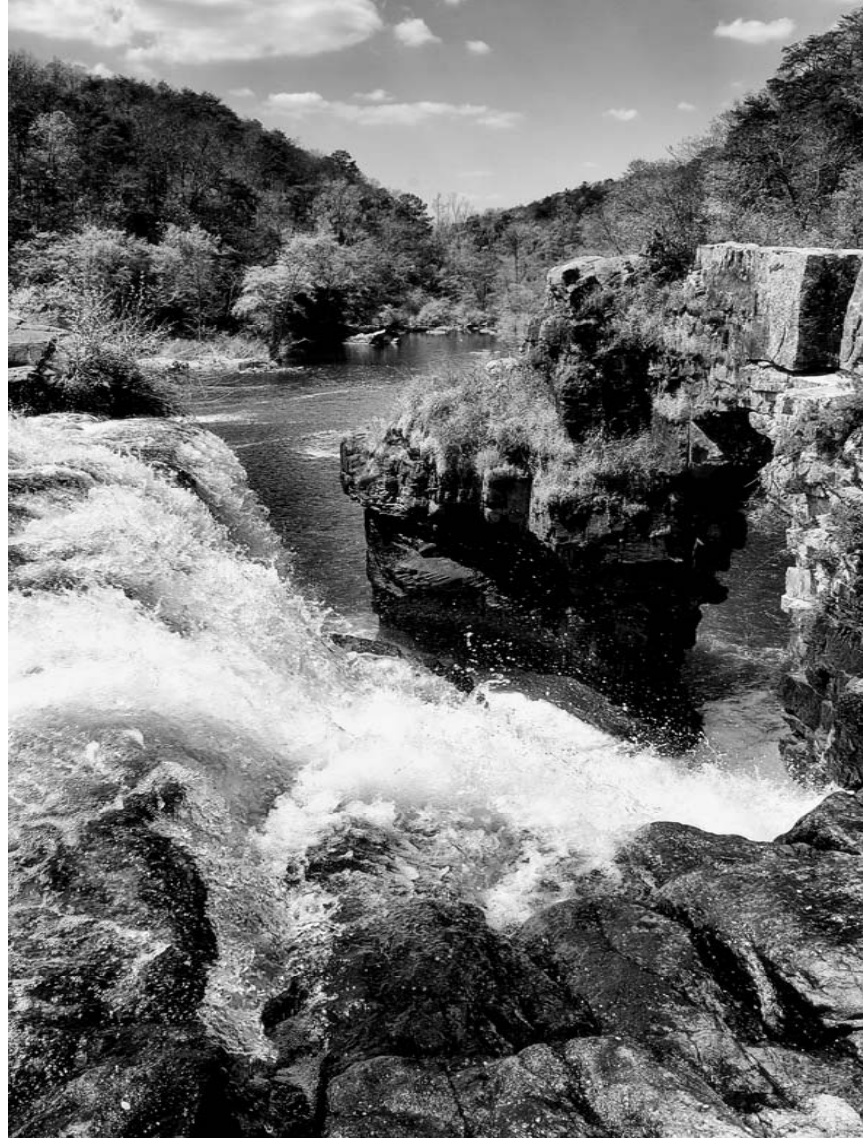


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Front Cover: **CANYON**

Photographer Lana Fuller works in graphic design as well as fine art photography. She owns Fuller-Photo-Image with her husband Kevin. They live in Pelham, Alabama.

Back Cover: **SNIFF**, Charcoal & Pencil

Gwen Gorby lives in the countryside near Birmingham, Alabama, with her son, John Gorby Carpenter, and various pets including dogs, goats, chickens, peacocks, and a donkey. The subjects of her paintings and charcoals are found in the people and places she encounters during adventures with her son.

OSAMA'S SANDWICH SHOP

Shaun Crawford

FADE IN:

INT. A NEW YORK CITY DELI

CUSTOMER enters. A MAN stands behind the counter in a robe and turban, bearded, with a rifle slung over his shoulder.

CUSTOMER #1

Ah, hello. Hey, I live around the corner and I've never noticed this deli here before. Are you new to the neighborhood?

MAN

Yes, just immigrated.

CUSTOMER #1

Oh, really?
Where from?

MAN (pausing, as if thinking)

Canada.

CUSTOMER #1

No way! Yeah, I thought so. I could tell by the long beard. Hey then, what's the rifle for? Bears?

MAN

Rats.

CUSTOMER #1

Ew! Oh yeah, New York rats are huge! But isn't it illegal to carry that thing around?

MAN

Illegal rats.

CUSTOMER #1

Oh, well, I guess that makes sense. So, what brings you to the States?

MAN

I am student.

CUSTOMER #1

No kidding? At NYU?

MAN
No. Flight school.

CUSTOMER #1
Seriously? And how is that going?

MAN
Not so good.

CUSTOMER #1
Oh, that's too bad.

MAN
Yeah. Frozen funds.

CUSTOMER #1
Ouch. Well, I guess it does get pretty cold up there in Canada. So that's why you opened this sandwich shop?

MAN nods.

CUSTOMER #1
O.K. then. Let's see what you have here. What's your specialty?

MAN
We have sandwiches, soups and sides. All Canadian.

CUSTOMER #1
Great. O.K. Sandwiches. Let's see. What's on a Tally Bun?

MAN
Veggie tabouli on a toasted bun.

CUSTOMER #1
Really? Tabouli's Canadian fare?

MAN
Yes.

CUSTOMER #1
Huh. You learn something new every day. No, that sounds too boring. How about the Infidel Castrato? What's that?

MAN
Cuban sandwich on sliced Italian bread.

CUSTOMER #1
Interesting. Actually, that sounds too spicy. How about that. What's the catch of the day?

MAN (beaming)
That is our house specialty! O-Salmon been laden.

CUSTOMER #1
Salmon, huh? What does the 'O' stand for?

MAN
Ocean.

CUSTOMER #1
Oh, I see. As opposed to farm-raised?

MAN
Right.

CUSTOMER #1
Been laden? Laden with what?

MAN
Tartar sauce.

CUSTOMER #1
Ooh. No, I'm not really a fish person anyway.
Another customer walks in.

CUSTOMER #2
Excuse me. Are you in line?

CUSTOMER #1
Oh, I'm just trying to make a decision.

CUSTOMER #2
Do you mind if I go ahead?

CUSTOMER #1
No, please. By all means.

CUSTOMER #2

Thanks.

(to MAN)

I'll have the Is-Salami sandwich on rye.

MAN

You want freedom fries with that?

CUSTOMER #2

No thanks. Now, that's all beef, prepared Kosher, right?

MAN

Sure. To go?

CUSTOMER #2

Great. Thanks.

MAN yells order in Arabic to unseen cook in back.

CUSTOMER #1 (shrugging toward CUSTOMER #2)

Canadian.

MAN (to CUSTOMER #1)

You ready yet?

CUSTOMER #1

I don't know. I'm between the Ramadan roll and the Afghani-Spam sandwich. Tell you what, just give me the Afghani-Spam sandwich on white bread.

MAN writes order down.

MAN

Any sides?

CUSTOMER #1

Let's see. What would go well with a sandwich? I see you have soups. What sizes do they come in?

MAN (holding up a bowl, then a cup)

Hez-bulla, hez-cuppa.

CUSTOMER #1

O.K. That's fine. What's this soup, the 'Al Jazz Era'?

MAN

New Orleans Millennium gumbo.

CUSTOMER #1

Cajun? French- Canadian Cajun?

MAN

What's your point?

CUSTOMER #1

Never mind. What about this other one. 'Allah-Ka-eesh'?

MAN

What does it sound like?

CUSTOMER #1

In French Canadian?

MAN nods.

CUSTOMER #1

A-lah-ka-eesh? With quiche?

MAN

Exactly.

CUSTOMER #1

So that's not a soup side?

MAN shakes head.

CUSTOMER #1

That's too bad. But look! I'm learning to speak Canadian! Who would have thought there were so many 'als' in the Canadian language. Is that like 'ey'?

MAN (unamused)

How about Hamas?

CUSTOMER #1

Excuse me?

MAN (enunciating slowly)
Humus. How about humus?

CUSTOMER #1
Oh no, no thank you. I'm not a big fan of chickpeas. I think I'll just have the sandwich.

CUSTOMER #1 (to CUSTOMER #2)
I didn't know humus was Canadian, did you?

CUSTOMER #2 shrugs.

MAN turns and shouts order in Arabic.

A WOMAN appears in a full-length robe, face veiled, carrying a small bag.
MAN takes bag and shoves order at WOMAN.

CUSTOMER #1
Wow! So this is your chef? How does he, she, cook all covered up like that?

MAN
Rules.

CUSTOMER #1
No way! Whose rules?

MAN
Health Department.

CUSTOMER #1
Oh, I see. Well, I guess that's good.

CUSTOMER #2 (to CUSTOMER #1)
Excuse me.

(to MAN)
Do you take credit cards?

MAN
Mullah.

CUSTOMER #2
Cash only? Well, alright.

CUSTOMER #2 takes bag, pays, exits.

WOMAN retreats.

CUSTOMER #1 (to MAN)
Say, do you have desserts?

MAN
Sheikhs.

CUSTOMER #1
Really? What kind of shakes?

MAN
See there. Sheikh Moo-Moo Abad. Is milkshake.

CUSTOMER #1
Well, I prefer my shakes Moo-Moo A-Good.
(chuckles)

MAN
Whatever.

CUSTOMER #1
Tell you what, do you have a Coke to go with my sandwich?

MAN
No Coke. Pepsi.

CUSTOMER #1
Oh, O.K. Pepsi then.

FADE OUT.

END.

.....
*Birmingham native Shaun Crawford is an environmental consultant and a member of
Alabama's Writing Today advisory committee. He is a reader for the Hackney
Literary Awards. crawsa@aol.com*

.....

CORVUS

Marianne Worthington

My mother works the crossword while we wait
for my father to die. I imagine
his father, with his pretty manners, his
hateful temper, standing by the logging
road to meet him. My daughter's nightgowns
flutter forgotten on the clothesline.
When she sleeps she is my mother reborn.
Ready or not, our days begin on black
wings and end the same. The crows strut and squawk
their dim song. Caw! is a three-letter word
for mockery. Into our yard they come
marching like drunken soldiers. Mother hates
this murder but feeds them stale bread, knowing
they steal our brightest treasures for their nests.

.....

Marianne Worthington is the author of a poetry chapbook, Larger Bodies Than Mine (Finishing Line Press, 2006). She lives in Whitley County, Kentucky, and teaches at University of the Cumberlands and the Kentucky Governor's School for the Arts. She is book reviews editor for Now & Then: The Appalachian Magazine.

.....

"Shall I tell you what true knowledge is?
When you know, to know that you know,
and when you do not know, to know that
you do not know--that is true knowledge."
--Confucius

she had to go by way of the volcano

A. Mary Murphy

she had to go by way of the volcano
this is familiar
we understand this
for some there is no easy way
for some the world does not fall at our feet
for some the world throws itself at us
sets itself on fire and throws rocks at us
and we walk right through the forge
getting disfigured and misshapen on the anvil

.....
A. Mary Murphy is a Canadian poet. She has a PhD in English and currently teaches creative writing at the University of Winnipeg. Her poems have been placed in numerous journals in Canada and also in Australia, England, France, the United States, and Wales. Her first book, Shattered Fanatics, will be published by BushchekBooks.
.....

"I notice that in spite of the frightful lies
you have printed about me, I still believe
everything you say about other people."

--Robert Maynard Hutchins

ON PEACHES AND PEOPLE

Peggy Teel

Peaches bought at a roadside stand,
eaten while driving down the road,
pits tossed out windows,
soft thuds in knee-high grass,
occasional plop or ping, a puddle or sign,
droplets of nectar dribbling down chins, soaking shirts, and
gathering in creases of necks and hands;
sated and sticky,
a solitary peach remains,
lone survivor;
mouth against peach skin, fuzzy, like a caterpillar,
soft tongue bitten by bitter skin -
warning or tease?
teeth pierce flesh,
surprise of sweet submission.
guilt;
lipstick mouth print on tender flesh,
quickly eaten, lest it brown
like an old man's tobacco-stained teeth;
pale center flesh bursts into flame,
turns bitter;
do people's insides taste like skin?
pit sucked clean, hard seed yields to fragile fruit,
life-saving laetrile;
pit on ground, bees gathering,
harvesting the flesh I couldn't
with my clumsy tongue;
belly full, mouth crisp and puckered, teeth acid sharpened;
bury the seed or suck out its marrow?
fragrance, opulence, sweetness,
stinging, healing,
virtues noted, vices savored,
respect that comes from knowing.

.....

Peggy Teel is Alabama born and bred, and she currently resides in Birmingham with her husband, Richard. This poem first appeared in her book Know Alabama (Phroughdyrie Press, 2006).

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PEACHES AT MARKET

Digital Photo

Katy Awad

.....
Katy Awad photographs people and places in Birmingham, Alabama.
.....

“We are all tolerant enough of those who do not agree with us, provided only they are sufficiently miserable!”

--David Grayson

HAMMER TIME

Susan Murphy

Thoreau once said, "...when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him." Smart man. If the Surgeon General really wanted to improve the overall health of the American people, he would require that this warning be emblazoned across the top of every real estate contract.

Our house has had us in a choke hold since the day we signed on the dotted line. The little split level darling spent months lying in wait. Not a

Our house has
had us in a choke
hold since the
day we signed on
the dotted line.

peep throughout the entire building process. Perfect angel during the final walk through. But as soon as the ink was dry, the transformation began. Full moon or no full moon, our beauty of a bungalow became a money guzzling, time trashing beast. While some people spend their lives in little hideaways called "Paradise Rest" or "Rancho del Cielo", we are saddled with "Attila the House",

whose quest it is to burn and pillage not only our life savings, but all of our weekends, holidays and "free time".

Even before all the boxes were unpacked, we discovered that the plumber had flip-flopped the hot and cold water pipes. Switching the H and C knobs would be no problem, but deprogramming myself from forty years of Left- H(ome) and Right- C(ross) would take some doing. What we didn't realize was that the mix up also meant that the dishwasher was trying to sanitize at 40, while the toilet was using up gallons of scalding water with every flush. I am told that trendy hotel bathrooms feature towel warmers, but as far as I'm concerned, there are certain times when feeling warm and toasty can be a little unnerving. Three days into home ownership, we were already looking at our first major repair.

No need to panic, we told ourselves. Every new home has a few bugs that need to be worked out. Besides, we had a certified New Home

Warranty. All we had to do was to call the builder and he would take care of everything.

What the contract did not specify was whether this action would be taken in our lifetime.

After making several rather pointed phone calls, I got a little...annoyed. Not Harold. It was just the break he'd been waiting for. Ever since he built his first birdhouse in Webelos, Harold's dream has been to die just like John Henry, with a hammer in his hand. Of course, in his case, it would be a perfectly weighted carbon steel issue with a custom grip, preferably in its own carrying case. As self-appointed home construction understudy, Harold had been secretly working out with screwdrivers and wrenches and such from the day we broke ground. Finally, he was to have his turn in the spotlight...or under the shop light, as it were.

The years have not managed to dampen Harold's enthusiasm. Armed with his new Time/Life home maintenance and repair series, he lives for the squeaky floor board, the drippy faucet, the loose ceramic tile. At Harold's hands, such seemingly simple operations take on all the pageantry of a Japanese tea ceremony. First, he must haul the 12 foot extension ladder up from the basement. Then, he puts on his Bob Vila safety goggles and rereads his power company pamphlet entitled, "Electricity and You: Well Grounded is Well Rounded". And this is just to replace the light bulb in the range hood over the stove.

For some reason, Harold sees himself as a modern day Daniel Boone, a rugged pioneer in Bermuda shorts and black socks, defending his homestead from encroaching wear and tear every Saturday...that is, until game time. Then his presence is required in front of the TV to help the NFL during another episode of "You Make The Call".

While I applaud Harold's dedication, I cringe each time he straps on the tool belt, because I know that somewhere in the middle of any project Harold undertakes, I will be called upon to hold something or make a judgment call of some kind. When Harold needed to change the bulbs in the outdoor spotlights, he asked me to hang onto his belt while he leaned out the bedroom window. For a good half hour, the only thing between

Harold and The Great Beyond was me and a 2 inch band of genuine reversible cowhide. I don't need that kind of pressure.

Once, Harold decided to take advantage of a Home-A-Rama sale on treated cedar planks to put an extension on the deck. Little did I know when he asked me to follow him to the store that I would end up driving ahead of him down the Interstate, emergency lights flashing, wearing a Wide Load sign on my rear bumper. It wouldn't have been too bad except that Harold forgot to signal me when he stopped off at the Shop-a-Snack. Several miles down the road, I happened to look in my rear view mirror, only to find myself driving down the Interstate at a breakneck 20 miles per hour for no apparent reason.

Before painting the house, Harold spent hours pouring over Consumer Reports articles on paint durability and ease of application. After two weeks of extensive study, he narrowed the color choices down to Ivory

The only reason I let Harold talk me into these things is that I know what happens when I leave him to his own devices.

Cream and Antique White. He painted test patches on all sides of the house to see how each color looked in the sunlight and the shade. Several days later, I was called in as an unbiased observer to make the final decision. I held out both paint swatches at arm's length and chose Ivory Cream. Feeling I had made my decision too hastily, Harold asked me to stand out in the front yard while he painted a six foot

section on either side of the front door. Again, Ivory Cream. Harold still wasn't sure I was getting the full picture. He went across the street and asked the neighbors if they would mind if I stood in their attic window to get an aerial view of the color choices. I could have died. The neighbors were very accommodating considering it was 6 o'clock Saturday morning. They just threw on their bathrobes and put on a pot of coffee. They did ask me, however, if Harold had ever worked for the federal government.

The only reason I let Harold talk me into these things is that I know what happens when I leave him to his own devices. Shortly after the Wide Load incident, Harold asked me to help him clean out the gutters. I told him he had a snowball's chance of my ever helping him with any more of his misguided projects. Crestfallen, Harold climbed up on the roof with the leaf blower slung across his chest like some Raingutter Rambo. I couldn't watch. A short time later, one of the neighbors called to say that Harold was hanging precariously from the down spout by an extension cord. Evidently he had miscalculated the kick of his new Leaf Blaster 2000. By the time I got outside to free him, Harold had regained his composure and was taking advantage of this new position to blow out the dryer vent.

All things considered, you have to give Harold an A for effort. And, thankfully, we're always just a phone call away from real professional help. The way things are going, however, it might be cheaper just to keep a plumber and an electrician on retainer. As it is, each time I call, they gather their entire staff around the phone before they ask, "What did Harold do this time?". It's always nice to bring a little sunshine into people's lives.

We have gone to great personal expense to protect ourselves from fire, flood and termite infestation. We are covered for tornado damage, falling redwoods and being swallowed by a sink hole. Every available moment is spent weeding and mowing, painting and caulking, sanding and spackling. But Attila the House just snickers. I know that somewhere out there is a mudslide or a plague of locusts with our name on it. It's just a matter of time. But I'll tell you one thing. I will have the last laugh. When we retire, Harold and I are going to rent.

.....
Susan Murphy is a laughter-prone author, columnist, and speaker living in Birmingham, Alabama with her husband Harold and two geriatric pets.
formurphys@aol.com.
.....

“Two wrongs make a casserole.”

--Bunny Hoest & John Reiner

THE NINA REMEMBERS COLUMBUS

Irene Latham

Three sisters, but I was the one he loved best.

His wife? She may have borne him a son
but I baptized him and taught him to swim in possibility,
I bore him across a hundred oceans.
I introduced him to a new world.

He favored *me*, ask anyone.
Voyage after voyage we sailed,
he with my ropes taut in his hands,
his boots claiming my deck,
his booming voice a song to lift my sails.
At night he would rest his cheek beside mine
and we would hold each other, earth and sea forgotten.

For him, I conquered warring currents,
discovered Cuba and placed him upon her shore,
delivered him by jet stream and stared down the eye of a hurricane.
And when he dropped anchor, wherever that might be,

I did not cry like the open-mouthed gulls.
I watched him row away in his launch, my eyes glistening,
wet tongues caressing my face, and this broad-shouldered man
with his fearless swagger and tender dreams,
I waited for his return with the patience of wood.

My sisters, they meant nothing to me.

.....
*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*
.....

MATCHING CELL PHONES

Ginger Hendricks

Six years after moving to the city, he decided they ought to be like everyone else and get cell phones. He found a deal with NY Wireless and chose two phones, each with interchangeable covers in blue, red and gray. As a selling point, the salesman added that his wife could coordinate her phone with her outfit. All ladies loved that.

When he went home, he placed the cell phone boxes on their sofa and joined his wife in the kitchen. Her graying hair was pulled back in a bandana and she wore no makeup, so he could see the scar near her eyebrow from a cancerous mole removed three years ago.

He told her she was the most beautiful cook he knew. She laughed, smoothed his hair onto his forehead, and told him she was trying a new pasta recipe and would he open a bottle of Merlot? While they ate dinner, he told her about his purchase.

She asked if they could afford the phones, and he assured her they could. But they had phones in their apartment and at work, and this was New York: there were pay phones on every corner. He assured her this was better. He didn't want her using a dirty pay phone.

It just seemed, she said, that this was an unnecessary expense. He said that everyone had a cell phone, and he'd already given the number to several friends, so she could learn how to program hers or not, but he wasn't playing any games. She said she wasn't playing games, and she was sorry. Perhaps, she suggested, they'd be able to call his father in Virginia at a cheaper rate.

He nodded and told her about how she could change the outside covers to match her clothes. She said she was sure she'd enjoy changing the covers around, but she liked the idea of matching cell phones, and couldn't they decide on one color and leave it?

They left their dishes at the table and he pulled out the boxes. She smiled when she saw both cell phones were in blue covers. When they were

first married and living in Pittsburgh, she'd wanted them to have license plates with their initials connected by a plus sign. Then, he had dismissed the idea, but now she asked again if they could choose a color they both could use. And even though he knew she'd prefer red, he said that blue was his favorite, so they were fine as they were.

He showed her how to charge her phone and when he turned the cell phones on, both glowed. They each chose how their phone would ring. He decided on the vibrator function, and she, on a double ring like that of a hotel phone.

As she mimicked his actions in setting up her address book, she asked him what it meant if she chose to keep the number secret. He said it would hide the number and name, and it could only be used with a special code. Oh, she said, and pushed no, she didn't want any number kept secret, and looked to see he'd done the same. Well, she asked, why would we need a secret number?

Well, she
asked, why
would we
need a secret
number?

He said he didn't know. All his contacts would be personal or business. Perhaps that function was for children, to keep them from accidentally charging up the phone bill.

She nodded, even though she knew that would be a worry they would never have.

Her doctor had called it "Tubal Factor Infertility," meaning her fallopian tubes were blocked. He said they could talk about other possibilities: in-vitro fertilization, perhaps. But she knew they couldn't afford it. Her husband didn't want to adopt, so as the doctor talked about options, all she heard was they'd be childless forever.

Why was it she could program a phone to do most everything, and yet she couldn't do the one thing she was designed for?

Their regular phone rang, a sharp, loud sound. As he went to the bedroom to answer it, she thought about how she loved their quiet evenings, when no one called at all. This was something they would've rarely had if they'd had children. But what about when she was alone, worried because he was late? If she lost her husband, she'd have no one.

When he came back into the living room, he held their address book. Again she told him she wasn't sure about the cell phones. She liked the idea of saving the money.

He told her once more he wasn't taking the phones back.

She programmed more numbers into her phone and thought if they had children, when they were teenagers, they would've gotten a family plan. She'd have programmed each child's number into her phone. They would've had two if she'd had her way: Jacqueline and Alan.

Without a word, she picked up her phone, went to their bathroom, and shut the door.

He can hear her now. Long, hard sobs. He doesn't understand why she's crying, but it hurts him to listen.

He picks up his cell phone and dials. Soon, two rings echo. She doesn't pick up at first but, when she answers, he doesn't say hello.

When she finally opens the door, he takes each blue cover off and replaces it with red.

.....
Ginger Hendricks holds an MFA degrees in writing from Vermont College. She is Director of the Center for Women Writers at Salem College in Winston-Salem, NC. Her work has appeared in The Patterson Literary Review, Big Muddy, Skirt, Winston-Salem Living and others. writingginger@yahoo.com
.....

skimming you

Danika Owsley

it's the illuminated beams hovering, drifting above glazed, sodden asphalt, the wipers swish, sling, slash, flick, the muttering of nocturnal silence swishing and flicking, the pattering, the tapping of loose rain streaming through skeletal trees, bare boned, stagnant, though echoing of our roots and cycles. I skim by these wooden skins [bark worse than bite] and muse warmly of swallowing you whole: bitter, bitter heart, steaming soul.

.....

Danika Owsley is a student at the Alabama School of Fine Arts in Birmingham, Alabama. When not writing, Danika spends her time riding horses, figure skating, and working as a life guard.

.....

“The older I get, the more convinced I am that the space between people who are trying their best to understand each other is hallowed ground.”

--Fred Rogers

SELF IMPROVEMENT

P.T. Paul

I need to lose a little wait

just a few pounds
of lateres,
maybes,
one days
that I've been carting around

like take-out boxes
full of noodlings

to-do lists
for my future self

unfortunately, the shelf life
of dreams
is a half-life

a life weighted

down

and hanging around, waiting
for the God/cosmic/karmic
"GO"

makes you a no-show in the
here and now

a cow un milked and lowing
to be relieved
of dreams gone sour

.....
P. T. Paul is a senior at the University of South Alabama completing the requirements for a B.A. degree from the University of Montevallo. This poem was written for the Advanced Poetry class taught by Alabama Poet Laureate Sue Brannan Walker. PTPhantazein@aol.com

.....



SCHOOL'S OUT

Digital Photograph
Andrew Tyson

.....
Andrew Tyson, self-taught artist and photographer, lives in Homewood, Alabama. His pencil drawings and digital photographs have won several awards, including recent recognition in Japan. Andrew has been commissioned to draw the reigning Miss Alabama for the past three years.
.....

ALUMINUM CROWN

Karl Koweski

after nine years
of disinterest
Gloria decided
she wanted to
compete in the
Miss Guntersville
beauty pageant

I tried to
talk her out of it
she ended the
discussion by
asking
"aren't I pretty?"

I don't know
how to tell her
beauty doesn't matter
when you're
on stage
wearing a
forty dollar
pageant dress
from eBay
Wal-Mart shoes
and dollar store
jewelry

she lost
before
she even left
the trailer

.....
Karl Koweski is a 32 year old displaced Chicagoan now living on top of a mountain in Northern Indiana. His latest collection of poems and stories, Demon Country, is available through www.showcase-press.com. His forthcoming poetry chapbook, Diminishing Returns, is due out soon from www.sunnyoutside.com.



UNTITLED

Mixed Media: Acrylic, linseed oil on printing press paper
Violeta Foreman

Violeta Foreman is an art student at the Alabama School of Fine Arts in Birmingham, Alabama.

CENTERFOLD

MY BODYGUARD

Jim Reed

Arthur Voss was my bodyguard in the eighth grade. Dot Jones was my girlfriend. Pat Flood was my best friend.

How did all of this come about? Well, I'll tell you my version of the story, since most people in the story are dead or distant or disinterested.

This is a true story. It's also *actual*.

First day of eighth grade on the school grounds of Tuscaloosa Junior High. It must be recess time on the first day of eighth grade. I'm wandering around the red-dirt dusty summer grounds of the school. The sun is bright and stark and unflattering to the uncontrolled acne on passing faces, a bit too revealing of the unprofessional makeup work most of the coeds have done at home before schooltime.

The sun is bright
and stark and
unflattering to
the uncontrolled
acne on passing
faces ...

One scowling guy struts by me and catches my eye. He must think I'm glaring a challenge at him, because he comes over, still staring, and punches me on the shoulder. I continue to stare back because I'm startled, because I don't dare turn my back on him, because I don't know any better. He's a rough-hewn country-looking kid who wants me to know who's boss. His scowl deepens and he punches me again, harder. I avert my gaze, pretending to suddenly remember an important engagement. "Dear me--must run. I left my baby on the bus!" is what I want to say, but I have no way of knowing whether that would just make him madder.

"Why'd he do that?" a tow-headed, barrel-chested student asks. I am standing to the side of the playground, wondering whether I am going to be punched again.

"I dunno," I say.

Arthur Voss is this kid's name. He is shy, too, and seems relieved that I'm willing to talk with him. Arthur is tough and knows a little about schoolyard survival. He never picks fights. But you can tell just from the way he stands that nobody is going to pick on him. He has a clean-cut no-nonsense air.

The bell rings and Arthur doesn't go right in. Like me, he waits for the crowd to disperse. "Stick with me. Nobody's gonna punch you again." Arthur says this. I make a joke out of it because that's usually how I survive.

"You mean you're my bodyguard?" I ask. "Yeah," is all Arthur Voss says. We go our separate ways to class.

"Hey, this is Arthur, my bodyguard," I say to Dot Jones, a very cute and perky petite blonde I meet at recess the next day. Dot is impressed and giggles her approval. Arthur just stands nearby and looks pleasant and alert. He really *is* my bodyguard. He's always close by when we're on school grounds before, during and after class. He makes no demands. We kid around, but he's not prone to idle conversation. He's just *there*. At lunch, we sit together with Dot and my other new friend, Pat Flood. Arthur is quiet, Pat is frenetic and funny, and Dot is giggly and cute. I actually have friends in junior high!

Stick with me.
Nobody's gonna
punch you again.
I make a joke out
of it ...

Maybe I'll survive eighth grade.

The two-step is all I can muster. If I want to dance with Dot Jones at the Friday night junior high gymnasium dances, I'll have to learn how to dance. Dancing is the only way I know how to justify getting my body close to Dot's body. We hold hands during school breaks, but there's no body contact and definitely no kissing. Not even any smooching, whatever that is. I don't know what smooching is, but I know I'm going to like it.

What is the perfume called that Dot uses? We do the two-step. We are exclusively paired and don't want to dance with anyone else. Will I be in love with Dot forever? Will Arthur Voss remain my bodyguard for life? Is Pat Flood going to remain my best friend? I now know the answers to these questions, but in junior high I don't. Shall I reveal the ending or leave you guessing? I've always felt I don't want to know my own fortune, but in these pages, I sometimes do know how things turn out, but the story must be told while simultaneously the characters within don't know outcomes even when their later versions do know the answers. Time travel is always confusing like this, but time travel must be done in order to get the stories told.

Will Pat Flood be my best friend till we're 80 and barely able to remember the stupid and silly gags we loved, the snickering fun we had? The junior high school gymnasium doesn't smell like sweaty locker room mildew tonight while the dance is going on. The nostrils only pick up what the sweet hormonal couple wants them to pick up. The smell of Dot's perfume. The fragrance of the flower in her hair. The smell of Wildroot

The nostrils only pick up what the sweet hormonal couple wants them to pick up.

Cream Oil hair tonic from my fevered scalp, the rustle of one too many petticoats, the riding up of my underwear, the squeezing-toe leather shoes, the slow dance music, the dimmed gym lights, the chaperoning teachers, the coeds all transmogrified by their acne treatment salve, their new lipstick, freshly Pepsodented teeth, lacquered nails, home-permanent natural curls, saddle

oxfords and penny loafers shuffling over the hardwood flooring, the scuffed shoe polish, the crepe paper decor, watery Kool-Aid punch, cool kids outside catching a smoke, brittle teachers, hawklike, searching for cool kids outside catching a smoke, pre-air-conditioning gym floor humidity-laden, red dirt and weeded grass and cool fungus fragrance outside the school while we wait for her father or my father to pick us up and deliver us to our respective homes.

Daddy drops Dot and me off at her house while he gives us a full three minutes alone, during which he drives to the end of the block on the pretense of U-turning the damp green Willys car, and taking his time to do it as if he couldn't just turn around in front of her house, but that would be dropping the pretense, wouldn't it? Daddy is complicit in the romantic effort to give us lovebirds a chance to cuddle, but all I can get the courage to do is shake Dot's hand and run to the car, never having been kissed, never having kissed. Kissing would break the spell, don't you know? The intense pleasure of anticipation is all there is, the knowing that if you break the spell with a kiss or a too-too touch, you just might fall from the grace of unfulfillment. The pressure of *almost* is so powerful, so fantasy-making, so just plain carnal, though I'm not yet sure what carnal is, nor can I ever be sure. The overwhelming pleasure of knowing Dot and handholding Dot and dreaming of Dot and talking too long on the phone with Dot in the hallway of my parents' home just feet away from their bedroom door, trying not to stand over the floor furnace too long, trying not to be heard by anyone but Dot.

The magic spell
consists of never
realizing your
dream, which gives
the dream such
power, such
magnification.

You see, at this point, here at this moment, I close the red clay diary and close my eyes and almost nap, then open up, get alert, and start again that which is never ended--the story of me and Dot and Arthur and Pat and who we are and who we were before now and who we were before the before time, and then who we will yet be and who we might be once we stop being we four who walk the dusty earth of 1954 Tuscaloosa junior high.

The *faux* doze starts once more, and I am closing the page, topping the pen, ready for the next episode of what's happening 50 years later, tonight, on Planet Three.

Does Arthur Voss ever have to fight anybody on my behalf? No, but nobody picks on me the rest of eighth grade, thus I am afforded the opportunity and mixed-feeling pleasure of living to enter the ninth grade.

Note: Fifty years later, Arthur Voss and Jim re-discovered each other. Arthur is still his bodyguard. Dot Jones' husband gave Jim a vial of The Perfume: *Midnight by Tussy*. He takes it with him when he tells the story of his bodyguard. He still does the two-step in his gymnasium dreams.

.....
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“Write only if you cannot live without writing. Write only what you alone can write.”

--Elie Wiesel



THE ANGEL OF ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

David Murray

.....
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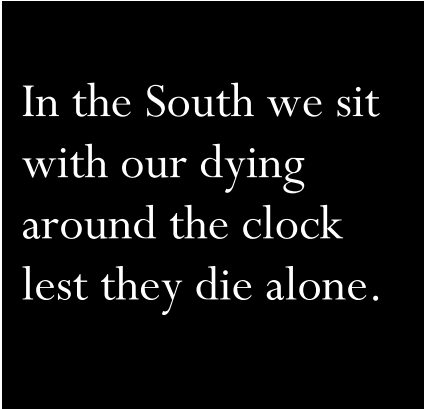
A CHRISTMAS AT HOME

Steve Edmondson

Winter comes reluctantly to Alabama. Fall lingers on and we enjoy many warm and sunny days right up until Christmas. So it was the Christmas of 1974, one of the warmest in memory and one of the warmest in my heart. I'll tell you about it if I may. It started so cold, yet ended so warm.

Thanksgiving, Mom had gone into the hospital with no prior problems. We didn't worry unduly about her; she had always been so strong for us in any way we needed. But her condition had deteriorated and now she lay dying and it was the day before Christmas. And I needed her strength to get through this Christmas.

I was driving into town alone to stay my time with her in the hospital for a while as we kept that awful vigil. To town, down that lonesome road again. In the South we sit with our dying around the clock lest they die alone. I don't know the true meaning of this, but I didn't want her to die alone either. Maybe I don't want to die alone.



In the South we sit
with our dying
around the clock
lest they die alone.

As I sped down the lonely rural road into town, so lonesome for my mother, my thoughts went back many years to another Christmas when I had needed my mother's strength. As a contrast, this was one of the coldest winters of my childhood, and I still feel cold and lonely thinking about it. You need to know about this Christmas in order to understand my others. And I need to tell you about it, for my own sake, because the despair lingers on.

We lived one notch up from sharecropping at that time. We depended on a few acres of cotton for a cash crop and a few acres of corn for our livestock. We canned some vegetables and salted some meat and

bought flour and coffee and sugar. There was no insurance, utilities, car payments, credit cards.

This year was the year that the infamous boll weevil struck without warning and our cash crop was wiped out and we had nothing to fall back on. We had canned some food and there was some salt pork and homemade sorghum syrup. We had corn to grind for our cornbread. Some dried beans. But this year, no coffee, no flour, no sugar. It was going to be a long winter but it was softened by our good old cow. We would have sweet milk and buttermilk and butter. We could do. I remember that phrase so well, "We could do." Perhaps I should remember it as my mother's heritage and her legacy.

Pop had gone off to a city in the valley and found a job working "at public work," and used to come home on weekends but as of recent months

But there are things
other than time and
distance that
separate people.

had found something more interesting that held his attention away from us. As well as his support. We knew it was a woman. We didn't speak of it. We would hear Mom crying in the night. It hurt so bad. And sometimes still does.

My attention was brought back to the present from its 30-year flashback as a fox pranced across the road in front of my sports car; a car I didn't even dream of ever being able to own as that hungry child. I was so close to the same place geographically and not far away in time. But there are things other than time and distance that separate people. I wanted to go on to the hospital and help my mom. I wanted to wipe away the anguish of the years past. I wanted to relive the past and the present, to make things good for her. It was not to be. Even as the good old cow wasn't to be.

Poor rural country people don't name their animals as their city sophisticated cousins do. Makes it hard when you have to eat them, or sell them. This time we didn't sell the cow, or butcher her for beef. She was so necessary to our survival, an integral part of our lives. So, we were really

apprehensive when the cow got sick. I felt close to her, the cow. I was small, maybe seven or eight, and I would go with my older brother to milk the cow. She was large and warm and gentle. Sometimes if it was late I would hold the lantern while big brother milked. I would help feed her and see that she got water. In a way I think my sister and I thought of her as sort of a second tier member of the family.

But that winter her milk production began to fall off sharply, and then in days she stopped eating and shortly became gaunt. We had neighbors come look at her and give advice. There was no money for a veterinarian. She got worse, and just before Christmas died. Even now I have a hard time explaining my sadness and sense of loss and helplessness at the death of the cow.

I was a child, but I realized the depth of our predicament. I know that when Mom held me and my little sister to her and told us of the death of the cow, how helpless and scared she must have felt. No way to get another cow; no way to replace her loss. No milk, no buttermilk, no butter. Dried beans and cornbread and sorghum syrup. And hollow, very hollow words of hope for the spring. Maybe Dad will come back, and maybe the boll weevil won't. But even then as a child of a hard world, I knew. I knew. Little sister Gwen and I crawled under our bed, to somehow hide from our predicament, a predicament that both scared us and left us more alone than ever.

Poor rural country
people don't name
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eat them, or sell them.

As I sat beside my unseeing and unhearing mother in the hospital, I remembered the reality of the moment, and the moment long before. Spring and Dad were abstractions; I was only a child in the middle of a present that I couldn't do anything with but accept. Now, I was in the same situation. I thought the silly thought, "If she could only awake from her

coma and I could buy her a new cow!" She had survived the death of the cow and brought me with her. Now I was the helpless one again. Nothing to do to help her.

Christmas Eve night and again I am finishing my sitting shift with Mom. The doctor has said she may go anytime now. I don't want to be far away, and there is no place to go. No warm, secure place of comfort. I began to walk the streets of quiet Cullman.

It was still unseasonably warm and pleasant. Past the high school where I graduated. Past billiard parlors where I played, remembering how we had to put up our cue sticks out of respect for the policemen when they came in, because we were under the legal age to play billiards. Past the awful dentist's office. The town was so quiet, everyone home with family almost, on this Christmas Eve.

Then I came to the Catholic Church, a beautiful stone building with gorgeously beautiful stained glass windows lit from within. Though this was my hometown, I had never been inside. Tonight was Midnight Mass for Christmas. As a Protestant, I had little appreciation for this. I stood in front of the church for a moment feeling very lonesome and left out. It looked so warm inside, and I felt so cold; cold of spirit and cold of hope. I followed a smiling family in, just behind the sleepy little girl with curly blond hair. To appear less conspicuous, I stealthily moved to the balcony.

I was still so wrapped
in my sad thoughts I
didn't truly appreciate
the beauty of the
situation until I began
to listen to the prayer
of the priest.

The church was beautiful after the cold and hard glass and chrome and tile of the hospital. Red flowers were everywhere. The altar was ivory and gold. A haunting statue of Mary was to one side. Red and green and gold decorations were all about, but mainly the ivory and gold of the Church interior touched my soul. I felt good being in this place of warm

colors and soft light. The place smelled of Christmas, with spices and evergreens.

I was still so wrapped in my sad thoughts I didn't truly appreciate the beauty of the situation until I began to listen to the prayer of the priest.

He prayed for the things you pray for in an open service, the poor and the afflicted and world peace and the sick and the shut-ins. And then he prayed for the well-being and happiness of his flock at Christmas. He covered all their needs he could think of, it seemed. I cynically thought that there might be others just as deserving of God's grace on this night who hadn't had the foresight to be a member of this congregation.

I remembered big brother pointing out to me as a child that Santa Claus in all his fairness brought far less to poor children because they weren't used to it, and lots of things to rich children because they were used to it. I know now big brother was trying to soften the blow of a Christmas without toys because we had nothing else, not even a father or a cow.

Now even the priest seemed to be talking to the same child big brother had thirty years before. Here I was, among strangers, and my Mom lay dying blocks away and there was no one to share my pain, my hollow hurt. And I couldn't tell mom how pretty the Catholic church was. As a child she had painted pretty word pictures for me of places I would see someday. I didn't then necessarily believe her, but I liked to listen and dream.

I cynically thought
that there might be
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deserving of God's
grace on this night.

**

Mom had always let me be the one to go to the mailbox, because we shared an interest in the mail. We read the paper together, me a slightly precocious child of the depression hills of Sand Mountain, and she a frustrated ex-school teacher and now a lone mother of four, a woman of more genteel background and breeding than most of her contemporaries, with faded dreams long in the past.

Just a lazy hot dusty
Alabama summer.
Sweaty backs, dusty
ankles. Buzzing flies.
And nothing much to
do.

Earlier in the night as I had held Mom's unresponding hand I remembered a happier time, a time before the death of the cow. I was about seven that summer, I suppose. I remember my ages by about how hard I worked, and I don't remember working real hard that summer. Anyway, it must have been after the crops were laid by and there wasn't a whole lot to do beyond feeding the cow and mules and chickens and working a bit in the grass-ridden garden. Just a lazy hot dusty Alabama summer. Sweaty backs, dusty ankles. Buzzing flies. And nothing much to do. Mom subscribed to the Birmingham Post-Herald, so we knew Mr. Ellis the mailman would stop by our mailbox each day. That gave a little purpose to the mornings. Some days we walked through the hot sand up the little road to the mailbox to wait on the mail. Nothing else to do. You could almost smell Mr. Ellis' old cigar before you saw his car, a '37 Chevy coupe, all yellow dust over the scratched black patina that was once paint.

It was fun waiting on the mail. Relatively, at least, for you never knew what might come. We always felt that. We always knew. We weren't really surprised then that day of the RC coupon. A little awed, and in wonder. Why would we be picked to receive something like this? A valuable coupon. There in the mailbox, beside the Post. Our name not even on it. And yet it was in our box.

We passed it from brother to brother to sister to brother. Each read it carefully, or pretended to. We looked shyly at each other, then ran down the road to show it to Mom, and to ask the inevitable: Can we? Can we, Mom? Can we take this here coupon and a quarter and go to Eva and buy a carton of RC's and get a FREE carton of RC's? Can we? Now? Today? Right now?

I don't think we said "Please" because we were prepared to give up immediately. In 1947 in the sandy hills of North Alabama you gave up real easy. It was the natural thing to do. Dad gave up and left for a girlfriend in the valley. A long time ago, it seemed, and hadn't seen the error in his ways yet. Uncles gave up and went north to the assembly lines. We gave up and stayed home. We knew about giving up, so we could have taken a "no" on the RC coupon and it would have been forgotten after one night's tears.

But Mom said yes. Maybe out of desperation of facing four lean-eyed kids for years. Maybe from defeat. Maybe she just wanted an RC. Anyway, she said "Yes," and we hardly knew how to take it. Even after she dug out the quarter.

We hitched the two mules to the corn wagon and all four of us kids crawled on the wagon for the hour's ride to Eva to the store. Intrepid big brother, all of twelve, strode into the store, coupon held in front so that if the devil smote the thing from him, well, maybe he wouldn't be hurt.

The coupon was accepted. We toted the twelve big old heavy RC's out to the wagon and carefully laid them down on soft corn shucks, and reverently hauled them home. We had to promise to bring back the empties. Sundown was nearby as we rattled into the yard.

Big Brother said we had to unhitch the mules, water and feed them first before thinking of the RC's. Finally we gathered around the linoleum-topped kitchen table and opened the first bottle. It was divided somewhat equally among the four of us children. Mom "didn't want any" and I bet you to this day it was so we children could have more. Gingerly at first, we sipped at our half-filled glasses of warm, bubbling RC. We grinned shyly at the burning strange sweet bubbly taste. We wallowed around a mouthful to feel the bubbles grow. We sipped as spiders, to make the portions last longer.

Anyway, she said "Yes," and we hardly knew how to take it. Even after she dug out the quarter.

And so it went that summer, that summer of the RC coupon. Each dusty afternoon a ritual of dividing a warm bottle of RC among four tow-headed and dusty kids. And in all the hot summers since, I'm pressed to remember a handful of experiences as genuine.

**

The RC's are gone now, and here I am alone in the strange church.

The cow was
gone, the RC's
were gone. My
mother might be
gone.

A tear in my eye from the thoughts of the RC's has seemingly washed away the cynicism of the moment before. And I hear Father Leonard intone "And no less, our Father, all those not of our flock in need tonight, we ask your blessings." And he went on.

And I felt warmed to the heart. I thought of my mother's good life and her love for me. And I tried to imagine the sacrifices she must have made that I cannot even to this day truly appreciate.

The sacrifices of all mothers.

His words kept echoing in the corners of my mind, "And no less, our Father, all those not of our flock in need tonight, we ask your blessings." I began to feel a peace. The cow was gone, the RC's were gone. My mother might be gone. But I remained, and life goes on. I had a son and a family. And probably I would never be called on to suffer the sacrifices my mother did, but she may have shown me how. I was beginning to see that now, that night. I eased from the balcony knowing where I had to go, and why. The choir was singing my favorite Christmas hymn, "Silent Night." Only that night, drawing on the heritage of their founding, the choir was singing it in the native German as written, "Stille Nacht...."

I walked back to the hospital in the still night, brilliant stars out overhead. Pretty Christmas lights in windows. Very quiet, very still. A silent night, holy night.

Back in the hospital, I noticed a different glance from the charge nurse. Some people were by the room door. I went in and clasped my mother's hand to my heart. My sister sobbed. Someone, perhaps a doctor, touched me gently on the shoulder.

"She's gone, you know."

"Yes," I said. "We have already said our goodbyes."

.....
Steve Edmondson owns a court reporting firm in Downtown Birmingham. He writes in Homewood, Alabama. edmondsonrpting@bellsouth.net
.....

“Silence the artist and you have
silenced the most articulate voice
the people have.”

--Katharine Hepburn



NEBULA
Ink on paper
Andrew Tyson

.....
Andrew Tyson, self-taught artist and photographer, lives in Homewood, Alabama. His pencil drawings and digital photographs have won several awards, including recent recognition in Japan. Andrew has been commissioned to draw the reigning Miss Alabama for the past three years.
.....

WATCHING MIDNIGHT STARS

G.C. Barnett

I

The twinkle of a bright ray cuts
The void darkness of the night sky.
Here and about a rodent darts,
A bird of prey watches. They do
Strange things in the night; all the while
Mr. Bobo watches. Does he
Wish to walk among them? None knows.
For he has been cast of their lot,
And does so in spite of choice. He
Has become a metaphor for
The darkness of their stagnant souls,
The failures of their aims. He tries
To escape ghastly visions of
The horrid sufferings which they
Seldom recall; an avid yet
Unquenchable thirst forgotten.
Compulsions and wanton desires
Serve as subliminal motives
For their frenzied obsessions. There
Again a twinkle, a distraction.

II

The cryptic obscurity of
The night sky is obstructed by
The luminescent ray of a
Distant star. Oblivious to
All that is real yet subject to
Their own whims, the strange irony
of existence. Adrift on the
Seas of extinction, impaled by
Forced happenstance. The underbelly
Of this beast, the strange beast known as
Monotony. Mr. Bobo
Struggles to forgive them for a
Relentless past turned present. Their
Inexorable quest to ruin
All that should be protected, their
Insidious machinations. A
Part of him would leave them to their
Fate, but he is compelled to do
Otherwise. He begins to speak.

III

To them all seems banal and trite,
However. "This we must do," they
Say in response. "For it is the
Force of necessity that drives
Us forward." The prospect of more
Repetition is greeted by
Obstreperous merriment, and
Banners flop and snap about. Their
Boundless depravity sickens
Mr. Bobo. He is ashamed
Of the carnage fashioned by their
Senseless depredations. Alas,
The deleterious effects
Of feigned righteousness are countless.
The twinkle of a brilliant ray
Pierces the great weight of the now
Enigmatic sky. They do strange
Things in the night; Mr. Bobo
Struggles to hold back woeful tears.

IV

“Would that I could save them. Would that
They would save themselves.” Their very
Best attempts at progress serve as
Mere subterfuge for purposeless
Meanderings – the endless course
Of dominion and suffering
Perpetuated. Thus, he walks
Alone amidst the dense crowd of
Humanity toward a fate
uncertain. *Careful, lest they tempt*
The cold and merciless Moirae,
He thought. Absent its meandrous
Residents for an evening,
The night sky frames the infinite
Wilderness beyond. The night’s hush –
Broken by the frenzied gallop
Of an antelope, the feral
Breath of a large cat – is almost
Gone. Strange happenings this still night.
Watched by that which is gazed upon;
The sudden recognition of
Cruel abandonment. Meanwhile, the
Forsaken darkness persists, the
Unrelenting press of gloom. There
Again a twinkle, a distraction.

.....
*Born in Fairfield, Alabama, and raised in Mississippi, G.C. Barnett is a graduate of
Samford University's Cumberland School of Law. He recently returned to
Mississippi to begin his legal career in the public service sector. This is his second
poem to appear in Birmingham Arts Journal.*
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CAHABA LILLIES

Darcy Glenn

.....
Darcy Glenn is a self-taught painter and photographer from Vestavia Hills, Alabama. She recently returned to work in the financial services industry after a two year hiatus during which she renewed her focus on art. She has won awards for both photography and painting and shows her work at area festivals and exhibitions.
.....

LISTEN

Louisa Howerow

The autumn sky filled in all the spaces between the house and the poplar trees in the back yard. It filled in the small space between Amanda and her son.

"Close your eyes," said Amanda to her son. "Listen."

"It sounds like a train," said her little boy.

"Listen to the leaves rustling when the wind passes through them. Listen to that," said Amanda.

Tony listened.

"That," said Amanda, "is the sound of the sea."

Tony had never been to the sea, but he knew his mother had. On the mantle, there was a picture of a young girl building a sand castle. Behind her was a blue-green band of water meeting the sky.

"One day," Amanda said, "we'll go to the sea. We'll pile blankets and bathing suits into a car. We'll take warm sweaters and pillows and we'll stay way past dark."

They didn't have a car but Tony was sure that if his mother said so, one day they would.

Amanda told him about the shells, and the gulls and how the sun sank into the water at the end of the day. "The morning waves and evening waves don't sound the same," she said.

But when he asked her how they were different, she couldn't tell him. All she could say was, "You'll have to listen especially hard to hear the difference."

The years went by. Amanda never managed to take Tony to the sea. Every summer she'd say, "Next August. Next August for sure."

Tony grew up and Amanda no longer wanted to travel. Her knees hurt. She was tired. "I got memories, Tony."

"I'll bring you back sand; I'll bring you back shells," said Tony. He packed his car with a bathing suit, towels, a blanket, a pillow. He drove until he reached the place where the land became the sea.

At the beach, he filled a small bottle with sand and another with shells. In the morning he swam into and under the waves.. Fat brown pelicans flew overhead. At the end of the day, moonlit waves lapped against his feet, brought him miniature stories.

His mother was right the sound of the waves was different day and night. He knew something else too, the sound of the waves changed day by day, night by night. He promised to bring back that difference to his mother.

They would stand under the poplar trees and he'd say, "Listen to the wind rustling the leaves. That's the sound of the waves in the morning. A storm is on the way." He'd wait for the wind to change, and he'd take her out again and say, "Listen. That's how the waves sound in the evening. A quiet evening."

His mother would smile and know he had been to the sea and he had listened.

.....
Ontario resident Louisa Howerow's short stories, true and fiction, have appeared in small press magazines, journals and online. louihowe@gmail.com
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“Just how much *does* succotash suffer?”

--Jim Reed

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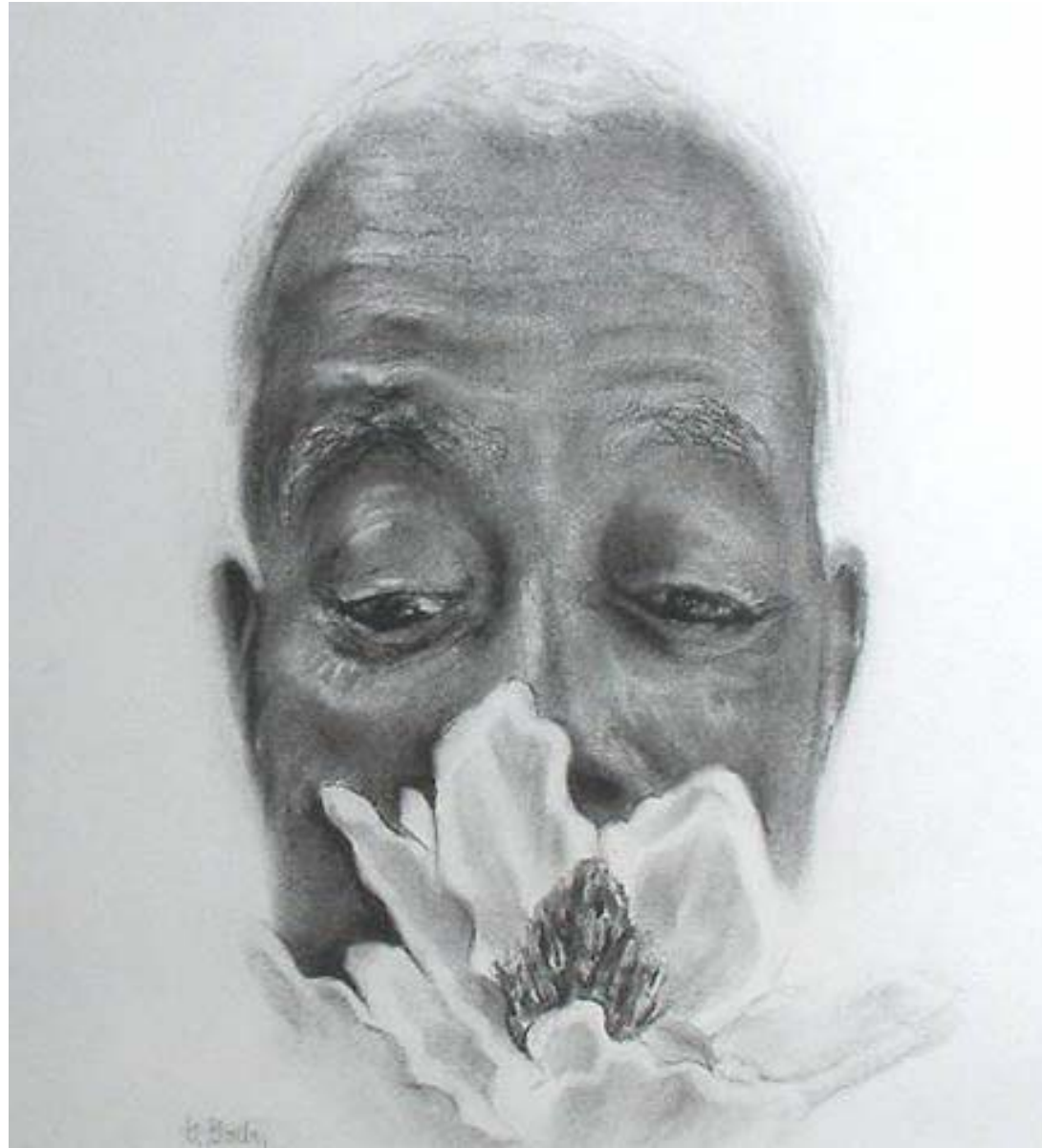
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