

# Birmingham Arts Journal

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**Front Cover: BEETHOVEN DRAWING NO. 3.** Acrylic wash, charcoal, and graphite on paper. 10" X 13". Ty Smith is a native of Montgomery, Alabama. He graduated from the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa in 2001 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree. Smith currently lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma where he is a Master of Fine Arts Degree candidate in painting at the University of Tulsa.

**Back Cover: SHE ALWAYS LIKED H WORDS.** Oil pastel on paper. 16" X 20".

Liz Reed earned a degree in Art Studio from the University of Alabama at Birmingham after retiring from the business world. She paints in the dining room of her home in Southside. [www.lizreed.com](http://www.lizreed.com)

## A VILLANELLE FOR VALENTINES'S DAY

Don Stefanson

for Linda Brant

I see my love in all the passing days.  
She is as pure as January's light.  
May her sweet spirit be my gentle muse.

I see my love in all the passing days:  
A February Valentine's her heart.  
A walk as free as March's quickening breeze.

Her Soul is April's quiet rain; the kiss Of May her laugh, so fresh, so  
warm, so soft.  
Her joy the flower of June, a rose.

In July fields, her lips the humming bees, Sweet as honeyed August suns  
for my delight.  
May her sweet spirit be my gentle muse.

I see my love in all the passing days:  
Her golden hair is ripe September wheat; Her dancing eyes the brown  
October leaves.

Her wit's as sharp as thin November ice, But her love lies deep like dark  
December night.  
I see my love in all the passing days  
May her sweet spirit be my gentle muse.

.....

*Don Stefanson is retired after teaching English Literature at Miles College in  
Birmingham, Alabama. A North Dakota native, Dr. Stefanson is a graduate of the  
University of Iowa and a Fulbright scholar. He lives in Birmingham's Southside  
with his wife, Margaret.*

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## SELF AND HUSBAND

Alexandra Mears

Oil on Canvas

48" x 36"

*Alexandra Mears is a native of Russia where she was editor, conservator, member and exhibitor with The Union of Russian Artists. Her work has been exhibited in solo shows in Russian state museums. Though in America only a short time, she has already been juried into The National Association of Women Artists and won the grand prize in the ENERGEN JURIED SHOW, April 2007, her first U.S. competition. Her work is collected by patrons and museums worldwide. Alexandra lives in Birmingham, Alabama, with her husband Ray. [Gobi1@earthlink.net](mailto:Gobi1@earthlink.net)  
[www.alexandraandraymond.com](http://www.alexandraandraymond.com)*

## OL' BUDDY CHANGED MY MIND

Rick Watson

I've always had big dogs; I'm talking German Shepherds and Bulldogs. Dogs that could take off a limb if you crossed 'em. We had a Shepherd named Duke that weighed as much as my wife Jilda and we kept him for over 13 years before he passed on. When he died, Jilda and I both wept as if he were a child.

Buddy on the other hand, belonged to my mother-in-law Ruby and weighed about 10 pounds soaking wet. He was a yapper and I had thought many times about smothering him with a pillow when we visited her. He was as hyper as a child that has been fed way too much chocolate and this lap dog really got on my nerves. But Ruby loved Buddy and Buddy loved Ruby so it was obvious to me, as far as Ruby and Buddy were concerned, I could learn to deal with it or I could "get lost."

In September (2003) Ruby was working in the yard when she fell and broke her hip and spent the next six weeks in the hospital and in rehab. Jilda remained by her side at the hospital for most of the time and that left me to tend to Buddy. I was not happy with the arrangement, but again it was something I had to do.

The first night when I went to feed him and let him out to do his business, he raced out to where Ruby had fallen. He sat down on the spot where she lay until the paramedics rushed her to the hospital. I tried to coax him in the house with food and treats but he would not budge. He simply sat there

He sat down on the spot where she lay until the paramedics rushed her to the hospital.

and stared in the direction in which they took his mamma. I had to physically pick him up and carry him growling, snarling and snapping back in the house.

The next day when I returned, it was the same story. I was his only human contact and he did not eat for days. I became worried and considered taking him to the vet but gradually he began to eat a little and he had almost stopped biting me altogether.

One Saturday, about three weeks later, when I went down there to feed him, I just sat down on the ground beside him. I took a couple of Slim Jim sausages in my pocket and I broke off little pieces to feed to him while we sat there staring down the road. I know that people passing probably thought I was disturbed, but it seemed like the right thing to do. Slowly he crawled up into my lap and we sat there for a long time.

“Ruby eventually went home but she could tell that things had changed.”

After a while, I walked over to my truck, opened the door and said let's go. Buddy jumped in and he's been with us ever since. Ruby eventually went home but she could tell that things had changed. She also knew that Buddy walked under her feet which made the chance of her falling much greater, so she told us we could keep him but only on the condition that we bring him to visit her....every day. We agreed and he

remained with us.

These days, Buddy weighs a good bit more than he did when Ruby first got him because he ate here at home and he also ate every time he went to her house too, as long as she was alive.

He has calmed down since he came to live with us. He loves to ride in my truck and he especially likes our fishing excursions. He also loves cruising in the country with the windows rolled down and when we explore old cemeteries.

No, I never thought I could ever love a small dog, but Ol' Buddy changed my mind.

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*Rick Watson is a freelance writer who lives in Empire, Alabama with his wife and a yard full of dogs. His work has appeared in The Birmingham News, the Birmingham Post Herald, Senior Living, The Snakeskin Entertainment Magazine, The Community News, The Mountain Times in Boone, North Carolina, and he writes a weekly column in the Lifestyle section of The Daily Mountain Eagle. Rick and his wife Jilda are also performing singer/songwriters. ybtgtxx@gmail.com*  
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## PATRON SAINT OF LOST PASSPORTS

Julie McGuire

My grandfather, Opa, prayed almost daily to the patron saint of lost articles. Although he'd long ago been excommunicated by the Catholic Church in Germany for marrying my Lutheran grandmother (an offense that is no longer so harshly condemned), Opa remained faithful to Saint Anthony, his patron of missing keys and hard-to-find parking spots. Perhaps demanding a parking spot might have stretched the limits of acceptable prayer requests, but I was sure that his cherished Anthony forgave my grandfather, who had been shot in the foot during World War II and found walking painful. It never ceased to amaze me; as soon as my grandfather touched his Saint Anthony medal and recited the familiar incantation, a parking spot would appear. As did the missing keys.

“Opa remained faithful to Saint Anthony, his patron of missing keys and hard-to-find parking spots.

I was charmed and amused by Opa's peculiar relationship with the much-beloved Catholic patron; I'd rarely known Opa to set foot in church and, until shortly before his death – when he once again found comfort in the church of his childhood -- he proclaimed religion to be, 'hogwash.' Officially, Saint Anthony, a poor Franciscan priest born of a wealthy family, is the patron of, among other things, shipwrecks, swineherds, starvation, sterility, asses (the animal, not the idiots) and, as Opa so fervently believed, seekers of lost articles.

Faithful the world over believe Saint Anthony to be a worker of miracles, a model of humility, generator of charity and disperser of devils. Perhaps that was the connection for my grandfather. And in my eyes, Opa

was all those things. Though he didn't speak a word of English, when he visited us in the summers, the neighborhood kids would gather around him, begging him to play soccer with them. Opa was generous with his money and his time; he visited long-forgotten widows on their deathbeds, always bringing flowers and funny stories. When less fortunate relatives visited, he'd slip money into a coat pocket for a rainy day. And he dispersed all my devils. No

“Opa always  
played the same  
numbers, and  
over the years  
won more than a  
time or two.”

childhood boogey man was safe when Opa was nearby.

Sometimes, when I find myself starting to forget what he smelled like, I open his wallet – Oma gave it to me when he died -- and a waft of Opa's scent escapes; a hint of cigarettes, red wine, daisies and the musty smell of his favorite cardigan. Opa carried the same wallet for years; he used it each time he

bought me an ice cream cone, and to tuck away the lottery ticket he bought each Wednesday afternoon. Opa always played the same numbers, and over the years won more than a time or two. In the wallet, I carry my favorite black and white photograph of Opa and me, the lottery numbers and his Saint Anthony medal. So far I haven't won any money, but Opa is still with me, and that is far more precious.

Soon after his death, as I was preparing to travel to Germany with my sons, I realized that our passports were missing. We'd moved to a new city recently and I'd made a mental note to myself to put them in a safe place. As with most of my mental notes, I couldn't remember where that safe place was. In a panic, I tore apart the rooms in our house, desperate to find the missing travel documents. They were nowhere to be found. Frantic, I ran to the shed in the back of the house. I thought perhaps the passports had ended up in one of the still-unpacked boxes that we'd dumped in the shed. I ripped through each box, finding papers my husband had graded his first year

teaching – ten years before – my old college transcripts, some clothes we’d forgotten to leave for Goodwill, but no passports.

In the last box I found an old photograph of Opa. He seemed to be grinning at me, and, as I looked closely, he seemed to be telling me to recite the little prayer. I shook my head at him, angry at him for leaving me. I cursed at Saint Anthony. The prayer that had guided my grandfather was nothing but a silly, superstitious nursery rhyme and I had bigger problems on my hands than a desirable parking spot.

Defeated, I went back into the house, sure that I’d have to spend hundreds of dollars on lost passport fees and for expedited service. Opa’s grin continued to nag at me, though, until I gave in and repeated the words I’d heard him say so often, “Saint

“I’d heard him say so often, ‘Saint Anthony, look around, something’s lost and can’t be found.’”

Anthony, look around, something’s lost and can’t be found.”

Opa’s scent was strong and clear, leading me back to the shed, directly to the first box I’d searched. The passports lay at the very top. Who knows if it was my grandfather or the patron saint of lost passports or just more thorough searching that led me to the passports.

Opa always had a pretty good track record, though, of not letting me down.

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*Julie McGuire is a litigation paralegal by day and a writer at heart. She has published numerous essays, short stories and poems and is working on her first novel. She lives in Richmond, Virginia, with her husband and two children. [nowritersblock@gmail.com](mailto:nowritersblock@gmail.com)*

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## EVEN THE GODS CAN BE WRONG

Margaret A. Frey

Junie is no longer afraid of the ocean, not the way she was when she rode her father's shoulders. On that first day, her father lifted and held her until she straddled his neck and then, cool hands clamped about her ankles, they galloped towards the dunes. She giggled. She shrieked. Her father ran and sweat rolled from behind his ears, trickled down her inner thighs and made her giggle all the more. The sun was hot, hot on her face and head. She threw her hands up and waved them about, but then forgot about the sun because her insides jiggled. On the highest dune, her father stopped. Junie cried out. She covered her eyes because the blue-gray water was big and wide and went on forever. Far out, there was no telling where the water ended and the sky began. Her father laughed.

"The sea has its place," he said.

He swung her from his shoulders and pressed rough, salty lips to her forehead. "Go. Explore. The ocean doesn't bite." Junie wrapped her arms around her father's hairy legs and though the springy hair was coarse and scratchy, she wouldn't let go. He picked her up, cradled her against his chest, where her mother had rubbed sweet coconut oil. Her father hobbled down the dunes, heels thumping. The thumps rocked her insides and made it hard to breathe.

"Look, silly girl. The ocean has its place."

She peeked from beneath her father's stubbly chin. The water was closer now. When the waves crashed and rolled, the surf turned silver.

“She couldn't fly but  
she could run fast,  
she knew, faster than  
her baby sister  
Sarah.”

Large white birds swooped and screeched over the water and smaller birds raced beside wavelets on skinny legs. Junie was bigger than the birds. She couldn't fly but she could run fast, she knew, faster than her baby sister Sarah. Maybe fast enough. She loosened her grip on her

father's neck. Her bare feet touched the wet sand, and gray goop squished between her toes. Cautiously, she walked out to where sea foam snaked along the beach then flew up and swirled like cotton candy. Tiny holes

popped open and bubbled on the sand's wet surface. She squatted and patted the sand, leaving a sharp handprint. This pleased her, so she did it again and again. She never saw the small but powerful wave that caught her at chin level and rocked her off balance. Her father scooped her up. She coughed and sputtered. The water burned inside her nose.

"Silly girl," her father said. "The sea has its--"

She was no longer fooled. The sea was inside her now, the mighty tides, the salty waves, and the terrible knowledge that if fathers were gods, even they could be wrong. Years later, Junie stands atop a dune where ocean breezes whip the sea grass and turn squawky gulls into feathery kites. Her small daughter, yearning for reassurance, gazes up with wonder and fear. Junie is tempted to laugh and say:

"The sea has its place, silly child, and the ocean won't bite."

Instead, she kneels down and whispers in the girl's ear: "The Ocean is a vast, blue mystery, older and stronger than you or me. And if the sea sloshes inside you, it's all right to be afraid. But remember, I'm here. I'm always on your side."

The small girl hesitates, but then smiles and runs to the water, arms stretched wide. Because sometimes, recalling their own beginnings, the gods are humbled, choose their words wisely and put things right.

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*Margaret A. Frey writes from the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. Her work has been published in numerous venues, including Notre Dame Magazine, flashquake, Mindprints, Smokelong Quarterly. New work forthcoming in: Kaleidoscope, Kaleidowhirl, Thema, and Cezanne's Carrot. She lives with her husband John and canine literary critic, Ruffian. mafrey@tds.net*  
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"Tact consists of knowing how far we  
may go too far."

--Jean Cocteau

## RAIN TODAY

Kelly Burnette

So happy to see the rain today. Well yesterday. It was so cool when it was blowing in, in the clouds. Now there's the rain falling from the leaves. I can't see it. I can't see the leaves either. They're both concealed in the dark. The only time I can hear the rain is when I go outside to smoke. Sit on the lanai. I'm rather fond of that. The tiny brown pebble floored lanai. Tiny brown pebbles, with equally tiny ochre pebbles, some mahogany for contrast. They feel good under my feet. Sitting out there, inside the screen. It runs along one side of the lanai, the backside, the side which faces the backyard. I can't see it right now because it's dark. The back yard. Must still be cloudy. Or no moon. Either way, I can't see it, the backyard,

“If I walked out  
to the front of  
the house,  
opposite my  
lanai, I could see  
remnants.”

the rain, the leaves. But I can hear it. I can still smell it faintly. That faint metallic smell. Nothing better than a hot vapor rising off baking asphalt, that smell. And the way it looks. Like it's been transported in time. As if the asphalt were actually that jungle. Not in that way. Not as in “the asphalt jungle.” Dear no. But as if it were in metamorphosis. That vapor rising up off of the asphalt. I can see it now.

Only in my imagination. The vapor fogging the well-manicured lawns. Concealing it like darkness. If I walked out to the front of the house, opposite my lanai, I could see remnants. Would still have to imagine it, the metamorphosis. I can do that. Though it's not the same. To see the vapor rising up in the dead summer heat obnubilating the well-manicured hedges, the foliage, concealing the neighbor's house. His lawn, her sidewalk lined with monkey grass. And see a dog. I suppose it's a dog. It's a large dog. Out of the vapor, the strong vapor, the unusually strong vapor in an unusually hot summer. Lumbering out of the bushes lining a house down the street. A house like mine. One like my neighbor's on the other side, or

down the street as well. All lawns uniform. See that lumbering animal, pausing I suppose, is it sniffing? I'm not sure. I can't be certain. It's vague, as in the night. As right now, on the lawn, I can hear the drops falling from the leaves. Near and far. No pattern but searching now for one. Amidst the lumbering, amidst the pebbles, the ochre and mahogany. In the dark. In the vapor outside my lanai. It's coming toward me. The animal pauses again. Is that a dog? I can only imagine. When I saw the rain today it went something like this: Finally raining outside. The air is actually cool. So refreshing feeling. Looking out the window, seeing the wet, darkened ground. The greens are swelling greener, the dark bark mulched across the landscape contrasting the glows, the gray sky slipping through the dripping foliage. Invigorating. It finally rained. The air has warmed up somewhat. I can feel that. It's more humid now, though there's actually less rain in the air. It's all rising from each blade of well-manicured grass, across acres of the same, from streets that wind between them, the lawns, the like-minded lawns, the well-minded lawns and shrubs, uniform, cut, proper and neat. Comfortable. Out to the gates at the front. The touchpad. Yes, even from the touchpad I can imagine that the rain is still evaporating, populating the next day's rain cloud of which we're sure to see. I tell myself that because it's comfortable. Like my lawn and my pebbles beneath my soft soles, on the lanai, looking through the screen at nothing. Well, at something. Nothing I can see. I can see it in my imagination. The touchpad. Some variation in fours by nice, each of us some 5000 occupants, some 750 units, each with our own variation of four by nine. Our code into comfort. From which the late rain ascends, from the roads which wind and the grass that bends. That bends the same, in much the same way, as the grass that lay by the next blade lays, until the

“When I saw  
the rain today  
it went  
something like  
this: Finally  
raining  
outside.”

edge of the neighborhood is marked by the steady whirl of the cul de sac. At that a line of trees. A single line of trees. And beyond that a creek, with a Bobcat beside, and beside that a mound of dirt, neatly piled, piled in a small pyramid, the keys out of the Bobcat. Or so I imagine. The creek barely running from a drainpipe in from a drain field from the neighboring neighborhood, with lawns as neat as mine, but concealed by a fence, for which I cannot see right now, nor would feel right about peeking at. This late hour. In the dark. Unable to see. Perhaps tomorrow. I could pretend to say hello to my neighbor, or actually do so, but to see his lawn, her bushes. Poke my head over the white wooden fence into their backyard, see the impatiens, all their colors, their monkey grass and grass and feel the vapor rising early in the morning when we're out manicuring our lawn.

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*William Kelly Burnette majored in Literature at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He now resides in Lakeland, Florida, where he happily lives year-round with his aluminum Christmas tree. [wkburnette@tampabay.rr.com](mailto:wkburnette@tampabay.rr.com)*

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"The world is too serious. To get mad at a work of art—because maybe somebody, somewhere is blowing his stack over what I've done—is like getting mad at a hot fudge sundae."

--Kurt Vonnegut

## ORPHEUS

Emily Thomas

This is the way I see you: sleek, compact.  
You, my dear, are that thing they always  
warned me about. Used to be, I could write  
songs about things I didn't know. Now,  
everything I write is in consideration of you.  
I sit in front of a typewriter all day, dragging  
from cigarettes, laboring over the thought of  
every vein, slope, fissure inside of you.

Used to be, I couldn't feel things without  
seeing them first. Now, you pinch and  
squirm and churn inside of me, kick up dust  
in my organs, tug at me from behind,  
whisper my name in the dark, touch the small  
of my back. You are wine brimming from  
some ancient chalice, a cold temptation that  
leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, dry as  
cotton and ashy as embers.

You are a pulsing, fleeting orb, beckoning to  
me in darkness. I reach out, cup you in my  
hands like a firefly. A glow permeates the  
space between my fingers, warm and wet and  
faint. When I open my hands, you are already lost.

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*Emily Thomas is a creative writing major at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. She lives in Hoover. She has been recognized for her writing in national, state and local competitions.*

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**GOLD SWIRLS**

Alan Burch

Stoneward Wheelthrown Pottery  
(with high-fire glazes and low-fire 22kt gold)  
30"

*Alan Burch fashions large ceramic pieces in his Florence, Alabama, studio, Ceramic Flame Pottery. His work is included in many private collections and available through the Lori Davis Gallery in Florence. [www.creativeflamepottery.com](http://www.creativeflamepottery.com)*

## THE ONE IN WHICH MY MOTHER LEARNS THERE IS ANOTHER WOMAN

Irene Latham

All night she waited. Put the boys to bed, nursed the baby, flipped through the channels on the hand-me-down tv.

“Highs in the sixties with a fifty percent chance of rain,” the weatherman announced on the ten o’clock news. She untucked her feet and clicked off the tv. Walked into the kitchen to clear away the pot roast she’d made especially for my father.

As she snapped the lid shut on the Tupperware, she remembered his promise: “Things will be different once the baby comes.” He’d said it when the labor pains first started, when she could still smile between contractions.

She rocked back on her heels and closed her eyes. Where was he? He was missing everything. He was missing *her*.

My mother opened her eyes, clenched her fists. The baby was three months old now, and this night was no different. She might as well be a single mom the way she was always making excuses to the boys. Didn’t he see how he disappointed them?

No. Of course he didn’t. He wasn’t there to draw up the covers and see their faces fall flat.

She rinsed the pot and set it in the rack to dry. As she shook the water from her hands, she heard his key turn in the door. Then the hinges squealed the way they always did, and her heart jack-knifed down deep into her belly. His footsteps sounded like gunfire as they moved up the hall. When he was almost to the kitchen, the squirmish stopped as he paused to drop his keys into the bowl. My mother smoothed her skirt, kept on with the dishes.

“Honey, I’m home,” he said in a sing-song voice. Every hair on the back of her neck stood at attention, but she kept her back to him and pretended not to hear. This is what it’s like to be one of those baby gazelle, she thought. Old enough to be aware of a dangerous stare but too helpless to do anything about it.

Suddenly his large hands reached out, grabbed her waist. She sucked in her breath and resisted the impulse to sink into him. He needed to know she was angry, that this couldn’t go on. She wanted him to *feel* it.

They stood like that for a long minute, her back rigid as a crowbar. Then he sighed and rested his chin on the crown of her head. He moved his hands away from her waist and lifted them to her shoulders. Then he slid his hands all the way down her arms until they plunged into the soapy water. When his fingers found hers, he put his mouth to her ear and said, "I'm in love with another woman."

My mother sank then, into the curve of my father's chest, her legs wobbly the way they got sometimes after making love.

Her mind scrambled through memories of the last few weeks, searching for warning signs. They were all there, bright red and blinking. It all made sense now. The late nights, the forgotten promises. Everything made sense.

She was too weak to pull away from him, too stunned to do anything but follow when he raised his hands back to her shoulders and guided her out of the kitchen.

If she'd turned, she might have noticed the tender smile on his face. But she didn't turn. He was having an affair? With who and when and where? The water from his hands soaked through her blouse to her shoulders and trailed down her arms.

When they got to the bedroom, my father pushed my mother to the corner, where the baby was asleep in her cradle, her pink mouth puckered around a pacifier.

"She's the other woman," he said, kissing my mother lightly on the ear. My mother's eyes widened, then she turned and pressed her fists into his stomach.

"How could you?" she said, resting her cheek on his chest.

My father chuckled and reached over to trace my infant cheek with his finger. Then he wrapped my mother in his arms and pulled her to his chest.

"Let's have some pot roast," he said.

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*Irene Latham writes poetry and prose from her home in Birmingham, Alabama. Her first book of poetry, What Came Before, was recently released by Negative Capability Press. Her first novel, The Witches of Gee's Bend, will be released by G.P. Putnam's Sons in 2010. [www.irenelatham.com](http://www.irenelatham.com)*  
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## HITCH

Jim Reed

Hitching up his trousers by  
grabbing his belt up front, he  
struts into the hardware store as  
if a potbellied stove were still  
radiant, as if a cracker barrel still  
dropped crumbs onto a soaked  
concrete floor.

His Daddy and his Daddy's Daddy hitched  
their pants up, too, way back when.  
But this new hardware store no longer  
attracts hitching-up men because  
the potbellied stove and cracker barrel  
have been moved aside to accommodate  
central air and heat, more display space,  
more stock turnover, busier and less  
connected customers.

Gossip and news are unknown here, so the  
store proprietors don't have any idea  
what's going on in the neighborhood.  
Instead of sharing information about  
neighbors and common problems, the  
proprietors now obtain their gossip and  
news on Talk Television, news and gossip  
that fill the spaces but tell nothing  
about the newborn baby down the  
street, nothing about the latest  
success of a nearby friend.

Cracker barrel potbellied men still  
come into the store and hitch up  
their pants, but they are processed  
by clerks whose eyes glaze past  
them, into the Talk Television mist.

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*Jim Reed writes true and actual stories in Birmingham, Alabama. His latest work appears in two new anthologies, An Alabama Christmas: 20 Heartwarming Tales by Truman Capote, Helen Keller, Sonny Brewer, and More (Sweetwater Press), and Whatever Remembers Us: An Anthology of Alabama Poetry edited by Sue Brannan Walker and J. William Chambers (Negative Capability Press). [www.jimreedbooks.com](http://www.jimreedbooks.com)*

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"Publishing a volume of verse is like  
dropping a rose petal down the Grand  
Canyon and waiting for the echo."

--Don Marquis

## THE LOVE SONG OF LANGLEY MORAN

Wayne Scheer

"I'd be happy if I were just pissing away my life," Langley Moran told his wife as they prepared for bed. "Instead, it's passing in dribbles and squirts. I'm like an old man with a prostate problem."

"Then get it checked. Do you want me to make an appointment with Dr. Levy?" His wife continued combing out her hair.

"No, no. My prostate's fine. It's my...Never mind."

She felt guilty not paying attention to him, but lately it was difficult to know when he was speaking to her or to himself.

"I'm a dinosaur. After thirty years with the same firm, maybe it's time for me to think about retire..."

"Oh, don't let me forget. Phyllis Ramsey left a message when I was out today. She and John want to get together for dinner this Saturday. We talked about it earlier."

"Talked about what?" Langley had taken off his clothes and was disappointed Agnes hadn't even noticed him standing naked before putting on his pajamas.

"I'm talking about dinner with the Ramseys. Don't you listen?"

"Oh yes. Dinner with the Ramseys."

"It's our turn to choose the restaurant. Perhaps Marcel's? They have a lovely poached sea bass. You had the chicken breast stuffed with crabmeat last time. You thought it was a bit dry."

"Fine. Dry chicken sounds good."

"We could go someplace else."

"Why bother?" Langley crawled into bed as Agnes applied cream to her face.

\*\*\*

Already awake, he turned off the alarm before it rang at six the next morning. Agnes had kicked the covers off herself during the night and her nightgown had ridden up exposing her rear end. In the glow of the morning light, he recalled how excited that sight once made him. He slipped out of bed, covering her quickly with the blanket.

She offered to put on the coffee. "No need," he said, looking forward to the time alone.

He felt odd this morning, acutely aware of his every move as if he were an actor playing the role of a man brushing his teeth, showering, shaving and carefully combing his hair from one side to the other to cover his bald spot. Dressing in a dark blue suit and white shirt, he thought of putting on the brightly colored tie their son had bought him for Christmas, but reached for the modest blue and maroon striped one instead.

Langley stared at his reflection in the mirror, stifling the urge to weep.

Instead, he thought of his son, his two daughters and his grandchildren, a thirty-two year marriage and an impressive title at work—Director of Research. He was a comfortable man in a comfortable life. Why, then, was he unhappy?

Happiness isn't measured in years married or titles, he thought. His children made him happy but they followed jobs to other parts of the country, and he saw them only occasionally. Agnes once made him happy, but they hadn't laughed together in years. Sipping coffee at the kitchen counter, he tried remembering the last time they made love.

His work was all he really had, and it bored him. Yet, the thought of not leaving for the office each morning scared him senseless.

He sipped his coffee, imagining what he would do if he had the strength to act on his impulses. Would he tell Agnes he never stopped loving her or would he walk out of the house and never look back? Would he put a gun to his head?

Agnes padded barefoot into the kitchen, her loose robe exposing part of her breasts. "Coffee smells delicious," she said, as she poured a cup. "How'd you sleep?"

"Just fine." Langley looked at his wife. Even without make-up, she was still attractive. He stared at her face, glimpsing the girl he married and recalling how afraid she was after giving birth the first time that her breasts would never again be round and firm.

"I'll sag like an old washerwoman and you'll lose interest," he recalled her saying. Langley wanted to tell her how much more beautiful she was now, how much more sensual and womanly her breasts were.

More than anything, he wanted to share with her how afraid he was. But he didn't know how to begin. Would she understand?

They had met in college. Back then they spent hours discussing poetry, arguing politics. Langley remembered his dream of writing a novel based on T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." He would tell the story of a middle-aged man who sees himself as others see him, and although profoundly disgusted at the sight, is too set in his ways to do anything about it.

Again, the urge to weep nearly overwhelmed him.

Langley felt Agnes take his hand. "Are you all right? You've been so distant lately."

"I've been measuring my life with coffee spoons."

"What?"

"It's a line from..."

"Prufrock."

"You remember?"

"Of course I do, Lee," she said, using the nickname he hadn't heard in a long while. "Of course, I do."

He wasn't sure what to say.

This was his chance to tell her...to tell her what? That his life bored him? That she bored him? That he wanted to do something daring? Something unexpected?

"What?" he imagined her asking. "What do you want to do? Do you want to quit your job? Travel? Climb mountains? Take up with a younger woman?"

He tried picturing Cheryl, his new assistant. She was young, attractive. He was surprised how long her hair was when she let it down at her desk the other day. But Langley knew she saw him as an old man, a sad old man.

"I should have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas," he mumbled.

"What's that, dear?"

"Nothing. Marcel's will be fine, Agnes. Be sure to call Phyllis and make arrangements." With a sigh, he added, "I think I'll give the chicken another try."

.....  
*After teaching writing and literature in college for twenty-five years, Wayne Scheer retired to follow his own advice and write. He's been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Best of the Net. His work has appeared in The Christian Science Monitor, Notre Dame Magazine, The Pedestal, flashquake, Pindeldyboz, Eclectica Magazine, Hamilton Stone Review, Stone Table Review, River Walk Journal, The Potomac and Triplopia. Wayne lives in Atlanta. wvscheer@aol.com.*  
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## JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE

Tracey Rector

The 7:50 bell rang as Kevin passed the school office door, just like it did every weekday morning. He knew he wouldn't be late if he passed the office when the first warning bell sounded. He remembered to keep his head up as he walked. The temptation to look down and count the floor tiles was almost overwhelming. He felt proud that he resisted the urge.

He reached his locker and dropped his backpack on the floor. Other eighth graders laughed and chatted around him. No one said hello to him. He spun the dial on his locker and opened the door.

His locker was almost empty. Most of his books were in the resource room in the special education hallway. He really didn't need a locker, since he went to the resource room between classes, but he had insisted on one. Everyone else had a locker.

Someone walked up beside him. Kevin detected a faint flowery perfume that smelled nice. Madison. He peeked cautiously around his locker door. She saw him.

"Hi, Kevin," she said in a singsong voice. She smiled. That was good. He remembered that he should make eye contact. His eyes flickered up and rested on the girl for a second. Then back down.

"Hello, Madison," he said in a serious voice. He wanted to say something else, but he couldn't think of anything. She was already talking to someone else, anyway.

He reached in his locker and took two pencils. They were yellow with blue erasers. He insisted on having only yellow pencils with blue erasers. He frowned as he picked them up. They needed to be sharpened. He felt annoyed, and took a deep breath. Dr. Tidwell said to take a deep breath when you felt yourself getting upset.

The battery-operated digital clock that Kevin kept in his locker showed 7:52. Time to put his pencils in his mesh pouch. He pulled the zipper and looked back over at Madison. She was shoving her backpack into her locker.

She's so pretty, Kevin thought. He wanted to touch her long, shiny brown hair, but he knew he shouldn't. People didn't like to be touched.

He peered into his locker. He had gotten his pencils, so he could leave. But he didn't want to. Maybe someone would talk to him today. He fumbled with the strap of his backpack, waiting.

Across the hall, Michael and Chase scuffled. Chase pushed Michael's head into the locker door, but not hard. Kevin smiled uneasily as he watched them. Would Michael get mad? Was this a fight?

But Michael laughed and grabbed Chase around the neck. Kevin breathed easier. They were just playing. Everyone was watching and laughing. Kevin wondered what it would be like to play that way.

Coach McConnell passed by and growled "Cut it out, Mike!" Michael grinned and threw up his hands. The other kids chattered and slammed locker doors. Kevin stood there, waiting uncertainly.

Michael crossed the hall and gently tugged on Madison's hair.

"Oww," she squealed softly, spinning around. Smiling, she ordered, "Stop that! You'll mess up my hair!"

Michael looked over at Kevin and winked. Kevin was startled. He swallowed, his brain scrambling frantically for something to say. Nothing came to him.

Michael and Madison turned and walked away, their heads close. Kevin felt frustrated. Would he ever walk down the hall, talking to a friend, laughing with a girl?

He stood alone while students brushed by him. Conversations, laughter, an occasional shriek combined to create a constant buzz in his ears. No one noticed him.

He looked at his watch. He had less than one minute to get to the resource room. He began walking, his head down. He counted forty-six floor tiles before he reached the door to the special education hallway.

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*Tracey Rector is a freelance writer in Birmingham, Alabama. A wife and mother of three school-age children, she is also an occasional volunteer, a frequent sports spectator, and the business manager for her son's growing lawn care business.*

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## MY OLD BACK YARD

Oil on Board

7" x 5"

Elizabeth Elliott

*Elizabeth Elliott is an artist and published author. As an applied sociologist she worked in international health care development, taught at Northwestern University, Ain Shams University in Cairo, Egypt, and most recently at University of Alabama at Birmingham. Her regional focus has been on the Arab Middle East where she lived and worked for many years with non-governmental organizations. She now paints and writes full time in Birmingham.*

## TOP RUSSELL ON DUCK HUNTING

Denton Loving

I wouldn't go duck hunting  
if I were you.

You're not hungry.

I used to hunt ducks.  
Wood ducks, black ducks, puddle ducks.  
Mallards of all kinds.  
There used to be ducks all over Davis Creek.

Two doctors from Knoxville came up here  
to go duck hunting, years ago.  
They couldn't shoot worth a s\_ \_ \_.  
But I could.

Now I regret every duck I ever shot.

I wouldn't shoot a duck for a thousand dollars.

.....

*Denton Loving makes his home in Speedwell, Tennessee. He works in the advancement offices at Lincoln Memorial University, where he also assists directing the Mountain Heritage Literary Festival. His short story, "Authentically Weathered Lumber," was chosen in 2007 as the first winner of the Gurney Norman Prize for Short Fiction, a contest judged by Mr. Norman through the literary journal Kudzu. dloving@lmunet.*

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## LOST IN THE GEEK HOUSE

T. R. Healy

Peering through protective glasses, I managed to wedge the screwdriver under a corner of the lid of the Dell computer at my end of the work bench. Then I pressed down on it, straining to pry loose the plastic lid but it would not budge so gradually I applied more force. Soon I lost my patience and began to jerk the screwdriver up and down until the lid finally cracked and slivers of plastic flew across the bench. The screech was so piercing it sounded like a gospel singer struggling to reach the highest notes of a hymn, and as I pried away other panels of the computer, I felt like the director of some thoroughly tone deaf choir. My screwdriver was a baton and I barely had to move it to cause some excruciating sound.

Once the panels were removed I could see the intricate web of ribbons and wires and fuses and switches and cables that comprised the brain of the computer. Always, as I stared at all the components, I felt like the most ignorant person in the civilized world, not having a clue how any of them worked. I might as well have been looking at a script of Sanskrit. But I was not required to know such things because my job was to plunder computers, not build them.

"You are in recycling," I was informed the first morning I reported to work as a volunteer at a non-profit technology facility called Free Geek. "You are a deconstructor."

I nodded uncertainly, not sure what I had gotten myself into, and made my way through the warren of battered rooms of the converted bakery to the Recycling Station where I was handed a screwdriver and shown the mounds of

computers waiting to be reduced to bits and pieces. The motto of the facility is "Helping the Needy Get Nerdy," and that was why I was there. I had signed up for the adoption program in which I agreed to donate twenty-four hours of service in exchange for a refurbished computer and a class on how to operate it. At last, I would be entering the twenty-first century.

“The motto of the facility is ‘Helping the Needy Get Nerdy.’”

I was not one of those people who was in a hurry to enter the new century. I am not sure why, either. Sometimes I thought of myself as something of a curmudgeon, perfectly content to compose messages on my manual Smith-Corona typewriter and drop them off at the post office. And whenever someone would urge me to learn how to operate a computer or some other newfangled piece of wizardry, I would recite to myself the observation of the Evelyn Waugh character Scott-King, "I think it would be very wicked indeed to do anything to fit a boy for the modern world."

Other times I suspected I was simply intimidated by the recent marvels of technology, worried I might press the wrong button or point an arrow in the wrong direction

“Practically everyone I came in contact with assumed I was computer literate, as if not to be was to admit you were some kind of troglodyte.”

and cause a minor catastrophe. Anything that required a lot of instructions made me uneasy. Stay with what you know I often cautioned myself, that way you won't embarrass yourself.

And yet the new technology was impossible to avoid. Practically everyone I came in contact with assumed I was computer literate, as if not to be was to

admit you were some kind of troglodyte. So, reluctantly, I went to the library and learned such rudimentary skills as navigating the internet and sending and receiving email messages. I was content to use the computers available at the library until I heard about the chance to earn my own through the Free Geek adoption program. So, with some trepidation, I enrolled and a few days later found myself in a kind of cave surrounded by a curious tribe of creatures who spoke a language I didn't understand and looked as if they seldom exposed themselves to sunlight.

Thwack ... Thwack ... Thwack ...

Abruptly, furiously, a frustrated volunteer next to me at the work bench banged a claw hammer against the computer he was endeavoring to take apart, and, at once, our supervisor came over and reprimanded him.

"Whatever the problem is, a hammer isn't necessary to solve it," he said icily.

Sheepishly the volunteer set the implement down as if it were a loaded firearm.

"Hammers cause more damage than they're worth. All you need around here is a good Phillips screwdriver."

The supervisor was right. Once I got the panels off, all I did then was unfasten screws. Dozens and dozens and dozens of screws. Some were as long as my thumbnail, but most were half that length. Conscientiously I tried to place them in one of the quart-sized coffee cans on the bench but often as not they scattered onto the floor which was already covered with

“Once I got the panels  
off, all I did then was  
unfasten screws.  
Dozens and dozens  
and dozens of screws.”

screws and nuts and bolts and washers. Wherever I stepped I felt something sharp and hard press against my foot.

Taking computers apart was tedious work and sometimes, as the screws spilled across the bench and onto the floor, I thought of the rivets that

Marlow desired so desperately so he could get his steamboat repaired and proceed upriver to find Kurtz. They were significant because they held things together in the jungle. That was what geeks did, I realized. They were the ones who really mattered, not drones like me who removed screws. They put them in and kept things from falling apart.

.....  
*T.R. Healy was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest and lives in Portland, Oregon.. His stories and essays have appeared in such publications as The Climbing Art, Ducts, The Houston Review, and The Red Cedar Review.*  
*laurel462001@yahoo.com*  
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## A HOLE IN THE CLOUDS

Tom Gordon

Sometimes the sun drills a hole in the clouds,  
Daubs its inner edges creamsicle orange and pink  
And lets them bumpily frame a bit of blue  
That beckons through passing mists  
To a world you may have seen in the serendipitous sequence of a dream,  
One toward which you and your lover can run hand in hand, laugh upon laugh,  
Gratefully free of gravity and the need to breathe.

You might say such a sight is a genuine hint of heaven  
And if that is so, I hope my mother is there,  
Waiting on me with her bad eye now good,  
Her bad hip now whole,  
Open to every kind of conversation  
About everything, including the time  
We tried to stop the vodka bottles  
From accumulating under her bed,  
Breaking her will with the clamor of our raised voices,  
Telling her she needed treatment.  
I see her in the kitchen as we prepare  
To head to the cars outside,  
Stopping to look out the window above the sink  
Past the deck and its caressing dogwood and the tree-splotched expanse  
Sloping toward the creek,  
Perhaps thinking all at once of the gardens she planted,  
The birds and deer she had seen there,  
Maybe wondering if she would ever see any of it again.

She is worthy of having all of that now,  
Basking as I believe she is in that bountiful beatific blue  
That the sun allows me to sometimes see,  
And that God may allow me to one day enter,  
Just beyond a hole in the clouds.

.....

*Tom Gordon is a state reporter for The Birmingham News, where he covers politics, education, and most recently, Alabamians involved in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the summer of 2003 he spent five weeks in northern Iraq as an embedded reporter, and he hopes to return there next year.*

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## I CANNOT BE "PERFECT" AND CREATIVE

Carey Link

*"Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life..." Anne Lamott from Bird By Bird.*

I step over cracks in a geometrical house--  
while Persona arches his back like a spying cat  
peeking through the smallest hole,  
to inscribe hieroglyphics  
on walls,  
ceilings,  
corners  
beneath the floor... .  
Dishes are stacked.  
Linen is folded lengthwise.  
My clothes never dry in the sun.  
The bananas are not brown.  
I have taken down my gaudy  
blue and green lanterns.  
I lock family skeletons  
in the closet.  
I have forgotten to bow my head.  
I cannot trace origin in my hands.  
The tree at my window  
does not hold children in summer.  
I do not recognize a river in tears,  
as the quartz pendulum rocks me to sleep.

.....  
*Carey Link is a student at The University of Alabama, Huntsville. Her work has  
previously appeared in Poem, The Birmingham Arts Journal, Apathy, and  
Whatever Remembers Us: An Anthology of Alabama Poetry.*  
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## THE STORM

Jéanpaul Ferro

There is no romance riding on a bus,  
like best friends: they come and they go,  
you love their ghosts just like you love their soul,  
the rain soaks you wet, and it, too, is always unresolved,

Kansas isn't Memphis;  
but, oh, how I loved you when we were  
down in New Orleans!

.....

*Jéanpaul Ferro is a poet, short fiction author, and novelist from Providence, Rhode Island. His work has been featured in Hawaii Review, Cortland Review, Portland Monthly, Review Americana, Pedestal Magazine, Barrelhouse Magazine, and others. He is a four-time Pushcart Prize nominee and has recently been featured on WBAR radio in NYC.*

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“Sharon Stone has the kind of face I’d  
leave my wife for. Since I’m not  
married, I’ll have to leave someone  
else’s wife.”

--Buck Henry

## BOOTLESS IN ARIZONA

Tom Sheehan

The troop train stopped for a fifteen minute layover in Winslow, Arizona. It was March of 1952, and they were returning from Korea, riding the train the right way, back across the mountains and fields of America. The train commander said they could hang around outside but

not to wander off and everybody had to be shod going to the dining car for the next five or six days.

All of them wore brogans, weighing about three pounds apiece, buckles included, the best boot in the world, but too heavy for after-combat aboard a lazy troop train heading home.

His GI brogans he loved but he was over-shod for a train ride. Running to a cab stand at the station, he asked if there was a shoe

store handy. "I only have 15 minutes," he said, "before it pulls out." He pointed at the train. "And I'm heading home." Half a dozen cab drivers were lounging about, drinking, smoking cigars, reading the paper, checking the numbers, watching early gains on the market, no rush to prosper.

One cabbie grabbed his arm, "C'mon, kid, just down the street." The cab driver ran two red lights, asked questions about his outfit in Korea, swung a tight corner, jumped the curb in front of a store. The sign said, "Shoe Cob." The cabbie ran him inside, yelled at a clerk waiting on two women. "Harry, kid here's just back from Korea. From Sonny's outfit. He needs a pair of eight and half moccasins, in a hurry."

Right then the train whistle sounded, larruped down the street, slammed through the front door. The cabbie pointed back over his shoulder. Time was the biggest enemy of all. Again came a long, low

"The train commander said they could hang around outside but not to wander off and everybody had to be shod going to the dining car for the next five or six days."

melancholy whistle full of new messages he did not want to hear. Late. AWOL. The stockade.

The clerk, the owner and Sonny's father he suspected, reached over his head and flung a shoe box at him. He reached for his wallet. "It's on me, kid. Promise you'll say one for Sonny tonight when you're thanking

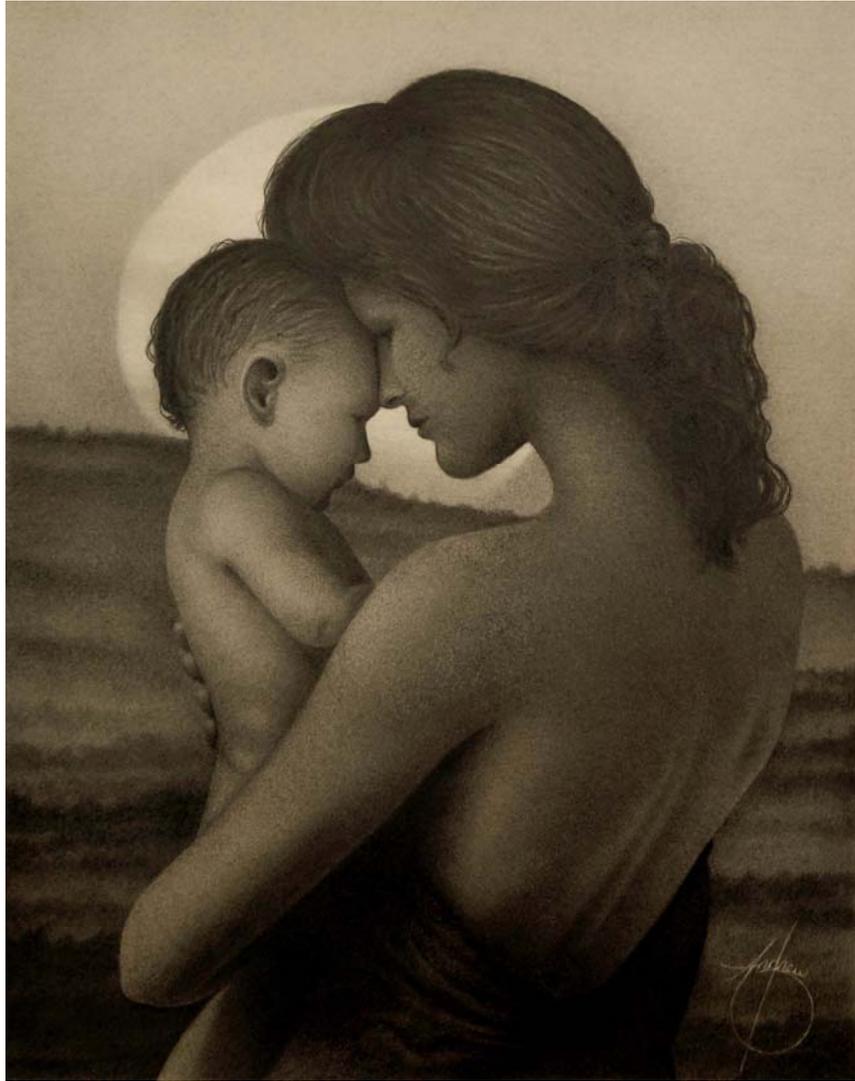
"It's on me, kid.  
Promise you'll  
say one for  
Sonny tonight  
when you're  
thanking Him  
for getting you  
back home."

Him for getting you back home." The whistle sounded again. They rushed, cab horn blaring, through the same two red lights. For the next six days, he went to the chow line in moccasins, and every other body aboard that reverse troop train wore the heavy boots of the trade.

Long after he was home from Korea he could talk about Slack and Leuter and Breda and other comrades for hours on end. In his blood they lived, at the back of his head, in heavy dreams. Every now and then, a place came back, a place like Winslow, Arizona.

For fifty-five years he's carried that warmth with him, that unforgettable scene, the traffic, the train whistles, those Winslow men, that cabbie, that clerk or owner, a comrade's father, that place. His memories flood him and will not disperse, not even now.

.....  
*Tom Sheehan's award-winning work includes four volumes of poetry, plus many short stories. A Korean War veteran (31st Infantry Regiment), and Boston College graduate after Army service, he has been retired for 16 years. He submits prose and poetry from Saugus, Massachusetts. tomfsheehan@comcast.net*  
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**MORNING SON**

Charcoal 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.*

## THE CREATION – GIRL, YOU KNOW IT IS IN YOUR HEAD

L.C. Gary

Supple Silky Sweet!!!...Brown Skin  
smooth and strong  
an ice cool grin burning HOT inside  
you're scared  
I melt.  
Dimples that dazzle  
Razzle dazzle razzle dazzle  
razzle dazzle  
I've been on safari for years --  
searching and seeking  
fighting and crying  
dying dying  
dying  
spring comes quickly  
long last I hear  
it beats hard  
like a drum  
like the African sun  
like a mama on a mission TO SAVE HER SON  
YOUR lion's heart  
I hear it. Can you?  
no.  
No fear.

STRONG. BLACK AND PROUD.

I'm at home.  
I crave you- it's so dangerous  
I crave you- it's disastrous  
I crave you- it's powerful  
I want to taste you  
just one last time  
or maybe for the first time  
Dark brown eyes that glisten  
Dark brown eyes of 42 years  
seen and unseen things  
Dark brown eyes that do not see me  
I crave you.

.....  
*Lisa Che Garyis a budding poet and a professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama with her gorgeous and delightful dog, Nugget. She enjoys writing poems, drawing with pastels, and traveling.*  
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"Life is easier to take than you'd think;  
all that is necessary is to accept the  
impossible, do without the  
indispensable, and bear the intolerable."

--Kathleen Norris

## EVE'S WEDDING

Vanessa Gebbie

Eve's picking philadelphus for her wedding bouquet. She's grown up now, makes her own decisions. Her mother's tears are long gone, far back in Eve's memory. But it would only take a few more thoughts for them to spill, flood the mind-meadows. So she won't revisit her mother crying herself to drink weeping about her hunchbacked child.

Eve's in bare feet on wet grass, scissors in hand, reaching for a few sprigs of mock orange. Flowers like frilled long white skirts, a deep red secret centre.

The rest of Eve's bouquet is lying on her kitchen table. Roses, blush pink, but she hasn't looked after them, their stems are weak. Some

“Eyes tight shut,  
she wonders  
about this  
bouquet. Will it  
do?”

unberried yew to throw the flowers into relief. Eve lays the new flowers among the rest. She sits and buries her face in them, inhaling the mixed scents, the sugary roses, the false orange lightness, the dark yew acid. Eyes tight shut, she wonders about this bouquet. Will it do?

She doesn't need help today.

Times past there would have been wine, family, friends, wise women washing the bride's body, telling her what to do. Eve needs only her flowers.

She wonders if he'll be cut. She's never seen a man, knows that some are cleaner. She wonders if he's known a woman. She runs her fingernail down a rose stem, rubbing off a layer of almost-skin.

Her hands. She'll rub them with olive oil, salt, lemon. Makes them soft. Lemon juice fades the brown marks... like old blood under the skin.

The dress is stained, but the flowers will cover that. The veil is good; beautiful last time she looked at it, clean enough. Maybe she could weave a few mock orange flowers round the hem? But the clock says eleven already.

Half an hour to go, this time. Then, she'll leave the house, push her front door key deep into her bouquet. She'll go to the gate, pull the veil over her face, tilt her chin skyward.

She'll start the walk to church, skirts hissing on the pavement. There'll be the squeak of a door, the thud of windows banging shut. The bark of a dog, the cry of a baby inside a house. A stifled laugh.

She'll walk past the chip shop, catching her reflection in the window. She'll turn frontways on, because that way she's always been beautiful.

She'll get to the church. They must all be inside, waiting. She'll walk up the path, her veil snagging on the chipped brick.

Outside, she'll pause, listen. As soon as she pushes the doors open, the organ will start, there'll be a single breath from the congregation, as though the church itself were breathing. She'll begin her slow walk down the aisle to the shadows at the far end. For the church is always dark. It's not easy to see in there.

Not easy to see. And so, so quiet.

“As soon as she pushes the doors open, the organ will start, there'll be a single breath from the congregation, as though the church itself were breathing.”

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*The author is a writer, editor and teacher of Creative Writing, who lives in the UK. Her work is widely published. Her short fiction has won many awards including prizes at Bridport and Fish International (both 2007) and her novel in progress won The Daily Telegraph Novel Competition, also 2007. Her debut collection of short fiction is forthcoming from Salt Publishing, Cambridge, UK.*

[Vrgebbie@aol.com](mailto:Vrgebbie@aol.com)

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## SERPENTINE

Natalie Reinhart

I was driving home  
yesterday when I approached  
a two-foot long rattlesnake,  
stretched across the road  
and sunbathing the little  
prickly scales that separated like beads  
of sweat on his back.

I waited for this grandfather  
to move his bones;  
watched each joint hook together  
and push his old head forward as he stuck  
out his tongue and spoke to the other side  
of the road.  
(a little pep talk for himself, a come on boy  
get your sun heavy belly across)  
When he finally made way for my car to inch  
by—I waved at the old man and  
laughed. Laughed at the little rattle he shook  
as gently as a baby would.

Today I came upon a lonely cord  
hanging in the middle of the air.  
I traced my eyes upward to make sure that no,  
this cord was not a snake hypnotized by the music  
of an Indian man, wooing it from its basket  
to stand straight in the air.  
No, this orange rope was nothing more but the  
extension cord of a janitor's vacuum  
that swung downwards from an above flight of stairs  
and into the plug beside me.

The cord swayed like the just  
snapped rope of a bungee jumper  
and twiddled and danced in front  
of my face, while the janitor above began to  
choreograph a tango for  
the two of us to dance together.

And for a moment I pretended  
that the custodian above me was a snake handler-  
a fundamentalist shouting glory hallelujahs,  
ready to lay his hands on me, and let a  
serpent as big as the one I saw in the road  
lay its hulky bones on top of my shoulders.

The snake and me would dance  
together like this cord and I were now,  
and we'd sing and holler; move our torsos  
to serpentine music,  
just slither in sync with one  
another's desire for salvation.

And I got all righteous and ready,  
feeling the tongue in my mouth  
fork and try to speak the Lord's language,  
little hisses to pray with.  
Then the cord twinged a little more,  
a little closer to my face this time,  
and I came back to where we were.  
Gyrating, it asked for another dance,  
the way that animal asked Eve for  
an afternoon snack.  
I declined.

.....  
*Natalie Reinhart is a senior at the Alabama School of Fine Arts and resides in New  
Hope, Alabama.*  
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## FATHER'S HEROICS

Leo Lichy

"Do you remember your father?" Mother asks me.

"The older I become, the fainter the memory," I tell her.

My most vivid recollection of him is that summer's afternoon on Revere Beach in Massachusetts. For one of the few times, we are together

“We should head  
back to shore,  
Captain, afore this  
swelling gulf  
consumes us within  
its hollow belly!”

as a family -- Mother,  
lugging a straw basket,  
towels and a windbreak,  
Father carrying an inflatable  
blue dinghy and two oars,  
and I with bucket and spade.  
When we are settled on our  
blankets and the sun tan  
lotion applied, Father begins  
to inflate the dinghy. When  
he is done I excitedly skip  
after him across the beach,  
towards the sea. The next I

remember is sitting uncomfortably in the dinghy and voicing my concerns as Father insists on taking his new vehicle further and further out to sea. Then, as I look back and see how far out we are from the land, I can feel a deep sense of panic welling in me.

Contrary to my vehemently voiced fears, Father insists on paddling the boat yet further out to sea, until the beach where Mother sits is a tiny speck in the distance.

All at once the sea changes its tone. Suddenly the waves grow larger and more frequent, and before I am even aware of the change, the lip of a wave lashes violently into my lap.

"We should head back to shore, Captain, afore this swelling gulf consumes us within its hollow belly!" I like to think I cried. This anxious outburst has some effect on Father this time, who has taken on board the danger of the situation -- together with a heavy bombardment of water that looks as if it may flood our now seemingly scanty craft.

Comprehending the seriousness of the situation, and seeing in my face absolute terror, Father doesn't like the mood within the boat, never mind outside it, and decides to head back to shore. But as he rows hard to turn the unruly dinghy, the waves get stronger still, and the waters that surround our capsule of hope are stubborn against the desperate lashings of his oar.

Rapidly we grasp that we are not headed back to shore. Instead we are battling to keep the boat vertical. My worst fears are quickly realized as Father begins to make jokes in order to ease my reservations. Then, with the heartfelt tears of the imminent victim who comprehends he will soon enter the throes of a torturous death, I see Father grimacing. I hold my breath and stare behind his shoulder in time to see a horrifying wave take shape.

“My worst fears are quickly realized as Father begins to make jokes in order to ease my reservations.”

As I watch it raise itself on its haunches I understand that this will be my final vision. There is no need for preparation. The outcome seems inevitable. All that is left is to take a final look at the face of the man I love -- ironically, the very man who led me to my demise.

The surge of saline bitterness hits the dinghy and lifts us into the air. I gasp, Father curses, and then another wave charges the boat and I find I am falling from the skies and headfirst into the unsupported darkness.

Everything has come to a close. All external noises have ceased.

Everything has turned to black. I think that I am twisting in the water, but I am only vaguely aware of anything else around me. I want to believe that the sudden voice I hear as my head bobs to the surface is real and not a figment of my imagination. But as realism of sound is quickly stolen from me, I can judge nothing. All I feel is my body twisting. Then, and of this I feel certain, my body is sinking to the bottom of the sea.

I don't remember what happened next. My eyes and ears were sealed shut on contact with the water. However, I do have vague recollections of

my rescue. I do recall feeling my arm being tugged at and then ever so slowly my head reaches the surface once more. After that I am gasping for

“But I am aware of  
Father dragging me  
along in the water,  
and soon we are  
back on the shore.”

air and not hearing much at all because my ears are so full of water. But I am aware of Father dragging me along in the water, and soon we are back on the shore.

Then Mother approaches and stands rigid with fury, angrily screaming abuse at Father, the hero.

The older I become, the fainter my memory of him. One

day, just like the dinghy at Revere Beach, his memory will be washed away.

.....

*Leo Lichy is the pseudonym of a former newspaper journalist from England, who has lived and worked in Canada and Australia and now resides in the US. His work has appeared most recently in Raging Face, Litbits, and Unlikely 2.0, and is forthcoming in Aquapolis, and The Blotter Magazine.*

.....

"Brief let me be. The fewer words the better prayer."

--Martin Luther

## PERHAPS MORE

C. Kodra

My father dies slowly,  
his ribs an ark holding a pair  
of imperfect lungs, sucking  
air with greedy concentration,  
releasing it in shuddering sighs  
that same way he used to smoke  
Camels, trapping the stream inside  
for long, luxurious moments, floating  
it out possessively, in small measures  
like a lover.

I love him the way one loves  
a wounded animal,  
but perhaps more.

I stay awake, not for the clang  
of metal linen carts in the hall  
outside his door, nor the senile  
woman two rooms away shouting  
*let me out, goddamn you, let me out*

over and over, the stress on every syllable  
the same, nor fluorescent lights  
everywhere, everywhere illuminating  
the evasive hum of hospital bones,

but to listen to the steadily drowning  
whine and rattle of breath, to make sure  
when he is breathing, to make sure  
when he is not, to rub his forehead, put lotion  
on swollen, weeping feet, change sweat-soaked  
sheets, and call the nurse for more,  
more, and more morphine, something,  
anything.

His dying eyes hold me longer  
Than his arms ever did.  
He is still first to let go.

.....  
*Cathy Kodra is a native New Yorker now permanently residing in Knoxville,  
Tennessee. Her poetry has appeared or is scheduled to appear in Lynx Eye,  
Beginnings, Tar Wolf Review, and New Millennium Writings (Fall, 2007).  
She is an active member of Knoxville Writers' Guild and its offshoot poetry group.*  
.....



## POPULATION 1

Digital Photograph  
Patti Rice Eggers

*Patti Rice Eggers is a native of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. A graduate of the University of Alabama and Harvard, she lives in Homewood, Alabama, with her husband and two daughters. Patti is an avid scrap-booker, and thus an amateur photographer. This photo was taken in Wyoming. [peggers@bellsouth.net](mailto:peggers@bellsouth.net)*

## CALENDAR

Kelsey Scouten Bates

Her week is threaded  
like a strand of seven pearls  
hanging around the slender neck of history  
where Monday, round and thick  
hangs heavily above her chest  
and Tuesday falls unswervingly in line to the left.

Her week runs  
counter to clockwise  
with no hard edges, abrupt endings, or returns  
where Friday is always at the clasp  
and Saturday is welded to Sunday at midnight  
ending a week indefinitely, inescapably circular.

Ask her about Wednesday.  
Her mind will search for it as a finger on a rosary  
Sunday  
Monday  
Tuesday  
Wednesday

.....

Kelsey Scouten Bates lives in Homewood, Alabama with her husband,  
Glenn. She works full time at the Birmingham Public Library as Assistant  
Archivist and Grants Writer. She enjoys being creative through writing,  
painting, and cooking--and sometimes combines all three at once.

.....

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