

Birmingham Arts Journal

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Birmingham Arts Journal

The Hackney Literary Awards, sponsored by the Cecil Hackney family of Birmingham, Alabama, was established in 1969. This prestigious writing competition recognizes excellence in poetry and fiction with prizes at the national level and for the state of Alabama. The annual competition awards \$5,000 in prizes for poetry and short fiction (\$2,500 national and \$2,500 state levels: 1st place, \$600; 2nd, \$400; 3rd, \$250).

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Front Cover: **BEACH BUDS** – Winner, Birmingham Arts Journal Publication Award, 2010 Alabama Pastel Society Juried Show, 16" x 24", Chalk Pastel on Paper. *Libby Wright, a native of Mobile, Alabama, started drawing about the age of 5. She took private art lessons through her school years and graduated from Samford University with a Fine Arts degree. Her works are usually in pastel or watercolor and contain contrast and/or studies of human character. artsylibby@aol.com*

Back Cover: **FLY BALL TO THE LEFT**, Laser cut carbon steel - Approx 12"h x 10"w x 4"d
Eric Johnson lives and works in Dora, Alabama, with his wife Tonja and three Australian shepherds. When he's not creating sculptures, you can find him in his garden or camping off the beaten trail. www.rejohnsoniron.com. eric@rejohnsoniron.com

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HALF A LIFETIME AWAY, IN SEVENTH HEAVEN

Jim Reed

Eldest Granddaughter Jessica is getting married on Saturday. One day, about half of her lifetime back, the two of us prepared dinner together. Here are my notes.

I'm sitting at the kitchen table, watching Jessica. She's 13 years old these days, and 13-year-olds must be watched and carefully considered, since time passes so fast and before you know it a 13-year-old will be a 20-year-old and you won't have any idea where the time went, where the moment went, where the 25-year-old went.

Jessica is sitting at the table in front of four soup bowls, or maybe they're salad bowls, only they don't contain soup or salad. Into one bowl she has crumbled up a bunch of Ritz Crackers, another bowl contains milk, another is filled with flour and the fourth holds several eggs she has whisked together into a sunshiny blend. She's had me cut up a lot of de-boned chicken breasts into nugget-sized hunks—the only way to do it, she insists.

Over on the stove, the wok awaits usage, since Jessica instructs me not to turn the heat on till she's through doing what she's doing at the table, which is: each hunk of chicken must be dipped one at a time into all four bowls, until the hunk looks kind of flaky and golden and quite raw. The process takes a while, but that's OK because we're chatting a little bit and she's got the TV turned up high so she can watch and listen to one of her favorite shows—Seventh Heaven, or something like that.

Earlier, we've gone to Bruno's Supermarket and bought everything on Jessica's list: Chocolate chip mint ice cream, corn oil, pre-packaged salad (Jessica likes it because she says it doesn't have to be washed and it's already cut up. I wash it thoroughly, just in case somebody named Booger has not practiced good hygiene the day he packs the plastic bag), frozen lima beans for microwave zapping, and whatever else Jessica has decreed for the ideal meal at home.

Process is important to Jessica. Everything must be done a specified way, a specific way, or the meal will be ruined. She's a particularly finicky eater, so finding a meal that she'll actually eat is tricky. She'd rather not eat at all than eat something she's never tried and has made a firm decision against.

Anyhow, we get this meal cooked to Jessica's satisfaction, and we even clean up the kitchen so that there will be no trace of the havoc we've caused in her father's absence.

The deep-fried chicken nuggets are good—we've cooked about four times as much as we can eat. And we're both somewhat satisfied with ourselves. She gets what she wants—a meal just like her Aunt Vikki cooks. I get what I want—a nice meal at home, not prepared by strangers, prepared with love and camaraderie, and the company of my grand-daughter.

We settle in to wait for her father's return, watching this TV show she loves, Seventh Heaven, and the night is quite all right, as nights on earth or in Seventh Heaven sometimes are

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Jim Reed is curator of Reed Books / The Museum of Fond Memories in Birmingham, Alabama. His latest work, How to Become Your Own Book, is a workbook for writers and want-to-be writers. <http://jimreedbooks.com>

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LOVE AMONG LINGUISTS

Allen Berry

She tells me in Sarikoli that many of the world's languages are dying. I, smiling, always the romantic, reply in Leonese that I hadn't known that. I ask her in my passable Istro-Romanian if she has read the tragic Judeo Italian poets' treatises on love in a time of hopelessness. She replies in Chuvash that she really isn't in to poetry. I chastise myself under my breath in the fading Sarwa dialect of Botswana for my foolish notions. She raises an eyebrow and asks me in quite good Oblo if I know any other African languages. I proudly reply in Luo, that in fact I know quite a few. She laughs and tells me in Bikya that my Swahili is proof that there is only one remaining speaker of Luo, and I am clearly not him. Looking to change the subject, I summon the waiter in the Oceanic language Amto. He arrives promptly and tells me that, in this part of Asia, and particularly in this exclusive restaurant, if I want service I'll have to speak Lom. I suppose that is only fitting, considering the quality of the Sumatran coffee. Turning to my companion, the waiter compliments her in Bonerif, says her eyes are beautiful in the all but lost Mapi language, and asks her what she's doing later in Saponi. She smiles and tells him in Tandia that he just might be her type. He replies in kind, that now she's speaking his language. Given that there are only two speakers of Tandia left in the world, I ask for the check in my broken pidgin, and she and I sit in a long, awkward, silence, having nothing left to say.

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Allen Berry's work has appeared in The American Muse Magazine, What Remembers Us, and For Better or Worse: an Anthology about Marriage. He founded the Limestone Dust Poetry Festival in Huntsville, Alabama, and is currently enrolled in the PhD of Creative Writing program at the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. ABerry4489@aol.com

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TOWER OF POWER

24" x 24"

Mixed Media

Kay Vinson

Kay Vinson travelled widely as an international flight attendant before moving back to her native Birmingham, Alabama, and settling down with art. www.kayvinsonart.com

DIPSOCRYPTAMNESIA (an excerpt from the short story)

Neil Dennis

"I'm going out..."

"Where are you going?"

"To the library—do some work."

She looked at him, knowing he was not going to the library at all, but was headed for the closest bar, where he'd sit and drink for several hours, wearing away the inhibitive shell of the gentle, introverted hermit Nash actually was, most of the time.

"Don't go."

"What?" He stares at me, thought Ross, as if I were the stupidest person on earth. "What? You don't want me to go to the library?"

"You're not going to the library."

"That's what I said!"

"You know you're not going to the library...."

It had been a hideous work day, where everything went wrong, and all Nash's workers were doing exactly what they should not have been doing for a large portion of the day. Production would be terrible for the next day. His ass was in trouble, and firings were rampant.

When he drove up, she had a mop in her hand.

"Here."

"What?"

"I want you to clean up the bathroom. Before you do anything else. Did you see how you left it this morning?"

"I-I was late, I-I—," trying to keep it nice, to have a pleasant evening watching the sitcoms on television, holding hands, thinking about children.

She handed him the mop. He went and did it, fuming the entire time, his anger building toward the final malfluctuation that would get him into such trouble by three the next morning.

April, flowers bloomed all over, flowers whose names he knew: crocuses, hyacinths, anemones, and sprayed along his interstate route, the red and yellow clovers. He looked at none of that on the way home that day; he dwelt on how horrible the day'd been—how stupidly people behaved, given half the chance: selfish, judgmental, oafish people! Look at that guy speeding along at 92 miles per hour, yn-n-n-nng, and he's past: drunk, most likely, or high on something, Nash thought to himself.

And out he went, pretending to go to the library. He went instead, immediately, though it was only about eight, to a quiet neighborhood bar downtown where he used to live years before in the hippie days.

"Hi," greeted the bar-girl, who sat in overalls and typical white shirt.

"Hi, what'll you have?"

Some hours later, along toward two or maybe threeish, having drunk several mixed drinks and some beers, Nash disregarded a red-light and then, when he perceived, through his fond haze, the blue lights swinging up behind him—they were in the mall, idle, waiting just for such as he on an otiose Wednesday morning—he made an improper lane change and pulled off the road. Peripherals aren't strong when your blood-alcohol tests at 1.13, which is where Nash's went when he finally blew into the tube. He was handcuffed, and a wrecker was called for his shabby, dirty car, while he waited in the back seat of the city cop car.

Wonder if this was the cell Martin Luther King Jr. was in? Wonder if this was the cell where the guy got beaten to death with a piece of fuzz last month? They didn't keep Nash's cell locked, and after lying down and trying to sleep off his drunkenness in a tight curl on the corner of a metal bench, he dragged himself to the door and pushed it open. Head not throbbing yet, but it wasn't far away. There was a desk with several police officers behind it.

"Can I make a phone call?" Nash asked politely.

"Dee You Eye?" A man with a thick mustache, obese, glassy-eyed either with rage or fatigue, looked down at a folder.

"You don't get no phone call, sir. Dee You Eye don't get no phone call."

"No?"

"No."

"Son of a—dog."

"You better hush."

Nash looked down at the cracked paint, the slivers of unrepaired wood and brick poking out like mangled bones.

He must have been muttering to himself.

"If I let you call, and you're drunk, you might call anybody...it's the middle of the night, you know, man? Wake somebody up, they alert the phone company, the phone company says it's us. So. You see, then."

"Uh, yeah, but I really need to tell my wife."

"We might let you in a few minutes."

"—where I am. Okay."

He went back to his hole, sat down and began after a while to feel like a piece of dried up, scraped off, discarded merde. Headpiece in hands, thoughts bleaker than they should have been, muttering My f_____ life is over, my job, gone—

That angel quit watching over me, oh man, swing low late this awful greeneyed morning, if you please.

Before he could dwell over much on the extent of his self-pity, before he could even consider the possibility of some grace in this situation, a guard passed by with some biscuits and sausage. Nash shook his head. It was late. He'd have to

call in work—or his wife would have to call in for him—Holy Christ, she'd probably be so idiotically angry—she would do something that would hurt herself, if it meant a way to hurt him. Shortly thereafter another guard came by and told him to head down to another room where several prisoners, none looking as bad as Nash, sat looking at the walls and floors as if masterpieces were encrypted or inscribed there. He sat down at a doughnut-shaped green metal table.

"What you in for?"

"Receivin' stolen property."

"Auto grand theft—"

"Dee You Eye."

Time greasily slipped by, left his neck tired and hard. He was due at work in about two hours. An officer or guard came past and Nash took a chance, rushing up to the bars:

"Can I use the phone? I need to call work. Come on man, please! Please!"

He looked at the desk. "Can he use the phone?"

It was the same guy as before.

"He looks much more sober, now. Yeah, go ahead."

The officer taking a batch of them into the courtroom looked so much like Daryl Strawberry, the disgraced NY Met baseball player, that it was beyond uncanny; Nash wondered if the Jaeger could incite hallucinations this many hours after drinking as much of it as he had last night. He began to talk as they were herded into the courtroom, which was empty. It must have been around 9 in the morning. A court reporter slowly put his machine into working order; bailiffs came and went. No judge had yet appeared.

"I'm gonna tell you all something; you can believe me or not, it don't matter to me, but you'll be doing yourself a favor if you walk up there in front of the Judge and plead guilty, tho' yerself on the mercy o' th' court." He guided a couple of older men toward the vacant pews/seats to the right. It was crowded; mass justice. Things started happening; Officer Daryl, eyes Pinscher-sharp (ears similarly pulled back), nodded toward the petite young judge now entering.

"You can argue," whispering now, pointing a dark, jagged-tip finger, "you can say this and that and you don't think you're guilty and all this, but, let me tell you—I seen it—you are better off just tho'in' yerself on the mercy o' th' court." He looked at everyone, rowing them with his brown and unreadable eyes. Nash thought a feeling: Mercy.

Man after man, and a couple of women, were called before the judge. His turn before the bench would come. He wanted a cigarette like a junky wants junk, but they were in his jacket.

Will she even come by to get me? Ross had seemed pretty resigned when he finally got her on the phone. She might switch to *Let him rot*, justifiably of course, but would she actually do that? My paycheck is more important, is it not?

Insurance, the house, all that... More important than making Nash suffer, isn't it, for her?

He could not be sure.

Finally his name was called and he was going to be judged for his sins, his crimes, his transgressions, all the things he'd done wrong his entire life long, all the bugs pointlessly killed, the birds shot when he was ten, lies told to girlfriends, lies told to parents, lies told to himself—

"Were you involved in an accident?" the hawk-headed judge twitched her head, eyed him from various angles.

"No your honor," he remembered to say.

The judge was still sizing him up and suddenly Nash wanted to say a few things, but remembered the Strawberry double's imperative and held his tongue. Sighing ruefully, the judge wrote on a piece of paper, handed it to someone—there goes my fate, writ large on a stinking piece of paper, three-color press, hard paper—and he was instructed to talk to a woman sitting where the prosecution sits at what Nash would consider a real court case. This was trial en masse, a queue of sickheaded folks scraped out of the city the night before. Almost all of the faces were as expressionless, nothing-colored.

"You'll have to pay fifty-five dollars a month until you pay this amount," touching the paper with her pen, not saying it aloud, "and you'll have to report to the Probation Office each month for a year, or until you pay your fine off. Okay? Do you understand what you have to do?" She looked like Nash's elder sister Regina, sun burnt and relaxed, retired in Florida these days. He nodded.

At least, he thought as he waited, at least nobody knows about this but me and Ross. He waited, trying to listen to the stories of the others but the talk was inaudible. At the end of it all, after only a brief wait, he was taken to a door, a thick locking door. His wife waited, waving, on the other side. Glad to see him? O Christ. She must be absolutely crazed by now. A guard gave him back all the stuff they'd taken from him the night before: cigarettes, belt, keys, change, lighter. A door opened, he was released!

Not yet. "Go through that door," said another guard. "And don't give nobody none of them smokes, you hear?" Soon he stood on the edge of release.

"Psst."

Nash tried to ignore him.

"Psst. Hey. Man." A head, an arm in orange. "Gimme one o' them smokes, man. Hey—"

Nash glanced up at a camera on the wall. He couldn't give the man the pack, much as he wanted to. His head was stuck through a door that probably should not have been open. The man moved into the room, reached into Nash's shirt pocket, took the smokes.

"Fine with me," Nash said to him. "You understand." Looking at him in the eyes as the prisoner eyed the pack for size. Only three.

Nash's name was called, finally. He moved through another large, electronically-opened door, and now his wife was hugging him.

"You okay?" The people at the desk would not accept the wad of money she had with her. They all had, Nash noticed, that impermeable weekday glaze about them; they didn't care what happened, nor who it happened to. This was another day at the office for them. But it really was not. He hadn't gotten home and seen CNN yet. There had been a massive loss of life at a building in Oklahoma that morning; only a few hours ago.

In the car he sobbed, begging her to forgive him, wetting her blue shirt. She patted his shoulder and looked investigatively at him. They had to drive home, get papers allowing them to regain the impounded vehicle Nash had driven during his revelry the night before.

"—which could have ended," she had to remind him, "with either you dead, or somebody else dead, or injured, and you in jail for Dee You Eye Manslaughter or something—Then how would I get you out? Huh?"

Nash shook his head, mashing tears out of his face with his thumbs, still obviously hung-over, but still unaware that his driver's license would soon be suspended for a period of time. His face felt like thin cardboard sheets left out overnight in a warm rain; looking at himself in the Pontiac's mirror was like looking at a semi-dead person, the caricature of a tragic, sick character. He scratched at his hair, told his wife as much as he could remember of the night before, then stuck his head out the window so his face would look more normal by the time they arrived home. He hoped he could keep this from the kids. Neither asked anything about it.

And you might have supposed that it was then all over: that they kissed, made up, worked it out—whatever couples do when they manage to stay together for long years—they screamed awhile, in an orderly, pre-ordained and almost ritualistic way, shouting back and forth in what ancient Greeks might have thought to be a lyrical dialectic. They talked calmly, in the middle of the morning or sitting on steps, at a desk. It is all worked out. But his wife will not so easily remove the problem of driving without a license.

"So...even though, if I get caught, fined and run through God-only-knows what else in legal hassle—if I get caught, you will suffer, too, economically." He was astounded.

Paranoid nervousness.

"So." He was not sure he had it straight. "You're not going to drive me to work, and pick me up again."

"Right." She smiled falsely, her pale navy eyes shiny from all the Schlauer beer she'd guzzled that afternoon.

He'd given up all alcoholic spirits. So far it hadn't been that hard.

"Let's see...lemme get this right, Ross. I have to drive—with this over both our heads—for four score and ten days—revocation hanging like a mother—I have to drive?"

"No way."

"Over both heads..." He looked at her. He was running out of self-pity quickly that late spring afternoon; his wife's Marital Compassion reserves were dipping treacherously low.

"I don't care," she said.

He waited about a week to turn his license in, annoying dozens of recalcitrant Public Safety secretaries and temporary workers by calling to inquire into the legality of it, not wanting to give up this supremely important identification card until the very last possible moment. It almost hurt, he told someone later, when he put it into the envelope with the \$50.00 check.

"You'll just have to go straight home and straight to work."

"Emphasis on straight."

"Nowhere else. And no drinking, period end."

Each morning, then, for the summer months, he got carefully into his Nissan and drove, as arranged, only to and from work, hoping not to get caught, thinking about it all the time. Suppose the tail light went out, or he was arrested for "bad posture." No tail light. "It suddenly went out!" "*Let me see your license, sir...*" A dangling muffler. Always the words *Let me see your license, please sir—*

Imagining myself as the fugitive I drove toward what might be one of those new way-stations set up where men in uniforms, with dogs and guns close by, check the identification papers of everyone passing through, ostensibly in search of hideous murderers but who knows who they might scrape up?

We're going to take you back to jail, Nash.

Why, please tell me before you take me, why? What did I do wrong?

You were born, Nash.

They will catch you, and when you do not expect it.

No they won't and even if they do, even if it happens, which I certainly don't expect—but then the other day I had some bright red string tangled around my wheel, yeah, and I thought, as I borrowed a knife from a man at a quickmart, I thought: How conspicuous! As though asking to be pulled over for something ridiculous...

Even a little fender-bender would render life untenable.

And so he lived with it, bearing the burden day after day, knowing even as he got into his car that he could easily wind up down at the city jail by afternoon, behind bars, awaiting a wife who'd been thinking *Divorce the bastard!* all the way there, awaiting another letter from the Public Safety department telling him he'd have to pay another \$50 and wait yet another period of 90 days before the license would be returned. Revocation came after suspension. He had learned a lot about

the legal system from this ordeal, Nash reflected brightly through the blaring darkness of possibilities. And the classes hadn't been so bad, after all....

Every Saturday morning, for eight weeks straight, one had to be at a certain building at 8:45 a.m. Drunk College, some called it. It was the same group of about 10-12 people, including two dudes who spoke and understood nothing but Spanish, though they were otherwise very attentive. Above the entrance was a chiseled owl.

Out in front of the Auld building, which was squashed between a church, the gas company, and several abandoned garages in one of the cloggy nexuses of business that still remained downtown, the group of transgressors gathered before class to smoke and gripe.

"I only showed point oh-eight. That's it."

"I was out for a short time to get some water."

"I was asleep in my car, can you believe that, they arrest a man for sleeping in his car?"

One small girl of perhaps thirty, who stayed in the corner of the narrow classroom (full of metal folding chairs, posters on the wall reminding us of changes in the law) and said nothing, seemed to be undergoing a rude change.

Worse than me? wondered Nash. That thin, wiry red-haired fellow—the one who boasts that he got drunk last night and that he'll leave there today "*and be on my way to getting drunk this evening*"—works in a foundry south of the city somewhere, unmarried, stupid. He'll wind up back down there, Nash realized with a shudder.

"What's the matter?" the red-haired man asked him. Nash had been staring.

"Nothing, nothing man. I'm tired this morning, is all."

"Dingy, eh? You tie one on last night?"

Nash shook his head ruefully, giving no clear answer.

"I did," the man said.

Across from him, near the girl we can call Karol, always trying to get the small girl to speak, or show some animation, is the big sweet wench, the good old girl of the good old boys—Nash thought of her as Debora, though that could not have been her name. She wore culottes and splayed her legs out widely, unknown to the instructor, but hardly missing the attention of Nash and the other guys against the wall. Between breaks, once, she'd mentioned how her parents got her out of her first DUI.

"But not this time. No more. They give up."

She looked liked the good-hearted, amiable pseudo-nymph Nash had been looking for when he found his wife. Twenty years ago, I'd be out to jump her bones. There were a couple of morose black dudes, an overweight sibylline trailer-park grandmother, and one other man who could have been, give or take a few years, Nash himself. At the break they filed dutifully down to the street to watch traffic, gripe some more, and smoke. The teacher of the group, a

grammar-school teacher from a local suburb, fiddled with her videotapes and read in a Foods For You magazine interesting stories on custard pies.

June, then July—only a month left—and then it was perhaps 18 days until he would get his license back. He was feeling he might now make it. He knew he'd never be able to drink alcohol like other people, mindlessly; in a way he was sorry that he could no longer use this method for reaching the border of oblivion—it was as if a friend had gone away, you missed them for a short while but then you forgot them altogether. He did not miss his friend alcohol for very long.

Foremost in his mind, now, was the awareness of the streak of stubbornness that sometimes led to substance abuse in his family: three out of four grandparents abused moonshine, during the '30s; two uncles died early, their livers shriveled to the size of half a big cookie; and his mother was fairly well addicted to Valium by the time she died, craving them even though—or perhaps because—she knew they'd cause her liver to quit functioning at all; then the bile came back up. Nash had watched for weeks as she died a slow and quite undignified death, puking bile into a plastic bucket, babbling incoherently through the gradual oxygen deprivation of her brain.

The night she died, where were you, Nash-Bob?

Nowhere near the expensive hospital room Nash's dad was paying extra for her to die in. Where was Nash, that night? He was getting drunk, shooting pool, having a good time down at the corner tavern that night. He could not remember it long without the pang of rancid old remorse in the barrels of his chest. That was probably one of the reasons he'd drunk to excess, trying to push himself through a self-determined envelope of contained intellectual rage and furious sexual fires that sometimes smoldered off into creativity.

It was this: the alcohol etherized enough of his sense of reality—the sweet Mind Erasers after work, the Mothers' Milk late at night at Trail's End—that, well, (he thinks after that second shot of tequila) maybe a woman would be attracted to me! I am so, urp, witty, and so, coughcoughcough, smart. I shall write on a napkin, and she shall think I am an available artiste.

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Thomas N. Dennis lives and writes near Lovick, Alabama. He is the author of two memoirs, Beautiful Illusions (2004) and Consolations of Loss (2010), as well as a collection of short stories, Magic Sweat (2007). One possible title for an upcoming novel is Never Snicker at a Snake on a Stick. He is also a practicing yogi. mfiction@charter.net & http://merefiction.com
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JOHN'S GARDEN (an excerpt from the short story)

Jennifer Pitts Adair

Charles Coffman let the hoe slip out of his callused hands and fall to the parched ground beside him. He felt the sweat beads dripping down his face and removed his straw hat to wipe it from his brow. Placing the hat back over his thin gray hair he sighed deeply, wishing that God would replace the relentless summer heat that was beating down on him with a nice cool rain shower. Goodness knows the land needed it, he thought as he surveyed the cracked earth around him. There was no way his crops would ever survive this heat. He spent every day fighting a losing battle with Mother Nature, but his stubbornness wouldn't let him admit defeat.

Charles admitted there were times when he envied the people living in the sprawling plantations he would pass on his trips to Atlanta to buy grains and supplies. Those trips were as much a part of Charles as the rich Georgia clay was. He remembered the excitement floating in the air the first time his father told him that he would be making the trip with him. He was so nervous that he couldn't even fall asleep the night before. He lay on the corncob mattress watching the ghostly shadows dancing on the wall for what seemed like an eternity in his boyhood mind. He'd always hated how winter stripped the trees outside of his small bedroom window, turning them into what appeared to him to be giant dead sticks. When he became too antsy to stay in bed any longer, he ran to the corner of the room and grabbed the chipped porcelain wash basin and poured in a little of the water he'd collected from the stream the night before. He splashed the water on his face and felt a shiver run down his spine at the coldness of it. He put on his best Sunday clothes and sat back on his bed waiting to hear his father rise from his sleep.

Most of the trip disappointed 10 year old Charles. They passed small family farm after small family farm. They weren't any different than his family's own tiny patch of land. Other families just like his, struggling to make it in this world. Charles had always heard stories about the huge plantations and secretly dreamed that one day he would own as much land as the famous plantation owners in his part of the country. He sat lost in thought and listening to the buggy wheels creaking along the dirt path. As the old buggy ascended the next hill Charles glanced over and his mouth fell open in shock. Lying before him was the most beautiful thing Charles had ever seen in his life. The desolate land gave way to lush green rolling hills. Scattered among the hills were row after row of white fluffy clouds on top of the ground. Cotton! He'd never seen such a large cotton field before. It went on as far as the eye could see.

"Close your mouth, boy," he heard his father command under his breath. "They ain't no better than you."

The buggy lurched forward with a swift snap of the reins. Charles sat in silence taking in every inch of the plentiful land before him. Whoever these people were, they never had to worry about a bad harvest, Charles thought to himself. Must be nice not having to worry where your next meal would come from in the years when the harvest failed.

As the cotton fields faded into the distance, the homestead came into view. Two rows of massive oak trees, now stripped of their summer glory, lined the path to the distant white home trimmed with blue shutters. Four massive columns appeared to suspend the second floor balcony over the wrap-around front porch. Charles imagined sitting on the steps of that covered porch, looking out over the land knowing that he would never have a worry in the world. Those thoughts slipped away as the massive plantation slipped farther out of view.

“Supper time!”

Charles snapped back to the present at the sound of his wife’s voice. Mary stood in the door of their small clapboard farm house.

“Made your favorite. Fried okra, fried squash, and fresh bread,” Mary smiled as she turned back inside the house.

He kicked the dirt and muttered under his breath like a little boy. His wife still loved to tease him after all these years. She knew he hated vegetables, but as the years went by he’d been less able to keep livestock around the farm. He preferred a juicy piece of fresh fried chicken, but seeds were cheaper to purchase than livestock, though everyone he knew would agree that they were also harder to raise than animals. He reached down to retrieve his hoe from the dirt and glanced at the far corner of the small garden where a weather-beaten, round, wooden marker stood six inches above the unturned soil. Then, leaving the hoe by the front porch, he turned and hurried into the house for supper.

“Noticed you haven’t turned the soil at the edge of the garden yet,” Mary stated during supper.

“Don’t plan to.”

“Why not? Remember when John used to plant his own little garden out there? He couldn’t have been more than six years old that first year, but he loved it.”

“You think I’ve forgotten how much our only child loved that garden?” Charles sneered at Mary.

“Not forgotten, honey. I just think it’s time to let go of the pain and reclaim some of the good memories. Maybe if we planted John’s garden then we’d be able to picture him out there again. In his garden. Like the war never happened,” Mary pleaded, reaching across the table and clasping her husband’s hands in her own.

Charles watched her eyes fill with tears and his heart broke inside his chest. They went through this same conversation every year, and every year his wife broke his heart without even knowing it.

He pulled his hand away from hers and rose from the table. “But the war DID happen!” he yelled at his wife, “and John’s garden will never be planted again. NEVER!” He heard Mary burst into tears behind the slamming door, but it was the only way he could get the point across. As long as Charles was alive the soil would never be turned in his son’s corner garden.

Now that he was outside he wasn’t sure what to do. That’s just like me, he thought to himself, always acting first and thinking later. He sure as heck wasn’t walking back into that house right now. He would like nothing more than to take his wife in his arms and comfort her, but he couldn’t do it. He had always sworn that he would do whatever it took to make his wife happy, Mary certainly deserved it, but this was one issue where he had to stand firm. Mary didn’t know it, but he was protecting her the only way he knew how.

He sat down on the sparse grass and leaned against the side of the house. The sunset painted the horizon breathtaking shades of oranges, reds, and blues; but Charles didn’t notice. Truth be told, he hadn’t noticed a sunset in years. He didn’t notice a lot of things that were right in front of him, but he always noticed his son’s empty garden. Every few weeks he took the scythe out to the small garden and swung it from side to side, watching the tall grass as it sliced across the blade and fell to the ground around him. His emotions always overtook him and he found himself kneeling in the grass crying. He never saw Mary watching him through the small bedroom window, nor did she ever acknowledge that she saw him. Some things are better left unsaid.

This certainly wasn’t the life Charles had imagined. In his young impressionable mind he was going to grow up to be wealthy. He had decided that on his first trip to Atlanta with his father. He planned on being a plantation owner, being able to care for his family without having to wear out his body working the land like his father did. He remembered the day his dream was shattered.

They had passed by that same plantation for years on their supply trips, but that day was different. As the plantation came into view, Charles saw the hustle and bustle of activity around the grounds. There must have been at least twenty carriages surrounding the entrance path to the massive home. Men in fancy dark suits tied their horses to nearby trees and circled back to lend a hand to the beautiful women stepping down from the carriages. Charles never knew dresses like that existed. He’d only seen the dresses his mother and sisters wore, linen for the summer and wool for the winter, all homespun dresses, all in the same neutral colors. These young ladies, however, wore bright reds, blues, and greens in designs that probably came straight from one of those expensive fashion patterns Charles noticed one time in the general store in Atlanta.

One young lady, who couldn’t have been more than 15, caught the young boy’s attention. She stepped down from her father’s carriage, and he couldn’t look away. She wore a white dress with tiny red and yellow flowers printed right

into the fabric. The bottom of the dress flowed away from her body as if there was something magical keeping it suspended there in a perfect hoop formation. He'd never seen his mother or sisters wear a dress that flowed away from their bodies like that. Their dresses always hung limply by their sides. Guess it would be hard for them to work in the garden if they were dressed like these girls. He noticed the young girl's flawless face and dark brown hair tucked under a white bonnet with the same red and yellow flowers as her dress. She was the most beautiful creature 16 years old Charles had ever laid eyes on.

"Hurry, Lily!" he saw a group of young, giggling girls, motioning the pretty brunette over.

He didn't realize he was staring until the young girl named Lily looked over directly into his eyes as his buggy passed by. Charles, in all his youthful innocence, smiled and nodded his head to her. Her eyes quickly darted up and down, taking in the strange boy in his worn out, hand-me-down, blue jacket riding in a rickety old buggy. The look of horror and disgust that passed over her face froze his heart. In that instant he felt his world come crashing down around him. His dreams were pointless. He would never be accepted into their world. He was sentenced to a life of hard labor, just like his father and grandfather. Coffmans would always work the land.

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Jennifer Pitts Adair is a software engineer living in Athens, Alabama. She enjoys running, playing softball, crocheting, knitting, and watching Alabama football. She and her husband Brandon celebrated their first wedding anniversary less than one month after she survived the April 27th (2011) EF5 tornado that demolished their home.
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“Reality is nothing but a collective hunch.”

--Lily Tomlin



At the bustling, weekly market in Vevey, Switzerland was the stall of the hat lady. Her hats were all wildly different, bright colors and fanciful designs. The Dame Chapeau stood in the midst of all this swirling color in a demurely colored outfit, quietly drinking a cup of tea in her combat boots.

DAME CHAPEAU-VEVEY

14" x 14"

Mixed Media

Marcia Mouron

Marcia Mouron lives in Birmingham, Alabama with her cat, her bees and a yard full of trees. Nature inspires much of her art. mamouron@bellsouth.net

NOCTURNE: WINTER

Laura Davenport

Because the look of drifting snow
garnished by street lamps made us think
of buried cabins, isolated counties
where winter lies heaviest, shivering
in each other's arms we slept with the curtains
open, watching flakes fall,
& I woke to the drone of a plow,
shovels scraping footprints from the walk,
men conversing softly in Spanish
or heaving out a breath, clearing
the courtyard between condos.
In bed I listened to a man's
muffled steps around the porch
as he cleared ice from the stairs. And, naked,
was drawn to the window, wrapped
the open curtain around my body,
peered at their bent backs.
Though the night was freezing,
they wore sweatshirts with the hoods
drawn tight, no jackets. Called in at midnight
when the snow stopped coming,
I suppose it meant a bigger
modest paycheck—shoveling out the frozen
condo owners' cars—though to me it felt
like rescue, the silent corps scraping
each walk, scattering salt and leaving me the world
as it was yesterday. In bed again, I shivered.
You turned and hummed a little in your sleep,
a tune you wouldn't remember
that arose from nowhere to drift

“Nocturne” 2/2
through your mind like this restless
wondering I get at night—the too bright snow
and the men's shadows over it,
carving out a path for us. I wanted then
to wake you, ask something inconsequential.
Like how long you would love me, what shape
love takes. I let you sleep. And I am not writing this
to ask you now. I write it
so that when the answer comes
I can look back on this questioning,
as first explorers at night by the fire retraced
blazed routes, naming each encampment.
Laid out behind them, the map ever-widening—
ocean in view.

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Laura Davenport received a Masters of Fine Arts from Virginia Commonwealth University. Her work has appeared in Boxcar Poetry Review, Richmond Magazine, New South and Best New Poets 2009, and was selected for the Helen Burns Anthology from the Academy of American Poets. ledavenport@gmail.com
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“There is no greater illusion than that age brings a simplification of life. On the contrary, it accumulates obligations.”

--Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

LAURA'S CUSTARD PIE

Steve Edmondson

With no phone, little gas money for the shabby old '39 Chevy with an oftentimes dead battery, and rough dirt road distances between neighbors and kin, it was a special trip to make a day visit.

My mother had lots of relatives, keeping up with them all. Family is what you lean on when times are hard, she'd tell us.

One such relative was Aunt Delia Morgan, a sweet lady who lived about four miles away, just Delia and her old maid school teacher daughter, alone in the pretty white house with green trim, a front porch and a red tin roof.

Actually, by today's standards, daughter Laura was a sophisticated and beautiful young woman, well-educated and bright, with a strange faraway look about her. In her mid-20s perhaps, she had never married, thus her local stature as an "old maid." Mom had hinted the sad look and single status might be intertwined with an old lost love. I was to think later she was straight out of a Tennessee Williams novel, maybe one that hadn't been written.

I remember Laura as of average height, and slim, with dark hair and sharp features. Smooth white skin. I still see her haunting dark eyes, her sweet smile. I wonder now about my mother telling me, a 10-year-old, such thoughts about why Laura was as she was, but I know were we to meet again, I'd fall in love with her again, and again, each time our paths crossed.

Then on a warm, early summer day, the old car cranked up slowly at mom's urging, and she jerked it into low gear and we lurched off down the road to visit Aunt Delia. We slowed for the intersection of crossing dirt roads at Eva, and went on the mile or so to Aunt Delia's house, pulling in the yard just ahead of a swirling cloud of brown clay dust. We were like the Okies in "Grapes of Wrath" on their way to California, looking for a cool stop and something to eat. It was a real adventure for me and 8-year-old younger Sister, to go miles away to visit kin for a day.

We were warmly welcomed and put at rest. Aunt Delia and Laura were sitting on the front porch snapping string beans, picking them from a tub of cool rinse water, pulling the strings off, and breaking them into the pieces to be cooked and canned. I hated green beans, and wanted no part of this. Sister and I sat on the edge of the porch for a while, then explored around the back of the house, then went out to the small barn.

Presently, mom called us, and we had to go inside as dinner preparations began and the easy conversation continued. Now you must remember that dinner in the rural South is lunch time, and we ate supper for the evening meal. And breakfast, well, breakfast was breakfast, such as it was.

Aunt Delia sensed we children would be getting restless soon, even though we knew we had to sit quietly and listen to the adult conversation. Mom and I

would talk that night about what had been said, and I wanted to remember. Still, at eight and ten, maybe we were restless. Aunt Delia had good ideas and sweet thoughts. She would have made somebody a fine grandma. She was a handsome woman, bunned white hair, lined face, steel-rimmed glasses, and just big enough to give really good hugs.

"If you children will be quiet and behave, I'll get Laura to make you a pie."

Now that was something I could believe in. Sweet and beautiful Laura, with a nod only, smiled her agreement, and the deal was made, in my mind. I would have agreed to anything for the approval of this beautiful being. I just couldn't imagine her being a school teacher. My teacher, Mrs. Mulligan, was old and had her long gray hair in a twist on top of her head. She was classy, but stern, never smiling.

We all moved to the kitchen, so clean with its spotless linoleum floor and white-painted cabinets. We sat around the kitchen table, mom and Aunt Delia talking, Laura beginning the pie-making process. Sister and I were watching and listening to it all. Laura got out a white china bowl and sifted some flour into it. Then she added buttermilk and some lard, and maybe some salt from a little wooden salt cellar. The flour was city-bought self-rising, from a 25-pound bag. The brand name escaped me. Probably Martha White Self-Rising.

She mixed this all together into a ragged mess, and then pulled it up and out and dumped it on the table where she had sprinkled a handful of flour. She kneaded it smooth and then rolled it out thin with a wooden rolling pin after dusting it with more flour. Then she carefully picked it up and draped it over a tin pie pan she had rubbed with lard. She used the back side of a kitchen knife to trim the drooping edges. She smoothed the thin dough into the pan, and then put it in the oven to bake. She stirred up the fire in the wood-burning cook stove, adding a couple of sticks of stove wood to the embers remaining from a dawn breakfast. The kitchen began to get really warm.

The conversation between Mom and Aunt Delia continued, as Laura worked quietly, smiling at me occasionally.

"Wasn't that sad about the Smith fire, and the little girls getting burned to death?"

"Who do you reckon we will get for the visiting preacher this year for our revival?"

"How on earth did Julian ever afford that new Studebaker truck?"

"I like to have died when I saw what Lena wore to church last Sunday."

"Ruby must be going through the change, the way she is acting lately."

I wondered about that one, yet suspected enough to take leave from asking about it that night when we got home.

Laura moved away from the table for more ingredients. She came back with milk, eggs, sugar, a new clean bowl and some spices. She smiled at me again, sort of conspiratorially, tilting her head and winking. I was too shy to ask

what kind of pie it was going to be and nobody had said. I'd just have to wait and watch. We'd probably have to go home before it was finished anyway. She poured some milk in the bowl, and stirred in a bit of cornstarch. We didn't have any of that at home. She offered to let me taste the cornstarch, but I was afraid to. She just smiled again, and went on about stirring the pie.

Aunt Delia continued the easy conversation.

"Is Hugh still working at the lumber mill in the valley?"

Mom nodded, looking away. Delia was referring to my dad, who had gone to the Tennessee Valley looking for a job.

"When do you reckon he'll be coming back to stay?"

I saw mom looking out the window, real sad like, and remembered her crying in the night for her man that had been gone too long. We had heard some kin talk about "another woman." We didn't talk about it at home, the obvious truth being hurtful enough, laying silent and heavy within us.

"I couldn't rightly say, Delia."

I heard the firmness in her voice turn to a strained crack at the end. Delia moved over to her, and in the manner of all good old aunts that love their kin, gave mom a long big hug.

"We'll pray about it tonight, dear, just have to let the Lord handle it. I don't reckon we know much else to do."

Then the conversation changed back to weather and church and the crops. You could feel the tension go away, and the hurt was hidden for a while longer.

Laura was cracking eggs in the bowl, and began to whip them into the mixture. The color changed a little to pale yellow, but it still looked like something to drink. My rural sophistication hadn't been exposed to eggnog yet, so that wasn't a thought. I knew I couldn't drink milk with raw eggs in it, and didn't know what the cornstarch had been for. Now she began putting several spoons of sugar in the bowl, and my interest picked up. Laura smiled at me, as if we shared some secret. I wished I knew what the secret was, but dared not ask. She tasted a spoonful of the mixture, smiled, and offered to let me taste it also. I silently refused. I loved her and trusted her, but didn't know what was going on. And didn't want to taste anything that had raw eggs in it.

Aunt Delia brought out some letters, and she and mom discussed them. They talked about old kinfolks, and speculated on what was going on in the lives of people far away but close in their hearts.

Presently Laura took the baked pie crust from the oven and slowly poured it full of the mixture she had whipped up, and very carefully lifted it from the table back to the oven, and closed the door. I couldn't imagine what for, heating milk and eggs in a pie crust. Was this just a mean joke on two hungry kids? Yet Laura was too beautiful, too sweet to do this to me.

Cornbread was brought out and placed on the table. Green string beans were heated up. Cool buttermilk from the well-house was poured. Tomatoes

were sliced. A couple of slices of cold fried ham appeared, and almost matching plates were placed before us. The blessing was said, and we had a fine dinner together.

I watched as Laura opened the cook stove oven door and sprinkled some spices on top of the mixture in the pie pan. Then dinner was over, the plates picked up and washed, and we moved to the living room. I was given an old book to read, a high school Literature and Living, with short stories and poems by Joyce Kilmer and Sidney Lanier and others. They thought it above me, but I liked it anyway. I was to learn in high school what a fine poet Kilmer was, and then later in college to discover what a poor poet he was.

Then in an hour or so, it was time to go. We needed to be getting home to fix supper and take care of the mules and the cow. I looked winsomely toward the kitchen, but was afraid to ask about anything. I could tell the something that was baking was really getting to a good place in its development. Long goodbyes were said, with promises of further visits, and hopes for better times. Aunt Delia brought out an old dress to give Mom. She gave us a couple of good flour sacks, good for their white cloth material to maybe make a dress for Sister. We got extra cucumbers and tomatoes to take home, and I liked that.

We had parked the old car on a slope, so that it might roll off and be cranked that way, should the battery be dead again. We were about to let it start rolling when Laura came from the house, holding something under a white cloth.

"This is still hot, so be careful. Take it home and let it cool. It ought to be about right for supper."

She raised a corner of the white cloth, and I saw the most beautiful custard pie I had ever seen. A crispy golden brown crust around the edges, where she had pinched little patterns in the edge. Golden custard in the center, sprinkled with sugar crystals and brown nutmeg, firm and warm, and smelling just absolutely tantalizing to me. Mom smiled, and Aunt Delia just beamed. "Take care of getting it home in one piece, dear."

We placed it on the car seat, with me sitting beside it to guard it on the way home. Laura leaned over and gave me a little hug. I was severely embarrassed and hung my head.

"I hope you like my pie, Stephen. I made it just for you."

I guess that was about as important as I had ever felt up to that point in my life. I wanted to hug her in return, but instead I hung my head and muttered,

"Yes'm. Thank you."

As we drove away, I took one last long look at Laura, to fix her memory in my mind, in my heart. I really wanted to tell her that I hoped I could cook her a pie someday. I was never to get the chance. We went home, had our supper after dark, and then cut the pie and ate thin slices of it, along with cool sweet milk. It was as good as we thought it might be. There is just something really

satisfying about expectations coming true. The second night all of it was gone, in a physical sense. Still, that pie lived on, as did my memory of the sweet Laura.

Through the years Laura came to mind. Maybe I would see someone that reminded me of her. I might be alone and sit and wonder whatever became of her. I could still see her haunting eyes and wondered would she ever again have the chance to smile at me. Sometimes I thought of a dream world where we would be together again somehow, someday. Then if perchance I met her, would she remember me and the pie?

Many years later, I wondered if I remembered the recipe for The Pie. So one Sunday afternoon I scrounged the ingredients, and put them all together in the right order as I remembered, and put them in a modern oven. I had to guess at some measurements, but my childhood memory had held. My pie was a remarkable semblance, I thought, of the original pie, Laura's Pie. And who's to tell me different?

In the half century since, there have been some constants, but not many as dependable as my memory of Laura and The Pie. Dad had come back, and left again. Mom is gone now, and I miss her, and I miss the God of my childhood we had prayed to. Aunt Delia, I see her tombstone yearly and I think warmly of her. Laura's now gone from my life, and I never knew if she found her lost love. Somewhere in time, it might have been me.

For the beautiful and sweet Laura, wherever you are, I cooked your pie, and I wrote your story. Somehow, I know we still are kin and will meet again. Should there ever come a little tow-headed country boy a'visitin', remember me, and maybe you should cook him a pie. He'll remember it, I grant you.

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Stephen R. Edmondson of Homewood, Alabama, writes about characters in his life, past and present, who represent values that may be slipping away. The handshake contract, a promise that endures, lending a hand to the lesser, those people who took time to be kind. These written thoughts are for his next generation. edmondsonstephen@bellsouth.net

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“Those who take time to explain their creative work are not busy doing their creative work.”

--Jim Reed



AMAZE Mural
Acrylic on Tarpaper
8' x 100'

Tres Taylor

Photo shown is portion of complete mural.

Tres Taylor was a biochemist for nearly 12 years before a "paintbrush fell from the sky." He paints about spiritual seeking, about love, Divine Love, peace, and joy. His subjects are usually monks, couples, and houses, but always the subjects are symbols of love. Tres' medium is house paint and acrylics on tar paper with putty, which enables him to draw freely, carving strong black lines. He lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and his work has exhibited in Japan, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. www.trestaylor.com

REDWOOD WAVE

W.F. Lantry

Straight planed. True jointed. Sanded near to glass
reflective surfaces, hand polished, grooved
along each base. The spindled cambers turn
in sequences designed to mimic waves
or be the swells we watch along a shore
we half remember, seen by other eyes.

And as each hand is turning, it remakes
the same motions we see in fairy rings:
the old trunk falls, and from the broken roots
columns begin to rise three hundred feet,
making a circle where the ancient stood:
the only difference in waves is time.

Watch with me now. Notice the turning hands
reverse themselves. Those sequences become
a right hand mirror of the turning left,
but still the sound remains, becoming one
with every tone, becoming music wind
makes through those redwood limbs above us when

the flow moves past the shore. Can we remake
those movements, manufacturing the voice
that first brought us to dancing, near these rings
already old a thousand years ago,
before the planed and jointed wood was cut
and sanded down to surfaces of glass?

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W.F. Lantry received his Maîtrise from L'Université de Nice and PhD from University of Houston. In 2010 he won the Lindberg International Poetry for Peace Prize, Crucible Poetry Prize, and CutBank Patricia Goedicke Prize. His work has appeared in Aesthetica, The James Dickey Review and Wallace Stevens Journal. His chapbook, The Language of Birds, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. He currently works in Washington, DC.

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DREAMLAND

Halley Cotton

Welcome, I gasp,
 With arms open wide.
Falling into,
 The pale cloudless sky.
A million thoughts,
 Are yet to be had.
If cut are the binds,
 That make the mind mad.
More days to be lived,
 In glorious life.
Away with the burdens!
 Away with the strife!
Speak to me slowly,
 With gentle soft words.
Tell me the tale,
 Of turtle dove birds.
Whisper me quiet,
 Sing me to sleep.
Stir not the nightmares,
 That live in the deep.
And peaceful with rest,
 In my warm bed I'll float.
With sheets for my sail,
 And a dream for my boat.

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Halley Cotton works and attends school in the Birmingham, Alabama, area. She is currently pursuing a degree in English and enjoys writing and exploring downtown in her spare time. Pantomime180@gmail.com
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THE SUN WAS UNCLOUDED

Anna Bedsole

"The Cherokees are a peaceable, harmless people, but you may drive them to desperation, and this treaty cannot be carried into effect except by the strong arm of force."

-Major William M. Davis, 1837

How can I put you in a poem, dustfoot
people? Your trees were faithless, in the end.
How you wove rivers in the skin and glassed
the long hut after all. The forest went wild
for grief after you left. Grass warrior,
first friend, the smoke and salt of you lingered
long after the cane broke. How many calloused
eyes, how much broken before the wheels?
The pocked dust should have swollen, crumbled
into earth red earth, sprouted sudden
mountains on the empty distant line of land and sky.
If the rocks rose up to cave you, if your graves
mounded numb and deep, if you somehow found
eastern sky again, if the trees refused to cover
your desperate bare—if anyone tried to say
you were fully desirous—then know your blood
was too fresh for them, too wooded,
too earth for that manifest. Real people, know
your soft language still tongues their brain.

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Anna Bedsole graduated from Samford University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 2010, and is currently completing a Master's degree in English at Mississippi State University. ambedsol@gmail.com

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DIGGING UP PEONIES

Vivian Shipley

Overcoming fear of stalks that are too close,
I remind myself it's Lexington, that mist
on fields meant rattlesnakes in rows of corn
would be cold, sluggish. Like prying out
potatoes with my fingers, I dig up tubers
as if I could lift my father, seeded with cancer,
if only for a day from gravity, from ground.
My parents know what I know—this is the end.
They will not return to this house my father built.
No refugee in Kosovo, wheelbarrowing
his grandmother to safety, I will bring as much
of Kentucky, of their dirt as I can carry with me
on our flight to Connecticut. A bride, moving
to New Haven over thirty years ago, I have
not taken root. I cannot explain this urge
to go to creekstone fences my father stacked,
dig up box after box of peonies I will bank
into granite piled along my side garden.
My father will see pink, fuchsia, blossoming
from his bed. Is this what revision is, change
of location, spreading, to retell my story
another time, in another soil? Unable to untie
what binds me to Kentucky, to bones of all
those who are in my bones, I will save what
I can of my mother, of my father from this earth,
from the dissolution that binds us after all.

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Vivian Shipley is a Connecticut State University Distinguished Professor and editor of Connecticut Review. Her sixth chapbook, Greatest Hits: 1974-2010, was just published, as was her eighth book of poetry, All of Your Messages Have Been Erased. Nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, the latter won the 2011 Paterson Award for Sustained Literary Achievement and the CT Press Club Prize for Best Creative Writing. She was inducted into the University of Kentucky Hall of Fame for Distinguished Alumni and awarded a CT Arts Grant for Poetryshipleyv1@southernct.edu

ECLECTIC

Marianne Alfano Dreyspring

Give me a song with a beat
That gets my hips to swaying,
That loosens my spine.
I want lyrics that make me laugh
Some bad bawdy laughter,
The low rumbling bellyheaves
That clean out what needs to go its way.
I'm tired of patriotic nonsense.
Who needs it?
I can hear that dribble from the mouths
Of old men with nothing much to say.
Maybe I'll go to Ola's tonight,
Let the beat move me to get the sassy lip
So I can tell them off. Somebody needs to.
What kind of poets gather at Ola's?
The in-your-face, say something with an edge
Women, like Lucille Clifton?
She drags those phrases up from her gut.
None of those erudite I'm-so-intelligent poets
Where do they gather? Coffee houses?
I want to find one of them too.
I can still mingle with the brainiacs.

Music moves me The Baroque organ sounds of Bach
Are good Sunday mornings when you can't find a jukebox
Playing' Beatles' Mersey tunes
Or some Elvis rocking oldies.

All of it it's good
The back table at Ola's Saturday evening
And the front pew at church Sunday morning.
Beer Saturday night,
Sunday morning communion wine
While the choir sings *Amazing Grace*.
I'm eclectic.

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Marianne Alfano Dreyspring is a native of Birmingham, Alabama, currently residing on the southside of the city. After retiring from a practice of professional counseling, she is pursuing her interest in writing. Her chapbook, Ode on an American Quilt, is her first. ma688@bellsouth.net

THE COCONUT POPSICLE (an excerpt from the short story)

Beryl W. Zerwer

It was October 1954 and I was five years old, fighting back tears, as I boarded a public service bus that would take us downtown. I looked at the driver and dropped the six coins, two nickels and four pennies, my mother had given me, into his outstretched hand. Then, I felt her body press against my shoulder, urging me forward, down the narrow aisle, toward the back of the bus. At the first available pair of seats, past the wooden sign that designated the section “For Coloreds Only,” she steered me to the right. I plopped down, next to the window, and watched her place the stained, brown, cardboard suitcase that contained every bit of clothing I owned, in the metal rack above our heads. Then, her body seemed to fall, like a heavy flour sack, onto the seat beside me. I was rubbing my eyes, with the heels of my hands, trying to dry my tears, when she looked at me, folded her thin lips and moved her hand, pulling me by the shoulder, close to her. After using her thumb to wipe the tears from my eyelids, she held her hand to the side of my head and drew it against her chest. I could hear her rhythmic breathing, her pulsing heartbeat, and feel the gentle lifting of the soft folds of her cotton blouse. The scent of the baby’s powder she had generously dusted herself with after her bath wafted up my nostrils. She held me in this position for some moments, before releasing a long sigh and cupping my chin in her hand. She looked down into my face and breathed, “Don’t worry.”

For the rest of the ride, we were quiet and just stared out the window, at the moving autumn landscape. When the bus dropped us off, near Bourbon and St. Phillip Streets, we walked hurriedly, my mother clutching my hand, pulling me along, while I stumbled, scuffing up my new Buster Brown white and black saddle oxfords. My two-sizes-too-large, ribbed, white socks kept slipping down my ankles, under my heels, into my shoes and I had to stop frequently to adjust them. That wouldn’t have happened if she’d bought the bobby socks I’d wanted, I thought. I was wearing my new uniform: a scratchy, starched, white blouse with a rounded collar, to which was attached a thin length of indigo blue, grosgrain ribbon, tied into a small, tidy bow, matching my pleated, wool skirt that was rolled at the waist and pinned with a large safety pin to my blouse, to keep it from falling. The rounded collar had started out as a pointed collar but, to meet the school’s dress code, Mama Honey had snipped and sewed the points to a blunt finish, which had as much resemblance to being rounded as a cup has to a mug. Each piece of my uniform had been purchased from the local Goodwill Store, which my mother and her sister, too embarrassed to admit to shopping at a secondhand store, always referred to as “The Place.”

The street we traveled was narrow and crowded, even at that time of morning. There was an endless stream of cars and trucks, jammed solid, their

drivers and passengers leaning from windows, rolled down to release the suffocating heat. Men and women, white and colored, old and young, rushed past, maneuvering large puddles of water from last night's heavy rains, but I kept my eyes straight ahead. Remembering an earlier trip downtown, I was hoping that we would walk down Royal Street, with its little shops waiting to open their doors. I had looked, longingly, in the windows, at the items on display, such as the shiny silver pitchers, Christmas ornaments made of glass and crystal chandeliers, with what looked to me like a hundred little candles, flickering light. Suddenly, I felt a twitch in my heart and, sniffing, brushed the tears from my nose with a swipe of my hand. My mother stopped and set the suitcase on the sidewalk, opened her tattered, black vinyl pocketbook, with its zipper that had run off its track, pulled out a rumpled white handkerchief, and stooped to wipe my face. She stood there, so small among the trees that lined the street, her lips a fine line, her eyelids half-closed, staring back at me.

"Don't worry," she said again. "You'll be alright and back home for Christmas." She took me by the hand and, squeezing it, said, "Beryl, you must be a good girl."

"But Christmas is so far away," I whined, walking stoically beside her.

She was silent, pensive.

"Why are you sending me away? I haven't done anything wrong."

"The good sisters can care for you much better than I can," she explained, turning her head to look both ways before crossing the busy street.

"Mama Honey can take care of me."

"Your grandmama can't teach you to read and write."

"Nunu can teach me."

"Uncle Edward can barely read and write hisself."

"I can teach myself. Why don't you want me at home?"

"Come on now. We must hurry. We're already late."

I looked up to see that we hadn't made it as far as Royal Street. Instead, she had dragged me down Orleans Street. I could see the big church, St. Louis Cathedral, and knew that we were only a half block from Royal Street. We stopped in front of a two-story structure, in the middle of the block, with numerous spacious windows their shutters flush against the building. Carved in the façade, high above the entrance was "St. Mary's Academy for Girls, Founded by Sisters of the Holy Family." Standing before a pair of double doors, made from two massive pieces of mahogany, my mother wiped the sweat from her face with the back of her hand and, taking a deep breath, grasped the large, iron knocker, in the middle of one of the doors, and sounded it a single time.

It seemed we waited a long time before a neatly dressed teenaged girl with a smiling face, showing even, white teeth that sparkled against her clear, cream-colored complexion, opened the door. But for her bold Negroid features, the broad, flat nose and full lips, with her thick, straight, black hair and cultured

MISSISSIPPI BLUE

20" x 16"
Oil on Canvas

Ted Openshaw lives and paints in Lipscomb, Alabama. fireball61@bham.rr.com



manner, she could easily have passed for a member of one of the Mediterranean races, a Greek or an Italian, perhaps. We followed her into a grand foyer, graced with a circular staircase. Lined along the white walls, almost like sentries, were wooden benches. Without waiting to be invited, we sat down on one, me cautiously, as if I might decide to bolt, my mother stiff, with uncertain formality.

Within minutes, the rustling of her habit, a full, black robe tied around the waist, with a length of white rope securing a string of wooden rosary beads, announced the arrival of a nun. She was tall and heavyset, with a handsome, brown face, although my keen eyes spied two dark whiskers, sprouting from her chin. Her pristine, white collar covered the upper third of her robe and the veil, of the same crisp cloth, draped her broad shoulders and most of her forehead. My mother sprang to her feet and gave me a look that told me I should do the same. I scooted to the edge of the bench and jumped to the floor.

“Hello Mrs. Boutin,” the sister said and turned to look at me. “And this must be Beryl.”

“Hello, Sister,” my mother and I said, in unison.

“I am Sister Helena. Come. We will go first to see the dormitories.”

She towered over us and the first thing that came to my mind was that she must be awfully warm in her gown. She had a kind of noisy friendliness about her, speaking with her hands flying about her face, as if her fingers tried to pull the words somehow trapped inside of her. As we ascended the circular staircase, I was looking up, with my head tilted back, my neck straining, to see, looming against the rear wall, at the top of the stairs, a life-size statue of the Blessed Virgin. Sr. Helena stopped at the statue, bowed, and, waving her hand for us to stand next to her, began moving her lips, as if praying. I prayed that I would not have to stay in this place, that I could persuade my mother to take me back home.

After passing through an arched door and down a short, dimly lit corridor, we came to a pair of pocket doors and the nun slid them open, revealing a long, narrow room, furnished with single beds, topped with white coverlets, and separated by chests of drawers of pine construction, lined against white plaster walls. At the foot of each bed sat a solitary pine trunk and, above each bed, affixed to the walls, was a wooden crucifix, from which was suspended a brass figure of Christ. The nun pointed to a shadowy corner of the room, on a side where there was no light from the windows.

“Your bed is over there,” she said.

“Go take a look, Beryl,” my mother said.

I gave her an imploring look and did not move. I was picturing my room at home, the one I shared with my three sisters and brother. We had a pair of twin beds and a roll-away where my brother slept which was kept hidden in the closet during the day. Our clothes were stored in a tall chest, where each of us had our own drawer. Just when I was telling myself that since I wasn't staying there was no need to look at any bed, my mother snatched me by the hand and pulled me toward the gloomy corner.

“Take a look at your bed.”

“It's not my bed. My bed is at home.”

“Be a good girl,” she whispered. As she wagged her finger in front of my face, my nose picked up the faint smell of Jergen's Hand Lotion.

“She can unpack after class,” the sister said. She took the suitcase from my mother's hand and walked over to the corner and placed it atop the trunk. “Is she capable of unpacking?”

“Yes, Sister,” my mother answered. “She's accustomed to having her grandmother do for her, but she will make do.”

The nun turned and looked at me and, feeling awkward at her gaze of appraisal, I dropped my head and shuffled my foot. There will be no making do, I told myself, because I was going home, but my heart was beginning to doubt.

Folding my arms across my chest, I walked out of the room, dragging the toes of my shoes across the wood floor as I left. What if my mother didn't change her mind? What if she forced me to stay?

As I went down the long flight of stairs, I stepped, slowly, onto each one, trying to keep my weight evenly distributed, afraid of tripping or, worse, falling. I breathed deep breaths through my mouth and hung onto my mother's hand, wondering what I could do to keep from being left behind. She never liked to see any of us cry, couldn't bear to see her children's tears. I thought that, maybe, if I started to cry, long and hard enough, she'd change her mind.

Once we were downstairs, back in the foyer, Sr. Helena walked to the door from which she had entered and, moving aside, allowed us to pass. Then, closing the heavy door behind her, she walked swiftly, straight ahead, motioning with her hand for us to follow. My eyes, always curious, scanned the high ceilings and the closed doors that dotted the walls on either side of the quiet, cool corridors. The sounds of our footsteps reverberated throughout the empty space and bounced off the plaster walls and the hardwood floor, drowning out the conversation between my mother and the nun. I was straggling behind, in no hurry to get to the classroom, hoping that my mother would see that I didn't belong here, that I belonged in my own home.

"Come. Come," Sr. Helena called, softly, beckoning her finger.

By this time, we had passed several closed doors, with glass panes at the top, and I thought that these might be classrooms, but was puzzled by the eerie silence. Where were the children? I had fallen far behind and when I saw my mother and the nun standing in front of one of the doors, I broke into a halfhearted run and went to where they were. My inquisitiveness had gotten the best of me, so I went up to the door and, rising on my tiptoes, peered inside the room. Very young girls, of varying complexions and descriptions, were seated around a large, oak worktable, piled high with books and pencils and crayons. Besides the ones seated at the large table, there were a few others seated in straight back chairs, at wooden desks. A young nun stood at the head of the class, in front of a blackboard. She held a wooden pointer in her hand, which she used to punctuate every word she said to the group, about fifteen in all. They were all dressed in the same uniform, but each girl's hair was styled in a different fashion. Those with silky locks wore Shirley Temple curls, which were either held back from their faces with plastic barrettes or were gathered and tied with blue or white satin ribbons. The girls with coarse hair, like mine, wore neatly plaited braids. I noticed there was, however, one girl, whose hair didn't seem to have known a comb. Her hair was wooly and framed her delicate face almost like a halo.

"You will like this sister, Beryl. She is so charitable to her community of girls, so zealous for God's love and the welfare of souls," Sr. Helena said.

But, I had already made up my mind that I wouldn't like the sister or the convent. I watched the other nun open the door and come out into the corridor. Glimpsing the girls staring out at me, I shrank back, sidled up next to my mother and reached to grasp her work-worn hand, which felt like sandpaper.

"Hello," the new sister said to all of us.

She was shorter than the first nun, with hooded, gray eyes set in a wide, plain face. A swatch of brown curly hair peeked from beneath her veil. Ten years earlier, she had entered the convent, where she had been educated, and was one of those whom the vocation of instruction suited best. Possessed of a cultured mind and remarkable instinct, it was unfortunate that, sometimes, her piety made her slightly formidable. I noted that when she greeted us there was no smile, but the tone was pleasant, even welcoming.

"Sr. Marie Francine, this is Mrs. Boutin and her daughter, Beryl, who is now one of ours."

I felt drawn to this younger nun, thinking that she looked at me with sympathetic eyes.

"Welcome, child," she said.

"Thank you, Sister."

"Do you know your alphabet?"

"Yes, Sister."

My mother put her arm around my shoulder and pulled me close. "She knows how to read already. She's been reading books, mostly Grimm's Fairy Tales, since she was three."

"Very good," said Sr. Marie Francine. Then, as if it had occurred to her that she should probably inquire a bit more into the personal aspects of my life, she asked, "Beryl, what is your favorite fairy tale?"

Clinging to my mother's shabby, threadbare, linen skirt, I mumbled, almost inaudibly, "Rapunzel."

I was thinking that, perhaps, now was the perfect time to start my crying jig, when I heard Sr. Helena say, "Mrs. Boutin, say your good-byes. Beryl has much work to do."

"No, Mama, don't leave me here," I screamed.

I put my skinny little arms around her ample waist and looked up at her. A scowl crossed her face.

"Darling, Mama will come to Mass on Sunday to see you."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Mama, don't leave me here. I don't want to stay."

"It's time to go," Sr. Marie Francine said, gently tugging at my arms.

"No! Don't leave me here!"

"Come now," the nun said.

I tore her hands away from me. Surely, now that my mother had seen my tears, she wouldn't leave me, I thought, as I clung to her, tightly, determined not

to let her go. When she, with tender force, pried my hands from around her, I threw myself against the wall and wrapped my arms across my scrawny midsection. I could see small fires blazing in my mother's eyes. She reached and clutched my shoulders, her fingers digging deep into the flesh. When she bent so low that her face was only inches away from mine, I flung my arms around her neck and buried my face in her hair.

"You must stop this performance. Now," she said, through clenched teeth, her voice so low it hardly reached my ear.

But I could hear the anguish in her voice. It spoke loudly. In a voice tremulous with tears, I said, "I promise I'll be good. Don't make me stay here. I'll be a good girl if you take me back home."

Then, I saw a flood of tears fill her eyes. I watched one tear roll from a corner of her eye, flow down her cheek, and come to rest in the crease of her mouth.

"Be a good girl, darling," she said.

She pushed me away and pressed her lips, firmly, on my forehead. Then, bowing her head, she spun around and walked away, almost mechanically, before breaking into a slow run down the corridor. I couldn't believe it. I was scared sick. I wasn't going home. All I could think was that she had seen my tears and it hadn't mattered.

I screamed, at the top of my voice, "You don't care anything about me!"

I chased her down the corridor, hoping she would turn around, terrified that she wouldn't, praying that she would change her mind, wishing that she would run back to me, losing all control at the realization that I was not going home. Sr. Marie Francine ran after me and grabbed me around my waist. We fell to the floor, me thrashing, kicking my legs, flailing my arms, the nun trying to pull me close to her chest. I could smell the familiar, clean, fresh scent of Ivory soap on her skin and it, somehow, comforted me. Still, I felt defeated and, succumbing, my body slumping in her arms, I allowed her to hold me and stroke my back.

"Everything will be all right," she whispered in my ear.

She lifted me from the floor and, as we walked to the classroom, my eyes searched her face, hoping that what she said was true, wanting to believe in my heart that everything would be all right.

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RUNNING FROM MERCY: THE PSALMS OF ISRAEL JONES

(excerpted from the novel)

Ed Davis

“A song is like a dream, and
you try to make it come true.
They’re like strange countries
that you have to enter.”

Bob Dylan, *Chronicles*

“He that findeth his life shall lose it:
and he that loseth his life for my sake
shall find it.”

Matthew 10:39

CHAPTER ONE

I stand mesmerized by the cacophony of sound and color. The room, as large as a dancehall, is alive with blazing neon and electric guitar—at first I think we’ve stepped inside a roadhouse circa 1958 with a rockabilly band in full swing—until I see the hand-lettered sign at the front: *No bad langage. No woman in pants. No long hair.*

We aren’t in a rowdy nightclub where a pimply-faced Jerry Lee is wailing; we are in church: Whitechapel Church of Lindsey, West Virginia, to be exact, and it’s 2005. But before I can fully savor the first flush of recognition, I see, lifted high above the whirlwind crowd, shimmering obscenely like a naked breast at communion, a tight coil. The sound I make is thankfully absorbed into the din surrounding me. A man holds a large snake in his palm.

No need to fear being forced to the front where the serpents are. I know, according to the documentary I’d seen in seminary, there are many other snakes, that they are kept in wooden cages with chicken wire up front until the right moment, when the Holy Spirit dictates. I also know they use rattlers, or, failing that, copperheads; that before us lies a great mystery as old as time, as universal as pain; and that it does not require my belief to work its wonders. When someone pats my arm, I turn and see Murphy sitting in the back pew against the wall. Dad sits beside him, his gnarled hands loosely clasped before him, the veritable picture of unhip humility. What in the world are a rock legend, his

lapsed-pastor son and alcoholic manager seeking here? But it will do no good to ask. My father doesn't answer questions; he takes hostages.

"We'll just watch," Murphy shouts near my ear.

I sit down and face forward. I've gone from a crowded, diesel-reeking bus to a snake-handling church in under an hour. Am I rolling toward Nineveh or heading back inside the whale's belly? (The latter, I figure, strangely calm.)

The music, I now see, pours from the hands of a teenaged boy sitting on an ancient tube amplifier that once might've belonged to Chuck Berry. The kid's old Les Paul sounds good as he fingers non-stop lead riffs. No chords, no discernible melody, just continuous sound. I have to laugh. Maybe that's all he knows. But it is enough, along with the tambourine, flailed by a tight-permed, grey-haired grandmother moving in rhythm (not dancing, no!) with the others up near the front.

Every now and then the sea of bodies parts, and I glimpse a man holding a snake on his palms, his sweaty brow furrowed in concentration, and I can't help wondering what he is seeing and feeling. Judging by his closed eyes, sweating forehead and swaying body, it is the opposite of fear. (And what is that? Love?) He handles the treasure in his hand so gently, making me imagine those coal-seamed hands on his wife or children, hopefully just as tender. Then up fly both arms as he holds his offering aloft. To God? Or to his fellows? "See: I am this moment without sin." To be bitten—and people are, but not as often as you'd think—means taking your eyes off the savior, or worse, some secret sin now bared before all. And the pain of public humiliation probably dulls, even annihilates, the pain of the bite, which a preacher on the video claimed was like a thousand toothaches.

I lapse into a daze that carries some part of me—my soul?—to the front of the church. At the same time I know I'm dreaming, it's intensely real. The walls, the wailing, stomping, suffocating mob surrounding me fall away; even the enveloping night, suffocating, too, in its vile darkness—all fall away and I enter a waking vision...

I bend, open my palms, and somehow the serpent is in my hand. I do not clearly see the instant when flesh and scales meld. (The Lord takes care of that—otherwise it could be too terrible to bear.) Once I feel the steely weight of living chain in my hands, obedience is complete. I am the boy with his fingers gritting against strings; the preacher striking the anvil air with his words; the children clapping in their pews; the old woman beating the tambourine against her hip. We are all part and parcel of the same body. For, once my arms are aloft, I look around me at the swirl, see sweat purling on the end of a young man's nose, scent the thickness of menstruating females, hear the roar of blood in

my head, though I'm calm as a babe in Mama's arms. The creature in my hands is of God, therefore is God. Surely, then . . . love?

As if I've been underwater, my dreaming mind breaks the surface, I'm back inside my body at the back of the church, my hands are empty and I hear the words they are singing:

"If you don't want it, give it to me."

Grotesque. Beyond bizarre. Yet somehow as ordinary as any Christian's belief in miracles.

"If you don't want it..."

I glance at Murphy, staring straight ahead. Dad's manager tolerates this as he does all of my father's eccentricities; it's an experience, like his boss's awful concerts, to be endured. Back at the motel, after Dad's show later tonight, there'll be time for him to erase visions of snake-waving ecstasies with a quart or so of bourbon before bed. He looks as bored as a kindergartner watching porn.

Less than two hours ago, I'd met Murphy at the auditorium's back door. It had taken eight hours from New Prestonburg, Ohio, to Charleston, West Virginia, on the bus-and I had the bad luck to sit next to a gum-chewing cell-phone addict.

The Whale was parked behind the auditorium. Good thing Murphy prepared me. No longer blue, the re-tooled Greyhound has been painted dull beige. It mostly fools media, if not fans. If I hadn't been so tense, I would've laughed at the block lettering: Senior Tours: See American Historical Sites. I wasn't about to barge on-board—it's been my plan, since getting the phone call, to observe unobserved.

Beside the auditorium door my father would soon walk through leaned Gunnar Oesterreich. I grinned at the appearance of the big German kid Dad adopted as his personal bodyguard back in '91: a foreign exchange student who'd defected, first, from his sponsoring family; then from his native country for reasons never clear to me.

Gunnar is Dad's doppelganger, whose entire spoken word-stock consists of one-word sentences: Stop. Come. No. Though he hadn't laid eyes on me in four years, the German nodded solemnly and summoned Murphy to my side within moments.

When the manager emerged from darkness, he was grinning his satanic smile. His olive face looked like the cracked leather of a suitcase that had lain in an attic for decades. As usual, he reeked of alcohol and tobacco.

"Good to see you, Skip. I mean, Reverend."

"You, too." I hadn't expected to be glad to see the alcoholic most responsible for my dad's departure from any semblance of reality; Murphy Angus

Kelleher: pimp, jester and errand-boy; who provided his boss with so much more than women, drugs and amusement, who provided him complete freedom from life, period. My father had never written a check, bought a gift or shopped for insurance. Murphy was the filter, fence, door and wall against distractions, enabling him to do all he'd ever wanted to do—or at least all he'd ever done—which was write, record and sing songs.

Murphy wrung my hand, and his felt warm and rough. “Does he know I’m here?” I said.

He shook his head.

“Is it drugs?”

Another solemn shake.

“Since the Bigger One, nada. No drugs.” He snorted. “Not even cigarettes.”

He smiled, proud daddy of a precocious six-year-old. After Dad’s first heart attack in ‘01, dubbed the Big One (Dad named everything), until the second, two years later, I figured he’d probably abstained from cigarettes, booze and various controlled substances for a month or two, then gone right back, exceeding his earlier consumption. Resulting of course in the Bigger One. I’d been AWOL for that one.

“You’re kidding.”

He stuck out his chest, gripped his belt buckle, a tarantula, with his bricklayer’s hands. “I’d know.”

“Whatever you say, Murph.”

Before I knew it, I reached out and squeezed his bicep, my pastorly way of solacing men, and though I recognized it as a mistake—you don’t touch men like Murphy unless you want to feel their fangs—the aging alcoholic smiled, the corners of his watery, pickled blue eyes furrowing as his face unfolded a little.

“I’ll go get him.”

And like that, the journey began.

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Ed Davis is the author of the novels I Was So Much Older Then (Disc-Us Books, 2001) and The Measure of Everything (Plain View Press, 2005). He lives with his wife and cat in the village of Yellow Springs, Ohio, where he bikes, hikes and meditates religiously. edavis903@sbcglobal.net

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A FEVER OF THE HEART

Wayne Greenhaw

The sun burned like fire on my shoulders. At five-fifteen on a Thursday afternoon in August I was chopping cotton in Miss Mae Rae Johnson's patch behind her old unpainted house when Oseola Andrews swished down the dirt road, riding her bicycle without a stitch on her scrawny body.

The long-sleeved shirt I wore to keep the sun from scorching my arms was wringing wet, clinging to me like a second skin. Although the broad-brimmed straw hat shaded my eyes, they were stinging. Still, I knew what I saw.

I already knew Oseola was crazy as an outhouse gopher rat. Seeing her butt naked on the old red and white Schwinn confirmed my suspicions. I stopped cutting the weeds between Miss Mae Rae's beautiful chest-high plants. I leaned against my hoe handle, blinked, shook my head, and took three deep breaths.

It was my afternoon away from *The Decatur Daily*, where I worked as a general assignment reporter. Having been born and raised in the Tennessee River Valley, I'd known Miss Mae Rae all my life. Born to a freed slave ninety-seven years ago, she had lived on my Uncle Prine Simpson's place all her life, and as long as I could remember she was Alabama's Cotton Queen, producing more cotton per acre than anyone else in the state. She only worked four acres, but it was tended with loving care from the day the land was broken, the seeds planted, the first seedlings popped up through the black dirt, the plants matured into stalks, and the bolls picked by hand in late September. Since I was a teenager I helped whenever I could, knowing she had no business out here in the hot sun in the afternoons, fighting to keep the weeds from smothering her precious plants.

I suspected Miss Mae Rae knew each plant by a given name, although I'd never actually heard her speak to them individually. Often when I'd leave my cottage near the big house, heading for work on the other side of the river at five-thirty in the morning, I'd see her out in her patch, her flour-sack dress down to her ankles and up to her neck, her handmade sunbonnet tied around her slender neck, her leather-worn fingers wrapped around the hoe handle, and her back bent toward the neat rows.

"Lord, Oseola," I called. "You better go and put something on to cover yourself."

She paid no mind, kept riding down the pathway, pedaling hard, heading toward the apartments beyond the scuppernong arbor. I hoped Uncle Prine wasn't out on the veranda having an early snort of bourbon he tended to sip every evening as the sun went down. Seeing such a sight as an unclothed Oseola might give him the heart attack he had been dreading for years. Not two moments later I heard someone scream and another cry out. I imagined Oseola had scared the wits out of farm workers coming in from the hills, not expecting to find a knot-

kneed, pigeon-toed, ninety-five-pound redheaded naked bicyclist heading toward them on a Schwinn.

I was grinning and resting when Miss Mae Rae came onto the stoop of her batten-and-board house and gazed down at me. "What is all that foolishness?"

"Just Oseola."

"Doing what?"

"Riding her bicycle as naked as the day she was born."

"She crazy, or what?"

"You know she is."

Miss Mae Rae mopped her leathery brown forehead with a rag and folded into a rocking chair and leaned back. With ease, she slid a small round tin container from the breast pocket of her dress, slipped off the top, and dipped a cut-and-frayed matchstick into the cylinder before she stuck it into her mouth and worked it between her teeth. Once when I asked how she could stand to dip snuff, she grinned and said, "Ninety-seven and still got all my natural-born teeth."

I sauntered to the edge of the porch and leaned the hoe handle against the steps and accepted the fruit jar of iced tea she silently offered.

"Guess Oseola's gone completely off the deep end, now that ol' Heck Grant's gone and got hisself arrested for killing the Indian chief down at Cutter's Gap."

I swallowed the icy sweet liquid. Putting the jar down, I said, "Yeah, that could be the problem."

"Well, you ought to know. You wrote about it"

I nodded. It was my page-one headline story last Sunday, describing the arrest of Hiram "Heck" Grant with three deputies drawing on him late Saturday afternoon and charging him with the premeditated murder of Choctaw Chief L.C. Lattimore, whose body had been found three months ago in a deep well halfway between Decatur and Moulton at a place called Cutter's Gap.

"I told Oseola I used to go courtin' down there when I was a girl," Miss Mae Rae said.

"Where?"

"I told Oseola she's not the only one's ever been smitten." Her eyes rolled, glistening. "Cutter's Gap. Named for Randall Cutter, who had a grist mill on Montgomery Creek way back in a time before The War."

"World War Two?"

"No, honey, The War Between The States."

"The Civil War."

"Wasn't nothing civil about it. Killed more men than any war. Besides, us blacks always considered the states didn't have no right to secede. So, it was The War Between The States, the Confederacy being illegal from the beginning."

I nodded, trying to follow her North Alabama logic. Folks in these parts had a way of looking at the world different from the way folks down in the state

capital of Montgomery saw it or from the way country folks north of the Tennessee stateline saw it. Down in Montgomery, they considered secession a political right, the town serving as capital of the Confederate government for a few months, and up in Tennessee the Confederacy didn't hold the territory but for a few months, having lost Shiloh and other skirmishes to the Union straightaway. Not far down the road from us was Winston County, a place that tried to secede from Alabama when it seceded from the Union, calling itself the Free State of Winston. Most of North Alabama sided with Winston.

"Your great-great-great-great-granddaddy set me free long before President Lincoln issued the Proclamation," she said for the upteenth time. I nodded, not wishing to stir up an argument with her. Of course, it had been her mother or her grandmother who'd been set free by one of my great-grandfathers who owned this place back in the mid-1800s. He too had been a rebel who rebelled against the Confederacy. He owned a passel of slaves he taught to read and write, gave them free run of his extensive library, and turned them loose before official Emancipation. Most stayed and worked the fields as they always had. Later, after Reconstruction, when Jim Crow politicians took away their right to vote, own property, or even spit on a sidewalk, the progeny of the original slaves moved north, settling in Chicago, Detroit, and New York. A few, like Miss Mae Rae's folks, stubbornly stayed on these rolling red hills.

"You wrote about the murder when they found that Indian chief," Miss Mae Rae said, as though I had forgotten the incident. My friend, Sheriff Lester McCall, phoned early on a Saturday morning in June and said, "Kip, you might want to ride down to Cutter's Gap, bring your notebook and your camera." I slipped on my khakis and a tee-shirt and took off, knowing Sheriff McCall wouldn't have called if he didn't have something important and newsworthy. A few years ago I'd broken a story about the local Ku Klux Klan impersonating sheriffs' deputies when they stopped a carload of African Americans on the highway. Passers-by swore they saw county deputies pulling the black folks over and putting them under arrest. Those people who'd had the misfortune of driving north on a dark highway were later found strung up in trees deep in the woods. Some folks pointed accusing fingers at Sheriff McCall and his deputies, until I dug around and found uniforms, false badges, and official-looking sidearms in the backroom of the old Klan meeting hall. In the backyard I found water-based brown and tan paint used to disguise the Klan vehicles. And I interviewed two men who were delivering the Huntsville *Times* newspapers at one a.m. on Sunday morning when they followed the so-called deputies into the woodlands and watched them hang the blacks from tree limbs.

The sheriff had never forgotten my work on the story, clearing him and his men. Ever since, he'd been trying to repay me, and I appreciated it.

When I arrived at Cutter's Gap in June, three sheriff's cruisers were parked outside an area enclosed by crime scene tape near the old honky tonk covered in

aging beer signs. Sheriff McCall met me, took me into the forbidden zone, and let me take pictures of the decaying body of Chief L.C. Lattimore that had been retrieved from the well. After the ME examined the body, he said it had "contusions and lacerations" around the chest, neck, and face. "I believe he was hit by a heavy, blunt instrument before he was dumped into the well," the medical examiner said. Later, the sheriff's men found a tire tool submerged in the well's water.

Between then and last Saturday, the sheriff's department discovered that the tire tool belonged to a long-distance truck driver named Hiram "Heck" Grant, a notorious on-again, off-again character in the Tennessee River Valley. From early June until mid-July he had been on several cross-country hauls for chicken farmers in the hills south of Decatur. When he wasn't on the highways he enjoyed the recreation offered at Cutter's Gap.

When I told my uncle what happened, he declared it "red-neck notoriety," shaking his large snow-capped head. Uncle Prine considered himself a gentleman farmer, although he'd sold most of the original plantation to real estate developers, a Korean television plant, and a Japanese automobile manufacturing company. And he had practiced law most of his adult life in Decatur. From time to time, local outlaws have approached him, seeking his legal advice and representation. To their faces, he said, "Sir, I am a legal warrior, representing only widow ladies in distress and unfortunate victims of society's underbelly." Uncle Prine had never needed quick cash, since he inherited the land, a considerable amount of utility stock, and a sizable insurance settlement when he was still in law school at the University of Alabama. Besides, he considered the worth of his reputation beyond the greedy clatter of coins in his purse.

"You think Oseola was having a love affair with Heck Grant?" I asked Miss Mae Rae.

"A what?"

"You think she's in love with the truck driver?"

"Possibly, but I doubt it," she said, a tiny dribble of snuff juice oozing from the corner of her thin lips.

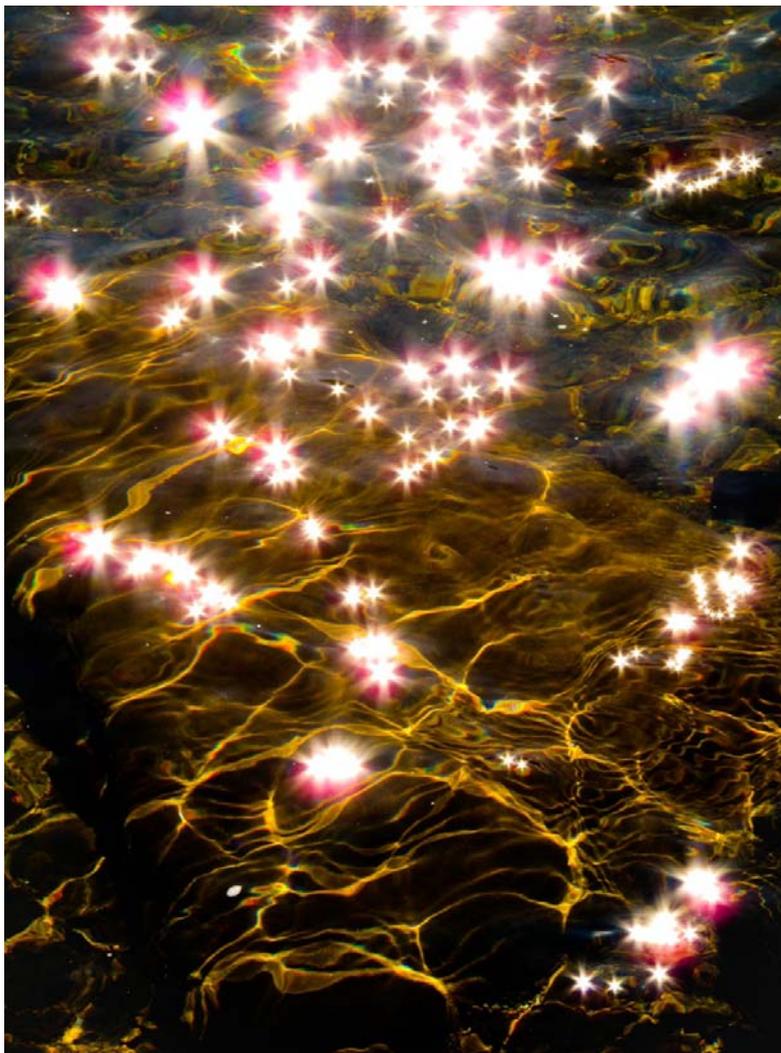
I watched, wondering if it would trickle down her bony chin and drop onto her dress.

"An affliction of heat," she said, her knotted finger flicking the drop of brown liquid before it fell.

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Wayne Greenhaw spent much of his 71 years writing about Alabama. This story won top Alabama prize in the Hackney Literary Awards contest. More on Wayne at <http://waynegrhaw.com>.

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THE RIVER

Digital Photograph
Beau Gustafson

Beau Gustafson, aka "The Big Swede," is an advertising, food, and editorial photographer based in Birmingham, Alabama. <http://www.bigswede.net>

MESSENGER

Irene Latham

Descend, spangly pigeon.
Bring me the scent of home,

the cusping walls that ache
for touch. Nevermind the puff

of angels hovering above
the empty bed. Tug velvet,

and they disappear, their
twining wings reduced

to dust. Gentle matador,
allow my heart to unravel

the headline. Nothing left
but feathers and pomegranate.

Call off the footsoldiers. Only
the blind fly so confidently

into purpled night. Tell
them I cannot cut the wick.

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Irene Latham is an award-winning poet and novelist. Her newest book of poems, The Color of Lost Rooms, features pieces inspired by women, nature and art. Her next novel, Don't Feed the Boy, about a boy who lives at the zoo, will be released in 2012. She serves as poetry editor for Birmingham Arts Journal. Visit her on the web at <http://irenelatham.com>.

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2. Thomas Dennis, Irondale AL *
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to begin anything. I am not able to
begin. I simply skip what should
be the beginning.”**

--Rainer Maria Rilke



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