no answer. I'm in trouble—at the bottom of a cliff in a Costa Rican jungle filled with creatures that could harm me. My ankle is sprained or broken and it's getting late. Dr. Radbury and the

students are probably on their way back to the hotel. By the time they realize I'm missing, it'll be dark; there's no hope anyone will find me.

I'm trembling. "Get a grip; stop the panic," I say aloud. My voice sounds unnatural, ghostly. I must take stock of my resources. The water bottle in my backpack is almost full. There are two granola bars; I won't starve. I have a Swiss army knife, flashlight, insect repellent, a plastic raincoat, and my automatic focus camera with a flash attachment. I smile at the irony. If I can't defend myself with the knife, at least I can photograph my attacker—hope someone finds the film some day and figures out what became of me.

The ankle hurts. I'm covered with dirt and scratches, face is hot. I look around and notice that the stream's bow has created a small pool. I crawl to the edge. The pool appears to be about two feet deep; the bottom is covered with silt. I lie flat on its mossy bank, swirl my hand in the water and splash it on my face. The silt, disturbed, moves lazily to change position. Something shines, a form inconsistent with the darker streambed. I look closely.

"Oh, what the . . . it looks like a gold cross!" I reach cautiously into the water, grasp the cross. It's attached to a chain extending into the silt. I pull gently to free it. First, it resists, then yields. I can make out a form rising slowly, a sodden tree limb perhaps. Oh, my god!

I stifle a scream, scramble away from the pool. Blood rushes, making a swishing sound in my ears. The chain is attached to a human skeletal upper torso and skull. I force myself to move back to the pool. The indolent flow of the stream has washed away some of the silt. The skeleton is more exposed now, and there . . . among its ribs, I see a smaller skull and . . . a smaller chain and cross. My heart pounds. This is the missionary. It's Mrs. Bennett's husband and their child. Reverend Bennett must have found his little child only to perish after plummeting down the same slope that victimized me today. Perhaps injured or unconscious, he could have fallen into the pool, still clutching the child.

I struggle to my backpack, grab the camera. The skeletons lie exposed, waiting patiently, sharp against the darker streambed. I adjust the camera's lens to focus through the water. The shutter clicks. Its images may quell the rumored wails heard by some on dark nights. I imagine I hear wailing. I freeze. But it's only a night bird calling.

I crawl back to the tree and lean against its trunk, try to clear my mind, make a plan to survive the night. It's getting dark. Calls of howler monkeys

reverberate through the forest. I hear a cacophony of sounds, the snuffling of some animal across the stream. Could it be a jaguar! Again, fear grips me. I know jaguars eat things like deer, fish, and wild pigs. In my rational mind, I know they rarely attack humans. But, what if a jaguar approaches? Strangely, this prospect thrills me. I'll just shine the flashlight, aim my camera and shoot.

Now, I can see a sliver of moon reflected in the pool. My emotions conflict through anxiety, fear, dread and excitement. I'm feeling shaky; I force myself to eat a granola bar and drink water. Chilled, I wrap up in the raincoat and lean back against the tree. This night will be long. Fatigue overtakes; awareness fades. Ghosts of a child's skeleton, nestled in the ribs of a larger skeleton, haunt me. A memory floats through layers of my subconscious, memory of a lost child but it's not the missionary's child. Oh, my god . . . it's my own. I'm wide awake.

Twenty-five years ago, I dealt with this. Why is it haunting me now, again? I want to cry out into the night's blackness. I don't want to feel this pain. My body aches with wanting. Perhaps a little girl, her name would have been Heather. I would have watched her run free through the spring grasses, ride her pony, laugh, grow up to discover her own dreams. But I didn't let her.

The choice seemed so clear back then. One child, a son, barely three pounds at birth-my body all the time trying to adjust to the lovely, little alien. Then, too soon, still weak, my body rejected the new baby even in the first weeks. But why do I mourn yet? Oh, damn you child there in the pool, your little gold cross shining around your bony neck. You had a life, though short. My tiny baby, a two-month collection of cells . . . hardly existed at all. Out of fear for her safety and mine, I chose for her and oh, how I miss her. All the howls of night creatures, though fear invoking, are no match for the grief demon inside my head. I can't control my sobs, buried twenty-five years by fear that if once started, they couldn't be stopped.

**I would have
watched her run free
through the spring
grasses, ride her
pony, laugh, grow
up to discover her
own dreams.**

Here in darkness on the mossy bank of the pool with its two skeletons whose spirits departed so many years ago, I have good company to witness the freeing of my grief. Finally, tears abate.

Birdcalls, I snap awake after hours of erratic dozing. I can see light, pale, through the trees. How I welcome this dawn. The air is cool, fragrant. A breeze stirs the grass on the bank across the stream. My ankle is swollen, body aches, but my mind is surprisingly clear. From out of nowhere, thoughts of Jeff invade my consciousness. I want to feel his gentle, strong arms around me. How many years has it been since I've longed for his embrace? I do not have time to think about this now. I must find a way back to the main trail.

But first, I move to the pool. I feel a strange affection as I peer through the water at the skeletal forms. Ironically, Mrs. Bennett's faith has been rewarded. I reach into the water and carefully remove each cross, put them in my backpack and zip it securely. Perhaps now Mrs. Bennett will find peace and quell the imaginings that must have haunted her for so long.

Moving back from the pool, I take my Swiss army knife from the backpack and cut twigs from a nearby sapling. I fashion three crosses, one large, one smaller and finally, one smaller yet. I place the two larger crosses on the bank near the pool. I place the smallest cross near the tree and kneel beside it. I bow my head, ask forgiveness of my child, unborn so many years ago. Here in the solitude, I feel peace. Finally, I can forgive myself.

Now, I must find a way to climb out of here. I make a splint from the sapling; tie it securely around my ankle with sleeves cut from my shirt. I struggle upward, clutching vines, pushing with my good leg. Finally, I reach the site of my fall and limp back to the main trail. I hear someone calling me. It's Dr. Radbury. I answer, but today I don't hear my name with the same familiarity that I did only a day before.

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Marian Lewis is a writer and retired space biology research scientist. An avid horsewoman and nature enthusiast, she writes fiction, children's stories, and non-fiction in Owens Cross Roads, Alabama. bo325sky@earthlink.net.
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THE RUNNER

Annell Gordon

Snatching up her bicycle by its rusty handlebar, the red-faced girl sped off toward the parking lot on the backside of the hospital grounds. The tires hummed over the blistering black asphalt – louder as the girl pedaled faster. Her scabby knees pumped furiously. The day was a scorcher, but that was not the sole reason for her flushed face.

“Stupid boys! They better shut up! I hate them!” She had fled from the jeering circle of boys and jumped on the bike. Sweat trickled through her stringy hair and beaded just under her sunburned nose. She rode around the empty parking lot, thoughts of revenge circling through her brain.

“Girl! Hey, white girl! Yo daddy Dr. Ames – he got de key. You go get Arthurine yo daddy’s key. You let me outta dis place. Hurry, girl! I got to get outta here!”

The girl paid no mind to the shouts coming from the window high overhead – the one on the third floor with the metal grate. She heard the same request every day all along her daily bicycle route. The girl lived in a small white house inside the main gate of the state mental institution for colored folks. The child’s daddy and mama worked at the hospital for the state of Alabama. Many of the patients called her daddy Dr. Ames. As a lab tech, he did wear a long white coat. As she rode throughout the hospital grounds, patients would often ask her to bring the key that would set them free.

Arthurine was by far the most worrisome. Her pleas were nonstop. During hot summer nights in 1958, the girl’s parents opened their windows, hoping to catch a cool breeze. They then had to listen to pitiful ululations of the insane – cries for Mama, appeals to the Lord Jesus, and lots of just plain old mumbo jumbo. The racket stilled a bit toward midnight as patients wore themselves out. Arthurine, however, never let up. “Lemme out! Oh, please, Lawd Jesus, lemme outta heah! I needs to be outta dis place where I is!”

Tires whirring louder, angry thoughts spinning faster, the girl screeched to a stop, cocked her freckled face to the high window and shouted, “Shut up, woman! I ain’t got no key, and my daddy sho’ ain’t no doctor. I can’t help you. I can’t help none o’ y’all so you better leave me alone!” The girl then pushed off and pedaled home, sick with shame over her hateful words.

She had started the day feeling free – finally out of school for the summer. Her parents had already left for work – a short two-block walk. She and her sister had decided to race to the hospital commissary for a breakfast of cold Coca-Cola and a bag of salty peanuts. Although the little sister was much fleet of foot and was way ahead, the girl felt that she, too, was flying in the cool morning breeze, running free and easy, no cares, no school, racing easily. She didn't notice the knot of boys squatted in the dirt playing marbles. They noticed her.

“Whoo-eee, look at her. Run, girl! You flyin' on that skinny twisty leg.”

“We better get outta her way. She's probly gone break the sound barrier.”

“Hey, gimpy girl – what you tryin' to do? Outrun a snail?”

She kept running, not from a sense of freedom, not now. Now, she ran from shame. For a moment, she had forgotten her lousy leg. She had felt that for once she could race like the wind, even catch up with her little sister. The younger girl kept running, used to the taunts hurled by other children at her older sister. The younger girl didn't notice her big sister when she turned to go back home to her trusty bicycle. Only on the rusty old bike could the girl really fly free.

After speeding away from the parking lot, she returned home and threw down the bike. Then she stalked off to confront her tormentors who were still shooting marbles. As the girl stamped along the dusty lane, she glared across the nearby vegetable fields – row upon row of turnip greens, red potatoes, sprouting corn, and peas, planted by the patients as occupational therapy. They had also built the barbed wire fence enclosing fields that stretched as far as she could see. The girl was just about to give those mean boys a piece of her mind when she looked up to see a scrawny, jet black woman, wiry hair bristling in all directions, threadbare cotton dress riding up stringy thighs, running directly toward her. The woman's bright black eyes were focused, not on the girl or the boys kneeling in the sandy lane, but ahead, way ahead, clear across the undulating vegetable fields.

Bony elbows and knees, pumping like pistons, the woman was flying – racing in the breeze, covering ground. A group of three red-faced, fat-bellied, white men lumbered after her – white uniforms indicating that they were orderlies from the wards. Sweating and gasping for air, they

screamed, "Athurine – stop! Come back, girl! You ain't supposed to be out! Stop, girl! You gone be in so much trouble! Stop, Arthurine!"

Arthurine wasn't listening. She was too busy racing across well-manicured hospital grounds. She was too busy busting right through the middle of the circle drawn in the sand, leaping over three stunned-into-silence-marble-shooting boys, mashing with her bare scrawny foot the hand of the boy who had called the girl gimpy and kicking dust into the eyes of the other two. Arthurine was too busy sprinting past "Dr. Ames's" girl who stood with shining eyes and an ever-widening grin. She was too busy flying down the worn path toward the vegetable fields.

Arthurine was too busy leaping like a deer slam over the fence without ever breaking her rhythm and racing lickety-split along the dusty furrows across acres and acres of vegetables as far as the now happy girl could see.

.....
Annell Gordon is a middle school algebra and English teacher. She lives with her husband in their renovated 1840's farmhouse near Grove Hill, Alabama.
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"Being a newspaper columnist is like being married to a nymphomaniac. It's great for the first two weeks."

–Lewis Grizzard

I WOKE UP ONE MORNING AND DECIDED TO LEAVE

Anna Greene

Just like that.
You never stirred from your mouth-open, head-covered slumber.
I grabbed my coat and walked barefoot into the wet grass,
and shed twenty years of doing-the-right-thing
by the time I reached the gravel road.
I never looked back.

I imagine people made up reasons-
Another man, a bad childhood, white trash raisin'.
I imagine the church came by to pray for you,
(and to see if I left the house in a mess).
I imagine your vacant stare as you mumble answers
to pious questions meant to root out my sins,
all the while looking out the window,
at my muddy bare footprints.

But the truth?
Who could imagine the truth?
I got tired of trying to be good.
Good Christ I was free!
Naked and unashamed,
black-hearted,
but true.

And you – I know you.
So innocent, so effortlessly pure-
You couldn't even muster anger or blame,
You wouldn't satisfy me with punishment.
You just blamed it on menopause.

.....
*Anna Greene is a forty-three-year-old systems analyst who has no prior publications,
real or imagined. She lives near St. Louis, Missouri, with her husband and continues
her quest to figure out what she wants to be when she grows up.*
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LIFE AMONG THE LILLIPUTIANS

Judy DiGregorio

For most of my youth, I felt like Mrs. Gulliver living among the Lilliputians. A head taller than my friends, my older brother, and even many of my teachers, I did not appreciate my long-limbed body. The tallest girl, the tallest person, and the tallest object in the classroom, I felt like a skyscraper.

Lofting me to this height was a pair of spidery long legs with knobby knees and skinny ankles, accompanied by feet the size of boat oars. I longed to be dainty and petite like my girlfriends who batted their eyelashes as they looked up at a boy's face. I never looked up at boys. I looked down upon their dandruff-ridden heads.

Instead of 'gorgeous' or 'good-looking,' my nicknames included 'Wilt the Stilt,' 'Beanpole,' and 'Long Tall Sally.' Thankfully, I learned to laugh at myself early in life, and my sense of humor enabled me to deflect the insensitive comments I heard.

I'll never forget my first dance in junior high which I looked forward to with great anticipation. In preparation for the event, we practiced the mambo, the cha cha, and the jitterbug in gym class. Though my feet were big, I could float like a butterfly on the dance floor. Unfortunately, none of the dwarf boys at the dance invited me to flutter from my cocoon. "Cherries Pink and Apple Blossoms White" echoed from the record player as I languished on the sidelines, watching the midget boys dance with the short girls while the Amazons like me wallowed in envy and boredom.

When I lamented my height to my mother, she confessed that she, too, had dreamed of being shorter when she was a young girl. She tried to solve the problem in a unique way by asking to sleep with her sister Ellis, who at five feet, three inches tall was the shortest of Mom's five sisters. Somehow, Mother reasoned that sleeping with Ellis would magically stunt her growth. Of course, her strategy failed. Mother ended up being the tallest sister of all at five feet, nine inches.

By the age of thirteen, I had surpassed Mother's height and sprouted up like a sunflower to five feet, ten inches. My attempts to appear shorter by wearing low-heeled shoes and a flat hairdo did not succeed, though I hunched my shoulders forward and bent my knees as much as I could. During every class photo or chorus concert, I stood on the back row. If

someone moved me to another row temporarily, there was an immediate outcry of ‘I can’t see over Judy.’

In high school, the situation improved slightly since some of the boys grew a few inches. However, I still stood out in a crowd of girls like a scarecrow in a tomato patch. My height wasn’t quite the disadvantage it had been though. When I auditioned successfully for the school’s modern dance group, my angular arms and legs fit in perfectly, and the judges raved over my high leaps into the air.

In college, I began to appreciate my height. Suddenly, being tall was an advantage, especially if you played sports. Selected for the varsity basketball team, volleyball team, and swimming team, I out-jumped and out-spiked my opponents, and my elongated body was a definite asset when I competed in the butterfly stroke.

My good fortune continued. Cast as Maggie, the funeral dancer in “Brigadoon,” my stature allowed me to perform dramatic arabesques and poses quite suitable to the role. Other dancing roles followed in “Carousel” and “The Boyfriend.” On stage, not a single person asked me ‘how’s the weather up there?’

At last, others viewed me as queenly and statuesque. A modeling agency hired me for part-time work, and even vertically challenged males eyed me from a different perspective. The ugly duckling had metamorphosed, maybe not into a swan but at least into a graceful ostrich. It was a great relief to leave the days behind when schoolmates laughed at my height.

Eventually, I married a good-looking Italian named Dan who was one inch shorter than I was, but my height did not bother him at all. He didn’t care if I wore sneakers, flats, or three-inch stiletto heels with sexy ankle straps. Of course, I didn’t often wear stiletto heels for two reasons. First, I couldn’t keep my balance in them, and, secondly, Dan might get tired of talking to my chest – or maybe not.

Infrequently, I still encounter ill-bred people who can’t appreciate tall women. I treat their flawed outlook with disdain since I am far above their petty views, both literally and figuratively. However, sometimes one of my big feet accidentally sticks out and trips them.

I have traveled from stick girl to gawky teenager to mature woman. Although I am still taller than most of my friends, I no longer feel like Mrs. Gulliver. In fact, I feel quite comfortable with my height. I don’t need a ladder to reach the highest shelf, and I can see over the crowd at any parade.

Yes, I have finally accepted who I am.
I am tall.

.....
Judy DiGregorio is a humor columnist for Senior Living and Eva Mag who has resided in Oak Ridge, TN, for 37 years. She has published more than 100 columns, essays, and humorous poems. The Tennessee Arts Commission recently nominated her for its online registry for outstanding Southern writers. See her portfolio at <http://southernartistry.com>
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HORIZON BECKONING

Robin Jackson
Acrylic on canvas
40" x 35"

.....
*Robin Jackson is a Birmingham artist who wears many hats. She paints in oil and in watercolor. She is a fused glass artist, creating fused glass pendants, plates, bowls and crosses. She also teaches art at Advent Episcopal School.
Greatglass3@yahoo.com*
.....

LAST SWIM

Jennifer Horne

Longed-for, during the first, busy days of fall,
dreamt-of, through a dull hour,
my mind floating like the blue raft
adrift on the green lake-
I meant to have that last swim,
feel the springs shooting up
from the cool heart of the world,
smell the fecund lakebed once again
before it closed into mystery,
keeping its secrets in the mouths of fish.

Suddenly I realize I've missed it.
The last bright day is gone.
September 20th:
the surprise lilies are up,
and all the wild magnolias
are dropping their canoe-shaped leaves
in unison. This afternoon,
rain will settle in like a mild cold.
Gone are the cloudbursts, sudden thunder,
the blazing steam that follows.

I stow the rafts, put away my suit,
sow some lettuce seeds.
The kind eye of the sun
is turned toward me now,
not that other, unrelenting, blessed fire.

.....
Jennifer Horne is the editor of "Working the Dirt: An Anthology of Southern Poets" (NewSouth Books, 2003) and co-editor, with Wendy Reed, of "All Out of Faith: Southern Women on Spirituality" (University of Alabama Press, 2006).
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SARTRE & PEANUTS

Nathan Radke

Our anti-hero sits, despondent. He is alone, both physically and emotionally. He is alienated from his peers. He is fearfully awaiting a punishment for his actions. In desperation, he looks to God for comfort and hope. Instead, his angst overwhelms him, and manifests itself as physical pain. There is no comfort to be found.

Poor Charlie Brown. He waits outside of the principal's office, waiting to hear what will become of him. He offers up a little prayer, but all he gets is a stomach ache.

When we are exposed to something every day we can eventually lose sight of its brilliance. Newspaper readers have been exposed to Charles Schulz's comic strip 'Peanuts' for over half a century. Even now, a few years after Schulz died, many newspapers continue to carry reruns of his strips, and bookstores offer Peanuts collections. His characters are featured in countless advertisements, and every December networks dutifully show the *Charlie Brown Christmas Special*. Is there any philosophical insight that can be gleaned from such a mainstream and common source?

There has been much discussion concerning Peanuts as a voice of conservative Christianity, including several books such as the 1965 work *The Gospel According to Peanuts*. This is not without reason; even a cursory glance at a Peanuts anthology will reveal enough scripture references to fuel a month's worth of Sunday school classes. However, to suggest that Schulz's philosophical insights didn't make it past the church door would be a mistake. While Schulz had a great interest in the Bible and the teachings of Jesus Christ, he was also highly suspicious of dogmatic, pious beliefs. In a 1981 interview, he refused to describe himself as religious, arguing that "I don't know what religious means." Charlie Brown was no comic strip missionary, blandly spreading the word of organized religion. Upon reflection, the trials and tribulations of the little round-headed kid provide deep and moving illustrations of existentialism.

This mixture of Biblical teaching and existential thought is not uncommon. The Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard was one of the first existentialists, and his religious beliefs impelled his philosophy, rather than limiting it. Kierkegaard was forced to confront his deeply held belief in the existence of God with the tremendous empty silence that returns from the prayers of humans, and the results were his vital and compelling theories of faith and freedom.

It should also be noted that while Schulz did not consider himself religious, neither did he refer to himself as an existentialist. In fact, he was unfamiliar with the term until the mid 1950s, when he stumbled across a few newspaper articles about Jean-Paul Sartre. He was certainly not formally schooled in philosophical works. And yet, his simple line drawings provide illumination into the questions and problems raised by existentialism.

In order to identify examples of Schulz's philosophy, a bumper-sticker version of existentialism should prove helpful. In his seminal 1946 work *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, Sartre outlines some of the core aspects of his theories. A key aspect is the idea of abandonment. Kierkegaard felt that there was an unbridgeable gap between God and Man. Sartre goes even further, and argues that even if there is an unknowable and unreachable God, it wouldn't make any difference to the human condition. Ultimately, we exist in an abandoned and free state. We are responsible for our actions, and since Sartre argues that there is no God to conceive of a human nature, we are responsible for our own creation.

How does this apply to Peanuts? Like the existential human in a world of silent or absent deities, Schulz's characters exist in a world of silent or absent adult authority. In fact, the way the strip is drawn (with the child characters taking up most of each frame) actually prevents the presence of any adults. Schulz argued that, were adults added to the strip, the narratives would become untenable. While references are sometimes made to full-grown humans (normally school teachers) these characters are always out of frame, and silent. The children of Peanuts are left to their own devices, to try and understand the world they have found themselves thrust into. They have to turn to each other for support – hence, Lucy's blossoming psychiatric booth (at five cents a session, a very good deal).

An ideal example of abandonment is the relationship between Linus and The Great Pumpkin. Every Halloween, Linus faithfully waits by a pumpkin patch, in the hopes that he will be blessed with the holy experience of a visitation by The Great Pumpkin. Of course, The Great Pumpkin never shows up, and He never answers Linus' letters. Despite this, Linus remains steadfast, even going door to door to spread the word of his absent deity. Does The Great Pumpkin exist? We can never know. But from an existential point of view, it doesn't matter if he exists or not. The important thing is that Linus is abandoned and alone in his pumpkin patch.

Sartre did not deny the existence of God triumphantly. Instead, he considered it "... extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there

disappears all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven.”. Without God, everything we do as humans is absurd, and without meaning. Certainly, spending all night in a pumpkin patch would qualify as embarrassing as well. In the absence of any parental edicts, the characters in Peanuts have had to become very philosophically minded in order to establish for themselves what is right and wrong. When Linus gets a sliver in his finger, a conflict erupts between Lucy’s theological determinism (he is being punished for something he did wrong) and Charlie Brown’s philosophical uncertainty (when the sliver falls out, Lucy’s position crumbles). At Christmas time, Linus dictates a letter to Santa, questioning the validity of Santa’s ethical judgments regarding the goodness or badness of the individual child. “What is good? What is bad?” asks Linus. Good questions.

Another key aspect comes from this monstrous freedom that abandonment allows, and this aspect is despair. In a nutshell, we are created by our actions. We are responsible for our actions. Therefore, we are responsible for our creation. What we are is the sum total of what we have done, nothing more and nothing less. But why should this cause despair? To answer this, Sartre examines the characteristics of cowardice and bravery. When Sartre



Pelham, Alabama artist Lana Fuller is a photographer and graphic designer. To see more of her photographs: www.fuller-photo-image.com.

describes the position that opposes his own, we can see how it may be comforting to not be responsible for one's creation:

If you are born cowards, you can be quite content, you can do nothing about it and you will be cowards all your life whatever you do; and if you are born heroes you can again be quite content; you will be heroes all your life, eating and drinking heroically. Whereas the existentialist says that the coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic; and that there is always the possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero.

(Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* 1957)

It is this very possibility that causes despair. Why does Charlie Brown tear himself into knots over the little red-haired girl? The very possibility that he could go over and talk to her is far more distressing than its impossibility would be; he must take ownership of his failure. When she is the victim of a bully in the school yard, Charlie Brown's despair threatens to leap right off the comic page. He isn't suffering because he can't help her, but because he could help her, but won't: "Why can't I rush over there and save her? Because I'd get slaughtered, that's why..." When Linus helps her out instead, thereby illustrating his freedom of action, Charlie Brown only becomes more melancholic.

In order to combat despair, Charlie Brown succumbs to bad faith, which is to say, he denies his freedom: "I wonder what would happen if I went over and tried to talk to her! Everybody would probably laugh ... she'd probably be insulted too ..." It is only by falsely denying his freedom that Charlie Brown can overcome his despair. But by hiding behind bad faith, he does himself no favours. Another lunch hour is spent alone on a bench with a peanut butter sandwich.

Existence is problematic and disturbing. In one weekend strip, Schulz succinctly describes the horror of discovering one's own existence in the world:

Linus: I'm aware of my tongue ... It's an awful feeling! Every now and then I become aware that I have a tongue inside my mouth, and then it starts to feel lumped up ... I can't help it ... I can't put it out of my mind. ... I keep thinking about where my tongue would be if I weren't thinking about it, and then I can feel it sort of pressing against my teeth ...

Sartre devoted an entire book to this experience – his 1938 novel *Nausea* in which his character Roquentin is alarmed to discover his own actuality. But Linus sums the point up very well in a few frames.

Existentialism has been accused of being defeatist and depressing (and Sartre didn't help his cause with terms like 'abandonment', 'despair', and 'nausea'). But Peanuts also demonstrates the optimism of the philosophy. Why does Charlie Brown continue to go out to the pitcher's mound, despite his 50 year losing streak? Why try to kick the football, when Lucy has always pulled it away at the last second? Because there is an infinite gap between the past and the present. Regardless of what has come before, there is always the possibility of change. Monstrous freedom is a double edged sword. We exist, and are responsible. This is both liberating and terrifying.

Schulz should be considered part of the generation of authors who saw active duty during World War II; he is in the company of writers such as Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, and of course Sartre himself. It is foolish to disregard literature simply because it appears in the funnies section of the daily paper. Schulz's simple line drawings and blocky letters contain as much information about the human condition as entire shelves full of dry books.

While it is difficult to say what Sartre would have thought of Peanuts, we do know what Schulz thought of Sartre: "I read about him in the New York Times, where he said it was very difficult to be a human being, and the only way to fight against it is to lead an active life – that's very true." If any character has shown us the difficulties in existence, it is Charlie Brown.

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NATHAN RADKE teaches workshops and tutorials in philosophy at Trent University in Peterborough, Canada. This article is printed with his permission and with the permission of Philosophy Now. nathanradke@hotmail.com

All quotations in this article come from the following books:

- Charles M. Schulz: *Conversations* edited by M. Thomas Inge, University Press of Mississippi 2000.
- *Existentialism and Humanism* by Jean-Paul Sartre, Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1957.
- *Peanuts Treasury* by Charles Schulz, MetroBooks 2000.

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MAGIC CITY
Larry O. Gay

Larry O. Gay lives in Bessemer, Alabama, and spends most of his spare time photographing hidden treasures throughout the state. For Larry, photography is more than a hobby; it's the way he captures and celebrates life. Visit his website: www/larryogay.com.



The Web
Hank Siegel

.....
*Hank Siegel, a retired government executive, has spent the last two years
rediscovering his photographic interest in capturing the beauty and complexity of our
visual world.*
.....

**"How many ne'er set foot beyond
themselves!"**

—Omar Khayyam

EXCERPT FROM NOVEL IN PROGRESS, *MOODY'S TRIP*

Andrew Glaze

Chapter One

I want to assure you that I, Willie Moody, am in most ways a conservative protector of the daily grind. We ought to get that straight at the outset. And the last person I expected to see as I drove into town was Mary Margaret. So ok, Mary Margaret "the accurst." I don't know how to introduce to you these events that so radically changed my life. I can only say that they came to my attention on Friday, April 21, 1995, a date which I will remember for a lot of reasons. Including that it was a few days after Easter, and that my 38th birthday had just finished landing me a low blow.

I drove into town, i.e. Delphi, Alabama, tired from a long drive, making for the home of my aunt, just deceased. If she'd been there to argue, she'd have let me know what a reckless expenditure it was, to purchase both an airline ticket and a rental car on the same day! Particularly since I was coming from a mysterious Eastern city she had only glimpsed now and then on TV.

But, defying her tsk-tsking, I had decided to sneak a peek at my old childhood home and see how my relatives and lost acquaintances were getting along. As I drove into town, rounding the town square, my stomach tensed up a bit, but it immediately retreated to normal as I spotted old Pete Offus near the post office. He was greyer, scragglier, raggeder, but unmistakably the Pete Offus I had known all my life. Waiting for his social security check. He was across the square from the confederate monument, which was s soldier standing and staring down the barrel of his gun—a tribute to salesmanship—but never mind, save that story for some other time. I stopped the car, opened the door, and stood up. "Pete Offus!" I yelled, and because he hadn't seen me in ten years, added "It's me, Willie Moody."

He shaded his eyes and looked at me with a squint, like a 'coon inspecting a committee of hounds. "You got the advantage of me, son, who the hell you say you was?"

"Willie Moody."

"Oh! Willie Moody! That Willie Moody—Patrice Bell's boy!" He offered me a hand which felt like an inferior grade of warm sandpaper. "You here for her funeral!" I had to admit that was true.

"How've you been, Pete?"

"No better than I ought. Truth of the matter is (he looked at my car speculatively) I expected to see you, if I see you at all, in a gold-plated Rolls Ransom."

"Why's that?"

"Word around here has been you penetrated them Eastern millionaires like motor oil through a cow. They say you are stacking up the money in your pantry."

"They are about as ignorant as usual."

"Sorry to hear about Miz Bell. I seen your Cousin Richard nosin' around this morning."

"I'm on my way to see Cousin Billie Dietrich."

"Screamin' Billie. We don't see her much."

It was my fate to have a relative known as Screamin' Billie.

Pete's white streaked eye wandered over the heavens like a meteor looking for someplace to fall. He spat over his shoulder. "Truth to tell, Willie, Angel and Billie have had serious trouble, I hear."

"Yeah."

"It's a case" he said, "I never did hear of anything like, except maybe once. They divided the house. He lives in the East, she lives in the West. They drew a yellow line down the middle. Nobody allowed to cross."

"Are you still selling hardware, Pete?"

A little eclipse of sadness moved across his face. "They moved the store into one of them concrete-floor, single-story, football-field size premises where you can't see the hardware for the advertising signs and you can't find nothing without a pair of roller skates. I won't work for a hardware store that stocks vases and dwarfs."

"Dwarfs?"

Glassware gnomes in short britches from Germany for old ladies."

"Then I guess they got rid of the old stove."

"Glad you're here, Willie, now it will straighten out." His eyes lighted.

"Wait till you see who else is in town! Rented the ol' Brown mansion, got it fixed up like kingdom come."

"Who?"

"You'll see!" He shoved off from the car and waved. "Somebody you will want to see."

Who the hell would I want to see or care to see in Delphi except for Muley Hulbert? Certainly not my relatives. Not Screamin' Billie, not fat Cousin Richard, and Aunt Patrice was gone.

I detoured to have a look at this old Brown mansion which somebody had fixed up. Somebody I knew. My Uncle Fairleigh (Aunt Patrice's long-defunct husband) always called that property "Moby Dick Acres" because he said it was a white whale. A white whale being several times the size of a white elephant.

I stopped in front. Two old ladies used to live in the middle part of the house in my childhood. They had out-lived friends, family and money. Now, the yard neatly cut, and newly planted in rye grass, painted an unnatural shade of off-chartreuse, the widow's walk on the roof glittered whitely, it looked like Queen Victoria dressed for a goombay ball.

There was no car in the driveway, no name on the mailbox. Who would Pete Offus know that I would know—likely to be wealthy enough to finance such a project? I pulled into a shady spot and stopped the engine. I looked at my watch. 3:30. A nearby mail box said "Segal." It was the house where Sibyl Vester used to live. Another said "Krensky" where the Johnstons used to live. Krensky's in Delphi?

I started the engine, passed the field where Margaret Palmer used to stake her cow that got loose and came in our house and ate the table flowers. Then the Abernathy house, where Solen Abernathy came back from World War I with mustard-rotted lungs and scared us kids with horrid rasping sounds. But he was so gentle and sorrowful a gentleman, who used to sit on the porch and play checkers with himself, twirling the board around on a lazy Susan to take turns.

When I felt I couldn't put off visiting Billie any longer, I accelerated. By the time I got to her block, everything was tumble-down fences, weather-worn unpainted wood, twisted trees, weeds, and beer cans. I stopped by the house. It looked awful and pitiful. The left half was plastered with a shingling of flattened blue five-gallon tin cans. There was the strangest sort of fish-scale pattern of great hammer gouges where the nails went in. The right half of the house was still more or less protected by the original boards—paint worn off. It had the silvery grey look of old wood in the country. And even though it was Billie who had summoned me from New York for the funeral, with a telegram which intelligibly enough said "Aunt Patrice died tonight, please come, Billie." I decided I couldn't face her. Not today. I'm a coward.

So I started the engine. Just then a car turned into the street a few blocks down, the only one in sight. It proceeded slowly towards me. It was big and battleship-grey. When it came up to where I sat in my puddle of funk, the brakes scrunched.

The back window slid gently down with a hiss like money fluttering in the breeze. A woman's head appeared out of the rich gloom. She wore a flowered turban and sunglasses. A good-looking lady of 35 or 40.

"Something wrong?" said a delicate cultivated voice, the kind that gets your attention with deep vibrations. The driver nodded. A black man in

uniform. The hand on the rear window was carefully groomed, with long fingers, shiny silvery nails.

"No thank you, ma'am," I answered, trying to see who was addressing me. "Looking for the Holiday Inn."

"Straight ahead, five blocks, to the right." she said.

"Thank you."

"No trouble, Willie." She waved, the window shut with a faintly audible snick, the car glided away, making a low crooning wasteful sound, picked up speed in a hurry and rapidly became a tiny blob.

Who was there, that rich, in Delphi, Alabama, who knew me that I never saw before in my life? In the distance, the car turned right toward the Brown house. Obviously she was the one Pete Offus was telling me about that I would be surprised to see.

Something buzzed like a gnat in my ear that I couldn't reach. Something was familiar, but I couldn't for the life of me place it. Just at this time, I didn't have that much brain to strain, so I decided to postpone worrying about it. To get to Aunt Patrice's house I had to go through the town center, passing several broken-down, dusty pick-up trucks with red-neck farmers at the wheel. When they abolish chicken-neck farmers in dirty pick-ups where I come from, I won't call it home any more.

Uncle Fairleigh's old law office looked vacant on the second floor as I passed through town. A long strip of duct tape stretched over a crack in the window. Rock, rap and rhythm and blues screeched below from a speaker full of broken glass. A black kid in denim was smoking a cigarette in the doorway trying to look evil.

At Aunt Patrice's house, I hugged Julia, with her pleasant brown face, sad smile, and kitcheny smell. She gave me a history of how Aunt Patrice started to fail. I called Edgar Pope, the lawyer, then the undertaker, to get things moving.

I found out neither Julia nor Edgar had found a will.

.....
Andrew Glaze, a native of Birmingham, is a long-time award-winning poet and emerging novelist. Andrew Glaze andyglaze@charter.net
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LAST NIGHT

D.S. Pearson

I watched
 Jupiter
 flee
 across
 the raven blackness
with
 Pollux and Castor
 by his side
saw Saturn and his entourage
 reluctantly
 ascend
through silhouetted limbs
 of
 frightened trees
as
 demons vied with angels
 for dominion
 over
 earth and sky

like
something from
 a classic 1950's
 science fiction film
 projected
on the liquid crystal
 dome
 of heaven
in
a digitally remastered
 3-D
 color format
 and
Dolby DTS Surround

.....
*D.S. Pearson is a General Contractor from Hueytown, Alabama. He is a member of
Alabama State Poetry Society and his poems have appeared in ALALITCOM.*
.....

**"Art, music, and philosophy are merely
poignant examples of what we might have
been had not the priests and traders
gotten hold of us."**

—George Carlin

SNAP SHOT

Joy Godsey

From the back
of a red pickup truck
flew a white foam

fast food box
onto the bright
green winter rye

growing on the side
of the road.
After a moment

a murder of crows
sent a sable black
sentry to guard the prize.

Green grass
White box
Black crow

Snap shot.

.....
Joy Godsey works as development director for Childcare Resources. Joy lives on the Locust Fork of the Black Warrior River where she and her grandson Lee love to explore the woods, catch lizards, fly paper airplanes, and create art from found objects. Joy's passions include kayaking, fly fishing, cooking, and poetry. She also enjoys coastal cruising along Florida's northwest panhandle, where she and her partner keep their trawler, Pyxis.
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DEATH TO HEMINGWAY

Rachel Saxon

I pull recklessly into a tight parking space. The kind of way that, if you happen to be sitting in the passenger's seat, would cause you to white-knuckle the door handle, but it's different when you are in control so I don't particularly mind.

I sit in the car for a few minutes quietly contemplating why it is that I am going to the grocery store. It's not that I particularly need anything. Yet boredom breeds eccentricities and I suppose that on this particularly gloomy Saturday I am more than excessively bored.

I hop out and slam my squeaky door. I think about how I desperately need to get that fixed... but not before the oil leak and not before that stupid blinking air bag light that always makes my mother nervous.

I don't know why but some impulse inside me causes me to grab a cart... and of course it has a faulty wheel that makes the entire thing veer to the left. I think briefly about switching to a basket but decide against it. I tell myself that no one ever uses the baskets, but then I think about all the people lugging carts with the only contents being a bottle of water and a pack of gum. Then I go back to thinking about my own leftist cart. I end up nixing both options.

As I walk past the express lane I cannot help but look, entirely out of habit of course, for the cute checkout boy who worked there two summers ago. My undying love for him was only slightly devalued by the fact that it was the same summer I fell in love with the boy who worked at the bakery in the mall. Nonetheless he is the reason I love the supermarket. He is also the reason that I only use the express line, whether or not I have 10 items or less.

I start with produce. As I walk down the isles of fruit paradise, I stop to fondle, grope and smell each piece. Like a blind man at an all-you-can-eat buffet. I wonder if Hemingway liked the grocery store, and I wonder what it would be like to meet him in frozen foods.

He stands in front of the freezer with the door open. I am irked by the fact that he is just letting the maddening frost film develop on the door. He reaches in and grabs an aesthetically pleasing white box of frozen macaroni and cheese. I then feel the need to advise him that the particular brand of his choosing is five cents more and infinitely less appetizing than the kind in the green box. But he gives me a disdainful and, well, Hemingway-esque look and mummurs off taking the brand of his own selection.

I get offended. I was only trying to help him save five cents. Not to mention an asbestos-tasting cardboard box of macaroni and cheese. So... no, thank YOU, Hemingway!

I dance down the hair care aisle to the Muzak version of "Rhinestone Cowboy." I spend 20 minutes trying to differentiate between the colors *espresso* and *chestnut*. And I think to myself how many different names are there for brown hair color? There's *espresso*, *chestnut*, *caramel*, *taupe*, *brunette*, *chocolate*, *coffee*, *tan*, *russet*, *dark sienna*, *light sienna*, *burnt sienna*. and then there he iss.

I think to myself "why is he in my grocery store!" and then I think about how wildly possessive I am of such a public place and then about how stupid I am even to be having this train of thought, and I try to erase it from my mind. So there we stand next to each other, civilly, like two strangers. Like two ships passing in the night.

I pick up a pack of unsalted butter and compare it to the salted butter I have already in my hand. I try to intensely concentrate on the difference in sodium and fat content but all I can think about is how he still smells the same. Like old spice and clean laundry.

I introspectively re-create an embrace so that I can adequately remember what he feels like. We speak no words. There are no more words to be spoken. I mean I could talk until I am blue in the face. I could stop and analyze everything that went wrong. I could spew my guts and four months of therapy all over the cold linoleum. But instead we stand there silently. But instead he looks at me. Not through me ... at me. I don't even notice that I have so carelessly dropped my butter. Five months, 2 weeks, 4 days, 7 hours, and 15 minutes. I wonder where the time went.

I am lost in a sea. It is here I remember that at some point in your life all memories start to blur. Days turn into weeks that become months that bleed into years that are lost in decades that no one seems to remember. And no one DOES remember. It is like only yesterday that it was 1979. But I remember. It's been 5 months, 2 weeks, 4 days, 7 hours, and at this point 17 minutes, and there is nowhere else to go.

have often wondered if Greta Garbowas into deli meats (let's face it, who isn't into deli meats?), would she choose roasted or honey-glazed turkey? Would Sylvia Plath like Trix or Fruity Pebbles? If James Dean made a salad would he use both bleu cheese and pine nuts? But these people are all dead. I'll never meet them at the supermarket..

I pay for my bottle of water and pack of gum. I think Fitzgerald, Teasdale, Kafka, these people are all dead.

I get into my car.

I think these people are all dead.

.....
*Rachel Saxon is an unpublished undiscovered poet and short story writer. She has just recently moved back to Alabama after attending a year of Bible School in the UK.
theredlips@hotmail.com*
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ROCKY POINT (WITH CLOUDS)

Melanie Sanderson Morris

Acrylic on canvas

24" x 20"

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Melanie Sanderson Morris is an award-winning acrylic painter (www.MelanieMorrisArt.com). Her work has been exhibited in galleries across the south and featured in regional and national juried shows. A native of Mississippi, Melanie has a professional background that includes medical marketing and consumer advertising. Currently, Melanie devotes her time to painting and teaching acrylic workshops.
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FACING GIANTS

Irene Latham

This photograph was taken June, 2006, at Muir Woods National Monument (California) where Irene and her husband Paul first met the redwoods and were reminded of how even in nature, art is a matter of perspective.

“To give birth to a desire, to nourish it, to develop it, to increase it, to irritate it, to satisfy it; this is a whole poem.”

-- Balzac

MUIR WOODS

Irene Latham

Here we begin
again,

where redwoods
rise on all sides

as if born
whole

and placed
by some god

whose one decree
was silence.

The seed
cannot know

its own greatness,
and we can

only hold hands,
take pictures

that tell nothing
of all we hope for

or where we've been,
or where we'll be

when the seed
is no longer

a seed
but a giant

with foot-thick skin,
its arms

reaching
toward an ocean

it will never see.

.....
*Irene Latham's forthcoming book of poetry is What Came Before. She is editor of
ALALITCOM and poetry editor of Birmingham Arts Journal. See www.alalit.com &
www.birminghamartsjournal.com & www.irenelatham.com*
.....

A SQUEAKY PORCH SWING IN TUSCALOOSA

Connie Foster

Yesterday I got in my car and drove from Memphis, Tennessee, to Tuscaloosa, Alabama. I didn't stop until I found the white house with a wrap-around porch at 1769 Crabtree Street. The home of Charlie Rhodes, the truck driver who killed my family.

Three months ago, I stood at our front door and watched my husband secure our son in his car seat. As they pulled out of the driveway, my son waved frantically from the back window as his lips mouthed *bye, Mommy*. How could I have known that would be the last time I would ever see him?

I paid \$349.00 for these binoculars. I considered buying a handgun but changed my mind. I sit here parked across the street with Charlie Rhodes in my sights just watching and waiting. Look at him, kicked back in the porch swing with nothing to do but watch traffic. I imagine him in the cab of his semi rolling over a cliff to his death. I visualize the terror on his face. Such thoughts are all that give me comfort. Lord help.

The front door opens, and a little girl carrying a book joins him. Her blonde pigtails are held in place with pink bows that match her tutu and tights. He lifts her on to his lap and opens the book. I roll down my window, but I don't hear his voice, only the groan of the porch swing. My body sways forward and back with them. I feel my Joey's tailbone grinding into my lap as I dream of once upon a time and happily ever after.

Dark settles in and they go inside. I watch the deserted swing move back and forth, and the loneliness of it makes me look away. I turn on the ignition and drive toward an empty house two doors down. My headlights illuminate a For Rent sign. I try to jot down the phone number on a Wrigley's gum wrapper, but my pen refuses to write on the waxy surface. Remembering my cell phone, I wad the paper and toss it over my shoulder, punch in the number and make an appointment for the next morning.

I sign a six-month lease on the spot. The landlord places a set of keys in my hand, and I put \$1,200 cash into his. When he leaves, I lock up and drive to Dillon's Furniture Store and buy a twin bed and a La-Z-Boy. I find a Wal-Mart Store, and I fill my shopping cart with toilet paper, sheets, one pillow, milk, cereal and a bag of assorted Hershey's. I return to the rental house and unpack my supplies. Thanks to my husband's life insurance, I'm in good financial shape for the first time ever. I've paid off Morton's Funeral Home, Heritage Mortgage, and Visa with over \$200,000 left in the bank. I

call it my nervous breakdown fund. It's an indulgence, really, allowing myself the mental breakdown my body craves.

With the recliner extended to elevate my feet, I place the pillow behind my neck, pick up my binoculars and watch Charlie Rhodes park his truck on the street. The front door opens. This time she wears a red cape and carries a brown basket. She runs down the sidewalk, and her cape flares behind her. He bends down, and his arms disappear under the red fabric. They exchange two quick kisses on the lips, and a chill runs through me. They go inside.

Daybreak begins to filter through the picture window as I flip-flop between sleep and semi-consciousness, dreaming of Joey. He sits on a porch swing wearing his baby blue Easter suit. His lower lip quivers, and he reaches for me. As I bend to pick him up, he transforms into a pretty, blonde girl with pigtails held in place with pink bows. I jolt upright in my recliner.

I walk to the kitchen and find my purse. I remove a manila envelope and place four stamps in the upper right hand corner for good measure. The next afternoon, my heart races as Charlie Rhodes limps away from the mailbox. He sits on the swing and opens the manila envelope. He looks at the picture, then the index card that reads, "Look at what you took from me." My binoculars shake as he lowers the note and looks at the picture of my Joey again. His face contorts. His chin trembles. I smile at his discomfort. Tears fill his eyes as he begins to cry. The sound of a wounded animal comes from his lips. His wife appears at the front door then hurries to his side. She picks up the picture and card then drops them as she wraps her arms around him.

The sounds of my own cries startle me. I pick up the pillow, run to the bed and cover my face, knowing my howls will rival that of Charlie Rhodes.

It's been dark for some time now. I haul my body off the bed and look out the window. The Rhodes' house appears lifeless. I walk outside, cross the street and climb the steps. Joey's picture is still lying on the porch. I bend down and pick it up. My hand caresses the picture, and I press it to my chest. As I sit on the swing, a loud squeak makes me suck in a breath. A noise comes from inside the house. I take off running, my heart pounding as the porch is suddenly bright with light. I slip inside my front door and grab the binoculars. Charlie Rhodes stands in his doorway fully dressed, holding a beer bottle. He looks around, takes a step back inside and closes the door. The porch light goes out. It's over.

I place Joey's picture on the passenger seat beside me. On the outskirts of Tuscaloosa, I head north. As I drive, I tally my expenses in my head. My nervous breakdown cost me \$3,500. Will it be enough?

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CONNIE FOSTER, first grade teacher by day and writer by night, lives and writes in Woodbury, Tennessee. She writes short fiction, creative nonfiction, and is revising her first novel. You may email Connie at foster_connie@yahoo.com
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ALABAMA

a sort of secession

Mark E. Wadley

I have spent my life cursing you, your temperament –
the way you let loose rain that closes like a curtain,
the irritable warmth of the palms of your hands–
but now that we're parting ways I have dug deep
into the dirt that separates us and pulled out a beating heart.
You and I can share that heart, halve it down the middle.

When I leave I'll tattoo your borders onto my left shoulder blade
and if I don't come back I'll know that you'll always be here, or there,
or somewhere that I can feel, finger like a map.
Your veins are highways that I haven't even thought of traveling down-
dusty back roads and six-lanes with strip malls.
Maybe I'll come home someday and trace them with my fingers,
feel our pulse beating like a heat wave
on the hood of my grandfather's old blue truck.

.....
Mark E. Wadley has high aspirations of becoming Birmingham's native son.
.....



JOSIE

Christine Cox
Pastel on Paper
23 x 19

.....
Christine Cox is a Birmingham, Alabama artist who enjoys sketching and drawing in pencil, pen and pastels for family and friends. cox@covpres.com
.....

LIVE ANOTHER DAY

Sharon M. Haley

Kyriaki's finger brushed the crack in the window as she searched the road outside her block dwelling. Pulling her hand back, blood smeared the glass. The frustration of staring out of dirty windows was more than she could bear. She wasn't used to living in filth. Crossing herself, she prayed for patience.

Waiting made her restless, and her back ached. She longed to return to the fields with her husband and sons, but the violence had escalated, and they were prisoners in their own home. The Bulgarians would soon reach Doxato. The gray September sky mirrored the dreariness that hovered inside the house.

In 1941, Germany, with the help of its Bulgarian allies, occupied most of Greece. The government was in upheaval, and the economy all but destroyed. Food shortages left thousands of people on the brink of starvation. Rumors of atrocities committed by the Bulgarians paralyzed the towns scattered throughout the northern part of the country. The Bulgarians pillaged and murdered wherever they went, without conscience.

The Kanatzidis family lived on a farm in the northeast corner of Greece. Their home near the Mounar-Bashi Springs was about six miles from the foot of the Kouslari Mountain that bordered Bulgaria. Papa had gone in search of their son, Prodromos, who at seventeen ran away to join the resistance.

Kyriaki was alone except for her fourteen-year-old son Gregori, who slept on a mat near the fireplace. He slept the sleep of innocence, his chest rising and lowering with each intake of breath. Gregori was born late in life, when she thought there would be no more babies. When this beautiful boy with large dark eyes and long brown lashes came along, he became as her heartbeat.

She touched his arm, "Wake up, sleepyhead, it's time to rise. It is our turn to get water."

Gregori stretched his arms and yawned deeply, "I'm up, Mama." He pulled on his trousers and shirt, then rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"Do you think Papa and Prodromos will be back soon?"

"I pray they will, but we must have patience. Run and fill the bucket while I fix our breakfast. Don't stop anywhere."

Kyriaki watched him struggle with his out-grown jacket, and she handed him the old black cap that once belonged to Prodrimos. She couldn't suppress a smile when he raised the cap from his head and bowed low with an exaggerated salute like a young courier. Then he grabbed the bucket and hurried out the door. He ran down the path and soon disappeared from view. Anxiety would fill her until he returned.

Later, as Kyriaki placed bits of kindling on the fire, Gregori burst through the front door, his face beet red. "They wouldn't let me get water. They are afraid and ordered everyone to stay in their houses. I'm sick of hiding. I want to fight those devils. I want to join the resistance like Prodrimos."

In a blind rage, she struck the boy hard across the face, knocking him down. Shock fused him to the floor as blood dripped from his nose.

"Don't ever say that again," Kyriaki cried.

"I don't know where Papa and your brother are, and your sister's husbands have gone in search. I am filled with dread of losing them all, and it is eating my heart away. I can't lose you, too!"

The anger in his dark eyes softened, and he took her hand and kissed it tenderly. "I'm sorry Mama. I never meant to hurt you, but I feel so useless. All we do is wait, and sometimes it makes me feel crazy. If only there was something we could do to help."

"I know, my son. I feel the same, but all we can do is pray and wait."

Kyriaki put together a meager breakfast. There would be no lunch and possibly only a crust of bread for supper. Their food nearly gone, they waited for Papa to return with rations, but when would he return?

As darkness fell, Katina and Sotiria tapped on the back door.

"Mama, the Bulgarian soldiers are going to every house and taking all the men in the village," cried Katina.

"Thank God, Makis and Nikos went after Papa," moaned Sotiria. "We must hide Gregori. They are taking boys as young as fourteen."

Kyriaki covered her mouth to hold back a scream.

Gregori cried out, "Don't send me away, Mama! I can fight. I will protect you."

Gunshots and a loud voice booming from a megaphone silenced them. The voice demanded everyone come to the town square. The children stared at their mother seeking deliverance, but there was none, for she was as helpless as they were.

Kyriaki looked at Gregori, "You must come with us, my son. Promise me you won't say anything."

Reluctantly, he nodded his head. The women kept the boy close as they hurried to join their neighbors. Hundreds pressed together as a battalion of soldiers shouted orders and waved guns at the crowd.

An officer walked back and forth, slapping a long stick in his hand. A bandolier slung over his shoulder and the pistol at his side looked menacing. Beneath a tall, fringed hat was a brooding face covered with a black beard and mustache. Bushy eyebrows nearly concealed dark eyes that stared like a cat in the night.

A woman in the front row clung to her husband as a soldier pulled him from her grip. She dropped to her knees and began beating her breast, crying to God to save her husband.

The soldier yanked her to her feet, "Do you wish to join your husband?"

Kyriaki closed her eyes and prayed. Suddenly, she whispered something to Gregori, and then dropped to her knees. Having no scissors or knife, she began ripping his pant leg with her teeth. Katina thought she had lost her mind, but then realized what she was doing. Greek boys under thirteen never wore long pants. Silently, Katina dropped to her knees and began ripping his other pant leg. Automatically, their neighbors closed in around them.

The soldiers never noticed what they were doing. Kyriaki and Katina jammed the torn fabric into their blouses. They rose slowly one at a time so as not to draw attention. One by one, the soldiers shoved the men and boys together until they looked like one living organism. Finally, their turn came.

The officer stared at Gregori. "How old are you, boy?"

Struck dumb with fear, he began to stammer, "I, I."

Kyriaki whispered, "He is twelve, sir."

"What did you say? Speak up," said the officer and pulled her towards him.

Katina and Sotiria kept hold of Gregori who reached for his mother. "Be still, be still," they whispered.

Kyriaki repeated her words, "He is twelve, sir."

Involuntary trembling overtook her body as the officer glared at her in silence. Something about her face caught his attention, but she was afraid to move. Suddenly, a bit of string brushed her cheek and she understood what

he saw. Threads from her son's pants had attached themselves to her hair and shawl.

He is no fool. He will know what I did. God in Heaven, help us.

His gaze turned toward her daughters, but they stared at the ground. He looked at the boy nearly smashed between the bodies of the women, and saw the ragged pants exposing pale thin legs. Fatigue seemed to wash over the officer, and for one fleeting moment, Kyriaki thought she saw a melancholy look in his eyes. His chest expanded within his tight jacket when he took a deep breath. The moment seemed to last forever, and Kyriaki closed her eyes and held her breath.

As if an impulse seized him, he pushed her backwards, and she would have fallen if not for her daughters. A curse flew from his lips, as he turned away and moved on to the next family. Instinctively, she grabbed her son who hid his tear-stained face in the folds of her shawl.

When the interrogation was over, they forced four hundred men and boys to march towards a field near the outskirts of town. The remaining soldiers locked the women and children inside the elementary school. It was a small building meant to house young schoolchildren, but they squeezed them inside like sardines in a metal can.

The moment seemed to last forever, and Kyriaki closed her eyes and held her breath.”

Katina and Sotiria clung to each other while Kyriaki held Gregori in her arms. All around them cries of fear and anger permeated the air.

Air was a precious commodity to the smothered souls, but whispered tales of the Bulgarians burning their prisoners alive kept them scratching at the door and walls. Kyriaki waited with the rest for the inevitable flame and smoke to take their last breath.

All through the night, gunshots pierced the darkness. Sporadic crying and moaning carried by the wind drifted through the trees and mingled with the fog. The interminable night did not bring their death sentence, and after twenty-four hours they were released, many on the brink of asphyxiation. The soldiers waved their guns, and ordered them to return to their homes. Kyriaki and her children waited for hours listening for the sounds of the soldiers, but the village was quiet.

The following morning, hunger and thirst gave them the courage to slip outside in search of food and water. The Bulgarian soldiers had deserted

the village so Katina and Sotiria returned to their homes to wait for their husbands.

Kyriaki tried to keep her young son close, but Gregori began roaming the village with the other young boys. She wouldn't let her son out of her sight so she followed them. As she trudged along, she noticed that all the boys wore ragged clothes, and many were bare footed. The cold air warned of the coming winter, and Kyriaki wondered how she would feed and clothe her child. Was it so long ago, when their lives were peaceful and their only concern was working to put food on the table? Stripped of everything, hunger followed them like a deathly shadow.

It didn't take long for the boys to discover the field where dead bodies of men and boys were stacked in gruesome piles. They looked in awe at the massacre before them. Kyriaki tried to get her young son to come away from the horror, but he was frozen.

At that moment, Kyriaki knew that her beloved son as well as all the others had lost their innocent childhood. This horrible scene of death would remain in their memories forever. Disgust filled her as the boys moved closer to the pile of bodies, and she pleaded with them to return to their homes. As though given a silent order, the boys began searching for something. Kyriaki didn't understand what they were doing, but it tore at her heart to see them moving among the dead bodies.

She watched in horror as Gregori began pulling boots from the feet of the baker, Antonis. Another boy took the boots from the tobacco dealer, Petrides, then the dentist, Alanapoulis and the butcher, Constantine. Their only thoughts were of the shoes that would warm their feet during the cold winter ahead.

At first, Kyriaki was repulsed, and closed her eyes to shut out the sight. Then she took a deep breath, hesitated for a moment and slowly crept up to the field of death to join the boys on their hunt. Perhaps this was their chance to live another day.

.....
SHARON HALEY, Woodbury, Tennessee, writes fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry and children's stories. Her first novel, Souls Entwined, is set in the Prater Community of Cannon County, Tennessee, from WWI to the 1950s. She is currently working on the sequel. She belongs to the TWA and Amen Southern Revelation Sisterhood writers. memeba@earthlink.net
.....

MY SUNS

Krissie Allen

Dawn.

I look over the hills at the gold fire—
My spirit's reflection—
Resurrecting from a night of darkness,
Ready to begin its symphony,
Tuning up with warmth on children's faces,
On stone hearts.

High noon.

Its trumpet blows
Loudly,
Calling in line nature's army.
Walking towards it, I am laughing.
Turning away, I have
Nothing,
Just bitter winds at my ears.

Dusk.

Gently,
Its shadow rests
On my shoulders,
Ready to carry me into night,
Still remembering,
I am the sun,
The center of the universe;
Tomorrow I may exchange it for
The moon.

.....
*Krissie Kubiszyn Allen is a former high school English teacher who currently writes
poetry and short stories in Birmingham, Alabama.*
.....

AN UNDERTAKING

Jim Reed

When I have done everything else,
I will write

Once I have raised the kids, retired, settled the debts,
sharpened all the pencils,
I will write

Just as soon as I take a
writing course and figure
out the mysteries of
ISBN and obtained an agent,
I will write

On the way to the hospital
and just before the undertaker
rubs his hands in glee,
I will write.
But not much.

.....
*Jim Reed has written hundreds of stories and poems about his internal and external
lives. He lives in Birmingham, Alabama. www.jimreedbooks.com*
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**"If the doctor told me I had only six
minutes to live, I'd type a little faster."**

—Isaac Asimov

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