

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 9 Issue 3



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Table of Contents

STALKING EDWARD HOPPER	Patty Jameson	1
THE STAIN OF SIN DISSOLVING	Wallace Wayne Watkins	2
BAPTISMAL ROBE		
ZERO FOR CONDUCT	Beau Gustafson	7
THREE FOUND HAIKU	Richard Luftig	8
SHIFTING FOCUS IN THE ATTENTION	Davey Williams	9
SPAN		
SHOES	Kristene Brown	10
IN TRANSLATION	Wallace Wayne Watkins	11
EMILY AND THE HELP	Beth Thames	12
CLOUDS	Lana Fuller	14
CASHING IN	Lesa Shaul	15
COMING STORM	Mary Mellen	16
HELL OF A STORM	Deb Jellett	17
(A LOVE POEM)	Steven L. Millhouse	19
REGRET	Kristene Brown	20
WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL	Claire Prescott Gross	22
BOY FISHING	Lisa Oestreich	24-25
STANDING AMONG TREES	GTimothy Gordon	26
THE UNEXPECTED STORM	Sylvia Barker-Osborne	28
HOW TO WRITE ABOUT A PEBBLE	Jim Reed	30
ANYTHING	Erika Donald	32
THREE RED TREES	Jill Billions	33
INTERSTATE LOVE SONG	John Woolf	34
I LIKE THINKING	Melanie L. Yancey	35
OCTOPUS EYE	Emily Brisse	36
THE LETTER	Chervis Isom	38
BLUE	Jennifer Horne	39
LAIKA IN AETERNUM	Lesa Shaul	41
GRAFFITI	Derrell Richburg	42
FRAGMENT	Benjamin Patrick	43
PARASITE TIME	Allen Johnson Jr.	46
WATCHING WINTER RAIN	Sylvia W. Dodgen	47

Front Cover: **CASABLANCA LILIES AND COBALT**, 30" x 34" Mixed Media

Ben South's art combines the sophistication of French Post-Impressionists like Matisse with the simplicity of Southern folk artists like Mose T. One of Ben South's patrons calls Ben's mature painting style, "Motisse." Ben is represented at Monty Stabler Galleries (Birmingham), Midtown Gallery (Nashville) and Brown's Fine Art (Jackson, MS) sthrnns@bellsouth.net

Back Cover: **ELIZABETH'S LADDER**, Photograph

Indiana native and current Birmingham, Alabama, resident, Dan Deem is a self-taught photographer whose roots lie in photojournalism. His work has been displayed in such venues as The Saturday Evening Post, NBC's Today Show, the Jimmy Carter Library in Atlanta, Georgia, and previous issues of Birmingham Arts Journal. Deem's work is well represented in many private collections throughout the U.S. www.ddeemphotoart.com

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STALKING EDWARD HOPPER

--after the painting, *Nighthawks*

Patty Jameson

Nearly morning, when shadows hide from where the neon
illuminates the sidewalk outside, after breaking martini
glasses against slammed doors, when the lonely sing
hymns of sorrow, nearly morning and sipping absinthe
tainted and antagonizing, his spiteful bride crept.
He'll sit, splitting, considering, until the day's first rays dip beneath
avenue signs, coaxing shadows from dusty corners. The coda
waltzes through an unseen door wearing an all-night afterglow,
known too by the husband sitting alone, no longer drunk.
She takes the seat next to his, opposite a man and his mistress.

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Patty Jameson is a writer and editor living in Mobile, Alabama. She is a graduate of the University of South Alabama and uses her poetry to explore the human experience, both real and imagined. Her work can be found in Sense Magazine and Oracle Fine Arts Review, and she has edited numerous fiction and poetry manuscripts for Negative Capability Press.

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THE STAIN OF SIN DISSOLVING BAPTISMAL ROBE

(a fragment from *The Poor Bride's Veil*)

Wallace Wayne Watkins

Brother Jonas dedicated his baptistry on a Sunday when Wayne was down from Fort Worth. Wayne had known for years that the pastor desired a baptistry – one to replace the horse trough that the men of the church had sanded and painted and anything else they could think of to hide the original purpose of the holy tub – before anything serving a more often used but less important function, and certainly more so than anything ornamental. On more than one occasion, Brother Jonas – after a typically obsequious expression of gratitude for all of Wayne's gifts – targeted gifts all – asked that his benefactor consider perhaps delaying and combining two or more of his gifts to provide the single gift of a proper baptistry. Wayne finally conceded in exchange for a consultation with Brother Jonas for the curriculum for Children's Sunday School for the forthcoming year, which Wayne would both select and fund, and which would certainly include the popular (and expensive) series "What Happened When Charlie Sinned" and its companion for girls, "What Happened When Kathy Sinned."

What Brother Jonas would call "The Gift from The Carpenter of Nazareth and Wayne Will of Fort Worth" was an elevated platform built into the back wall of the church behind and above the altar that extended outward toward the congregation and to which preacher and candidate would ascend by stairs to stand before the baptismal basin. The baptistry was backlit in hues of blue and ivory. Brother Jonas would stand on an "X" marked on the floor of the platform so that a strategically placed floodlight would illuminate Brother Jonas to give the impression that he radiated a bright light as he first exhorted the candidate to walk in the paths of the Lord, and then admonished the congregation for recidivist backsliding. He would then assist the candidate into the basin and dunk him into the water of heaven after it had first been extracted from Lake Purdy and

cleansed, blessed, and consecrated by the Concho County Water District.

After a few baptisms, the Almighty graced Brother Jonas with what he would call no less than a miracle. He was given from above a very spiritual and visual symbol for washing away the stains of original sin – and all the sins accumulated by the candidate during his life after conception, including all the ways that the fully alive little human could sin while still in the womb. Like Michelangelo's rendition of God touching Adam finger to finger with the current of life, Brother Jonas was given The Stain of Sin Dissolving Baptismal Robe.

One Tuesday morning, Mrs. Candace Echols from over near Veribest – a faithful lady of the Ladies Sunday School Class – while experimenting with various solutions to clean the dark loam from the work clothes of her husband, Gene, discovered that by merely immersing his clothing in a solution of rainwater, bleach, and a measure of Captain Strurgis Boll Weevil Annihilator, the streaks and smudges and stains and grime would dissolve in seconds without agitation. Once run through the regular cycle of her Kenmore, the cotton and denim and polyester would emerge looking as if just off the racks and shelves of the J. C. Penney in Angelo. Her discovery circulated quickly at the markets and beauty shops and drugstores and church socials and on the telephone lines in the area from Angelo to Milo to Wall and Vick and Veribest and over to Eden, and many believed that for Candace and Gene and their children, The Year of Thin Times was over and they could move to Angelo, or perhaps up to Lubbock, or even Fort Worth like Wayne. Her disappointment – and that of the other wives and mothers to whom she had given the recipe for her laundry miracle (except for the envious ones, who were thrilled by the failure of her discovery) – was great when all of Gene's work clothing, and the work and play clothes of the husbands and sons of Mrs. Echols' friends who worked in the fields and on the small ranches and at the cotton gins or played sports or otherwise engaged in dirty activities at recess, during the second washing in the marvel solution, sometime during the regular

cycle in their Kenmores and Whirlpools, simply dissolved and disintegrated, leaving brass and plastic and Mother of Pearl at the bottom of the machine basin like loose change left in jeans pockets. Over the next few days, sales of work clothes at the department stores and thrift outlets in Angelo spiked, and some families with several males in the home and whose matriarch washed all their clothing once a week were required to divert funds from paltry accounts budgeted for other uses to replace jeans and cotton twill pants and overalls and cotton shirts worn to schools and around the farms and ranches and other places of employment where the men and boys worked or played in and around the dark loam.

Brother Jonas would later describe the temporal failure of Mrs. Echol's miracle solution as an example of how God Himself takes the disappointments of man and turns them into divine spiritual gifts of the Almighty. (Brother Jonas would of course never use the word temporal, preferring instead more appropriately biblical words like "earthly" or "of the flesh;" he also thought temporal was a medical reference for those areas of his head in front of his ears where he applied glue for his wig every morning.) He began to use the miracle blend as an integral part of his baptismal ritual. After collecting over the course of several Sundays a special offering for new baptismal robes, Brother Jonas asked Gene Echols to mix enough of Candace's concoction to fill a drum that had been discarded by the septic tank company from over in Eden. On the Sunday of a baptism, while Gene Echols filled the sacred cistern with two parts water and one part miracle solution, Brother Jonas gave the candidate two robes – one that had never been washed, and the other washed once in Candace's cleaning brew. On the first robe, which the candidate wore beneath the second, Brother Jonas splashed red dye Number 40; on the second, which the congregation would see when Brother Jonas and the candidate scaled the stairs to the baptismal platform, he stirred a pot of water, dark loam, and motor oil and, using a plain medium paint brush, swashed swathes of the greasy film down and across the robe in broad strokes. To protect the candidate's skin and hair from the corrosive effects of the bleach and the Boll Weevil

Annihilator, Brother Jonas instructed the candidate to don surgical gloves, tight fitting swimmer's goggles, and a woman's white shower cap. He then smeared the candidate's exposed facial skin with extra strength petroleum jelly. On ascending to the baptismal trough, the candidate looked like a dirty monk just returned from aerial combat.

When Brother Jonas stood on the "X" in front of the Lord's Tub, the candidate next to him, he silently surveyed the congregation for several seconds before introducing the candidate and explaining the meaning and spiritual importance of the baptism ritual – always concluding the same way since he began using Mrs. Echols' discovery as he assisted the candidate into the water. "See this man before you covered in the dirt and humiliation of his sin. Wallowing like swine in this foul and filthy sin since the day the Lord made him in the marriage bed of his Mama and Daddy. He is of Satan and for his demons. His home is in the fires of burning Hay-ell for all eternity. But behold. Jay-sus, the Lamb of God, His only Son, comes now to cleanse him in his pure and holy water." Instructing the candidate to hold his nose, Brother Jonas would place his hand on the candidate's lower back and slowly immerse him into the basin, holding him under a bit longer perhaps than a typical baptism in another church to ensure that the bleach and Captain Sturgis would accomplish their purpose. When the second robe had dissolved into the bottom of the tub, Brother Jonas would lift him from the water, help him to step out of the basin, and remove his goggles, shower cap, and surgical gloves. "Behold again, my friends. This man is white as snow. His sin – the filthy, wretched sin of the flesh – is gone. It is washed away. The only marks left on this man are the loving stains of the blood of our Lord Jay-sus, shed for him by the lashes and the thorns and the nails and the sword at Calvary. Accept this man now among you. He is now of the Lord. He is now one of you. He is saved."

On more than one occasion, believers from places outside the area from Angelo to Milo to Wall and Vick and Veribest and over to Eden would travel to see a baptism administered by Brother Jonas T.

Hand of the Gethsemane Baptist Church. Brother Jonas offered to his God genuine gratitude for his great fortune. So far, only one candidate required a ride to Angelo to be treated for severe chemical burns.

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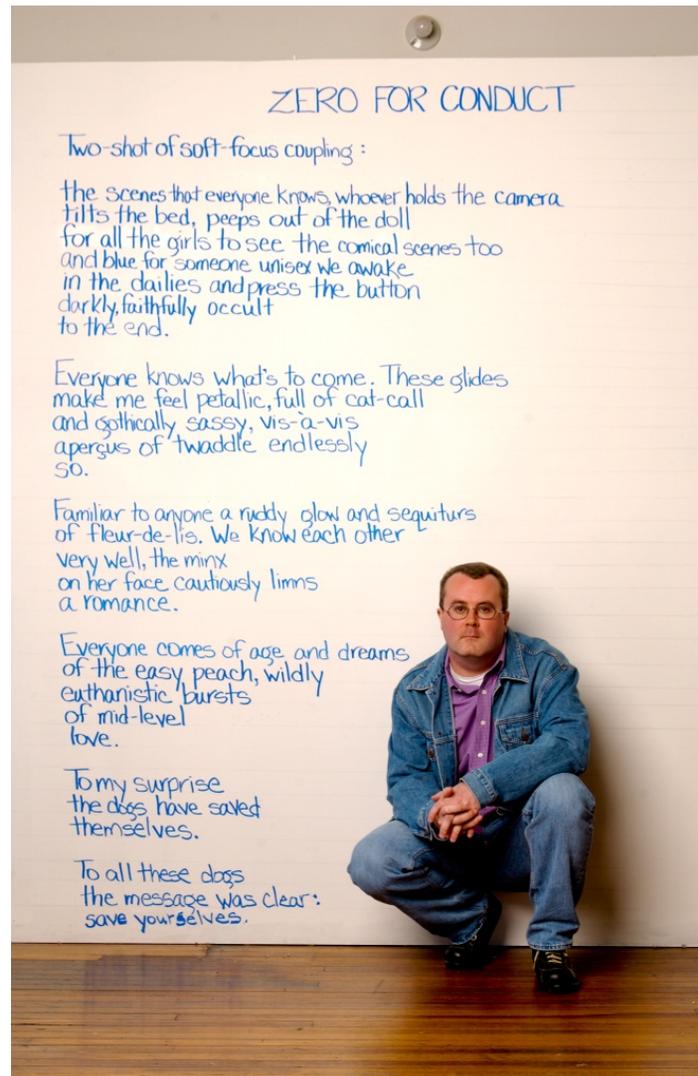
Wallace Wayne Watkins is a fourth generation native of Texas. He is an attorney by training and trade. Wallace Wayne resides in Huntsville, where he writes fiction and poetry, and practices street law.

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**It is a capital mistake to
theorize before one has data.
Insensibly one begins to twist
facts to suit theories, instead of
theories to suit facts.**

--Sherlock Holmes



ZERO FOR CONDUCT

Beau Gustafson
Photograph

Beau Gustafson is a photographer based in Birmingham, Alabama, who specializes in photographing people and food for books, advertising and editorial clients. www.bigswedefood.net

THREE FOUND HAIKU

Richard Luftig

Announcement

Silent auction today
All proceeds to benefit
The high school speech club.

Roadside Diner Sign

Pee and Eat Shrimp Lunch
Buy One Get One Free Half Price
Beer Worms Pizza Eats

Bathroom Manifesto

People who write on bathroom
walls are idiots. I am a
social commentator.

.....
Richard Luftig is a professor of educational psychology and special education at Miami University in Ohio. His poems have appeared in numerous literary journals in the United States (including Third Wednesday) and internationally in Japan, Canada, Australia, Europe, Thailand, Hong Kong and India. One of his published poems was nominated for the 2012 Pushcart Poetry Prize.
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SHIFTING FOCUS IN THE ATTENTION SPAN

Davey Williams

I have never seen any of the five food groups fall from the sky. I have seen fruits fall from trees, though even if I hadn't, Newton has already proved that fruits sometimes fall from trees. According to comic book legend, Superman fell from the sky, though except to a few antiquated societies, he is not considered a part of any of the major five food groups.

None of this has anything to do whatever with a point I was intending to make about music. Doesn't really matter; I've forgotten what that was going to be anyway.

This happens a lot during improvising: start into an idea and then forget what it was, perhaps to find it revived in the course of some other idea, or not.

It is beside the point whether the new idea is "better" than the former idea. Since I don't remember what it was, comparison is impossible and anyway a distraction from the flow of ideas, which it's important to stay in the moment with.

Kind of like driving past a traffic incident. No rubber-neckin'. Keep it moving, pal.

.....

Davey Williams is a career musician and author. He lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and plays his music almost everywhere. Shifting Focus in the Attention Span is an excerpt from his book, Solo Gig: Essential Curiosities in Musical Free Improvisation. daveyjwilliams@att.net

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SHOES

Kristene Brown

I once owned a pair
of pink Mary-Jane's
like two soft padded

hearts beating to
the rhythm of a
good girl pace,

the taste of a boy's
tongue in my mouth
like the first pair

of patent flats
that made a noise
click-clack

on my mother's
linoleum floor,
barely a breath

of a heel.
I read the Bible
but all I recall

of Sunday school
is Mrs. Newberry's
nude heeled shoes.

At sixteen my
mother discovered
a pair of stacked

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See bio on page 21.

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strappy wedges
hidden in my closet.
She called a priest.

It's Impossible to
retrace the
flawless shape

of a newborn
baby's toes
molded in bronze,

stowed away
in an attic box--
Now from the

High-arch soles
of a black patent
leather polka

dot peep-toe
I know,
my mother

would never approve
of the direction
shoes like these go.

IN TRANSLATION

Wallace Wayne Watkins

what if all the translations are wrong
and adam never really knew eve
like king james said but only knew her
and she gave him cain and he killed some guy

and adam still didn't know her
so he just kept knowing her
until all of us are here knowing each other
even though no one is going to write a book about us

i am still waiting for someone to write a book about me
so i can stop knowing everyone
i'll pretend to be tender while i know you
but all i really want is to be magnanimous

(and syndicated)

.....
See bio on Page 6.
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EMILY AND THE HELP

Beth Thames

Her name was Emily and she was The Help.

When I was a child in the 50's, Emily worked in our Alabama home five days a week. She did some cooking, some cleaning, and some baby-minding. I was the baby who nestled in Emily's lap, smelling her perfume of sweat and furniture polish, falling asleep to her humming and rocking, and knowing she'd be there when I woke up from a nap.

I loved her with my whole heart. I have a black and white photo of the two of us in our front yard. I am puffy with the mumps and she is standing behind me, her hand resting on my shoulder.

Though my parents paid her dental bills and bought her winter coats, though my father drove her home and made repairs on her tumbledown house, she was "like family" in my parent's eyes, but surely not in her own. Her own family was made up of a daughter sent to live with relatives up north and a husband who knocked her around when he drank.

She was physically small—she would not have been able to fight back—and wore the white apron and gray uniform all the maids wore. Sometimes she wore a white, starched cap pinned back on her head, like a nurse.

She sat me in my high chair in the kitchen and fed me peas, which I hated, by zooming the spoon into my mouth like a flying airplane, or piling them on top of a volcano of mashed potatoes, tricking me into eating my vegetables. I was a fussy eater, but she took her time and added sugar to boiled carrots or yellow squash. Emily slept on a pallet on the floor of my room on the nights my mother drove to a Birmingham hospital where her own mother lay dying of cancer. In the morning, Emily drank her coffee out of a "maid's" cup that only she used.

When she'd travel to the beach with us, she'd carry me on her hip as she waded along the shore. I asked why she didn't go into the water, and she explained that it was "the white people's ocean." It

would be decades before I understood how big that ocean was that divided the help from those who hired them. My family moved north for five years. And when we came back south, Emily was invited for a visit. This time, she called me "Miss Beth" since I was twelve; this time, she sat at the kitchen table with my mother who served her a cup of coffee out of a real cup, one the family drank from. She and my mother even laughed nervously, it seemed to me, about the old ways, and my mother told her she was glad times had changed. When they embraced goodbye, my mother thought they'd stay in touch.

I invited Emily to my wedding ten years later, but she sent a gift instead of coming to the all-white Presbyterian Church. And when I moved away and had my own family, I'd search for Emily on my trips home, asking for her by name in the black sections of town, thinking I'd seen her—there!—a small, stooped woman with white hair stepping out of the grocery store. But I never found her. My mother called some families she had worked for, but nobody knew what had become of Emily. I wanted to hold her one more time and thank her for my life. Her love and kindness had shaped the person I became. And I wanted to say I was ashamed of pallets on the floor and maid's coffee cups and an ocean of injustice. When I saw the film "The Help" a few days ago, memories of Emily washed over me. I stayed until the final credits rolled over the screen. Out in the lobby, I walked toward the exit with the others. I was not the only white woman of a certain age who'd been crying.

.....

Beth Thames writes in Huntsville, Alabama. Her work has appeared in the Huntsville Times, The New York Times, Southern Living, Atlanta Magazine, and Working Mother. Her commentaries have aired on public radio. bethmthames@gmail.com

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CLOUDS

Lana Fuller

Digital Photograph

Lana Fuller is a graphic designer who lives in Pelham, Alabama.
Photography is her first love.

CASHING IN

Lesa Shaul

Let go.
Let go and allow yourself the luxury of grief.
You deserve it.
You, who have socked away so much
In your heartbreak savings.
You, who have invested so carefully,
Not just in anticipation of the gentle sprinkling
Of regret and small remorse,
But of the soaking monsoon of loss.

Restraint has served you well in the past.
You held the holdings with both hands.
So allow yourself this,
This decadence, this gaudy excess.
Drink long from the draughts of sorrow,
No tiny sips, no measured swallows,
But greedy gulps
Out of a cut-glass goblet carved
From the crystalline chambers of your buried heart.

Stoke the embers into flaming life.
Feed the fire with the hoarded currency
Of letters, pictures, boarding passes, certificates.
Wallow in the clinking ingots, doubloons,
Coins stamped with the faces of
Birth, passage, age.
Let go.
Sit naked in chinchilla
And howl.

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See bio on page 41.
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COMING STORM

Mary Mellen

14" x 12"

Acrylic on Canvas

Mary Mellen lives in Mountain Brook, Alabama. She painted Coming Storm shortly after the tornadoes of April 2011.

HELL OF A STORM

Deb Jellett

In looking back on that day, what I did at the time seemed harmless enough. We lived in a small town, where nothing bad ever happens. And people learn to trust and rely on one another. That I could not have foreseen the tragedy that awaited me five minutes later, is no comfort at all. That I was worried and upset about things that now seem insignificant makes me wish for the old problems. The old stress. Because what I live with now is like a dull ache, like a cancer that is eating me alive.

I got out of the car in front of the Y. Just to run in and drop off a pair of shoes that a friend of Jason's had left in my car. Jason was asleep in his car seat. In the back seat, where he was safe from airbags and windscreens. It was so hot, over 100 degrees, and so I left the engine running and the air conditioner on. I didn't want him to be uncomfortable. Thunder rumbled and a flash of lightning ripped across the sky. I waved to a friend across the parking lot and she gave me a thumbs up. I ran into the building, dropped the shoes off at the counter and trotted back out. Two, maybe three minutes. I had had a brief exchange about soccer practice with the coach's wife. So, maybe four minutes. I heard thunder, then lightning, one on top of the other. And, when I emerged into a gusting wind and a light driving rain, I had one of those moments you experience when you come out of the grocery store or the mall and you look at the spot where you think your car should be and it isn't. A moment of unease and then, ah yes, it's two rows over.

The gleaming white SUV was not in front of the Y. I blinked and wiped the rain from my eyes. More thunder and lightning and suddenly a torrential downpour beat against my bare face and arms. Then a boom of thunder and a violent crackle of lightning. I thought. 'The side. Perhaps I had left it at the side.' I turned and looked. But no. It wasn't there. Then, I spotted a white SUV, the same model as mine, parked near the side door. It was surreal, like being ripped away from normality into an alternative world. I shivered and

scurried down the steps to the side parking lot. Ten feet or so away from the car, I knew it was not mine. Even in the driving rain and gloom of the storm, I could see the tag was out-of-state. I stood there and then turned slowly around searching, hoping. But, hope was draining away. I turned and ran back into the building. The old man at the desk seemed to have a hard time understanding what I was saying. People were staring and keeping their distance. The coach's wife came over and finally I made her understand. She sat me down on a sofa in one of the offices and took an umbrella and went out to the parking lot. When she came back, she spoke to the man at the desk and he picked up the phone. Someone put a blanket around my shoulders. By the time the police arrived, the storm had passed and steam was rising from the pavement. My husband appeared and talked quietly with the policemen. He listened and then looked over at me with a look that said nothing would ever be the same between us. There was no anger, not yet. Just blame. The car was found later that day in the woods a mile or so away from the Y. Empty. There were no fingerprints other than mine and no sign, save for an empty car seat, that Jason had ever existed. That was two years ago. Jason has a spot on a number of milk cartons and a TV show did a feature on him and his disappearance. Leads and sightings come and go. He would be six now. He would be starting First Grade. My husband left six months ago when the anger was in danger of spilling over into violence. I don't see anyone much. I have thought about moving away, starting over, but what if Jason came home and I wasn't here? My mother says that is not logical. But, in hell logic seems out of place.

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Deb lives in Daphne, Alabama. Her work has appeared in Birmingham Arts Journal, Storyteller Magazine, Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, and AlaLitCom. Debjel36532@aol.com

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(A LOVE POEM)

Steven L. Millhouse

For you, I would . . .
For you, I would . . .
For you, I would . . .
And then, I would . . .
And then, we could . . .
You said we would . . .
But we never did . . .
And you never did . . .
Now, you're gone.
Stayed with him.
Said it was ". . . for the kids."
I wish I could believe that.
I wish I could believe that.

.....
Though he has many Northeastern and Western American influences, Steven L. Millhouse is a Southern-born writer trained formally in structure, style, verse and format in university classrooms and informally in deep, southern-fried, home-grown, country flavor. He has an untamed style that has learned the rules in order to break them.
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REGRET

Kristene Brown

Midnight. Bare branch

 snow trees,
like ghosts, spooking spirit

a hi-fi ice heaven.

 Limbs frozen
in bow knot blue knuckles

stretch to sky

 snaring flake and
down in a frigid web.

I plow a boot beat path

 the biting frost
squeezing softly, I slide

deeper and deeper into the

 sleet silence.
The night is sharpened by

stars and winter wind

as I labor to walk at
turn-table speed through

slush and snow.

The only noise is the
fire-light of ice creaking.

Then, a break

a tree split down
the middle, like two people

in two separate cities
simultaneously turning
the bed sheets down while

thinking of one another.

One warm, the other alone,
a break is never even.

And then there is me.

Soft flakes falling into
the warmth of a glove

for a brief moment

there is a crystallized
skeleton, then nothing.

.....

Kristene Brown is a Master of Fine Arts student at Vermont College of Fine Arts. She has previously been published, or has work forthcoming, in Folly, Forge, Swink, Westward Quarterly, and many others. She is also a psychiatric social worker for the state of Kansas.

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WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL

Claire Prescott Gross

When I was a little girl, a long time ago, I used to live in a neighborhood—a real neighborhood with big oak trees and sidewalks where we rode our bikes.

When I was a little girl, a long time ago, my brother and friends and I would play in Norwood Place until it was dark. (We could do this because no one EVER bothered us.) My Daddy would whistle two times to call us home for supper. And my brother and I would go a-running and our friends would go to their homes on The Circle and The Boulevard.

When I was a little girl, a long time ago, sometimes, on the way home from school, I would stop by the Methodist Church, climb the big stone steps, open the heavy wooden door, and go inside, and talk to God awhile. (I could do this because no one ever locked the church.)

When I was a little girl, a long time ago, the milkman came before daylight and left our milk in real glass bottles. Mama always left the empty bottles with a note inside. If my brother and I had been very good, the note would say: “Please leave one quart of chocolate milk.”

When I was a little girl, a long time ago, on Saturday mornings my Grandma would take me on a trolley downtown to the Alabama Theater to see The Mickey Mouse Club. If you held a winning ticket, you got a prize. I never won a prize, but I always got to eat at Newberry’s and get anything I wanted.

When I was a little girl, a long time ago, on summer evenings Mama, Daddy, my brother, and I sat on the front porch on a squeaky glider and watched lightning bugs in the park. My Daddy rocked me on a pillow until I fell asleep. He did this until my feet touched the floor. And I was safe and happy, when I was a little girl, a long time ago.

FOOTNOTE: This is the story I told my children, then grandchildren, and now, great grandchildren when they have asked

for stories of my childhood. One of them once asked if I knew George Washington. With a straight face, I said, “No, he didn’t live in Norwood. I think he lived in Woodlawn.”

.....
Claire Gross, a native of Birmingham, Alabama, grew up during the 1940’s and 1950’s. She taught second grade for twenty-nine years. Presently, she is a writer, actor, storyteller, and reading intervention teacher with Better Basics. She has five children, eleven grandchildren and two great grandchildren. clairehouse@bellsouth.net
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**As children tremble and fear
everything in the blind
darkness, so we in the light
sometimes fear what is no more
to be feared than the things
children in the dark hold in
terror.**

--Lucretius



BOY FISHING ON THE KENAI RIVER, ALASKA

Lisa Oestreich
35mm photograph

Lisa Oestreich sought a career in photography but discouraged by what she perceived as fierce competition in the field, followed her other love, medicine. She is a physician at UAB Student Health in Birmingham, Alabama. lao@uab.edu

STANDING AMONG TREES

GTimothy Gordon

Standing among trees

and the white lace

falling

The ash a fine silt flute

and so much singing in the

leaves

The legs of limbs spread astride

and so much singing within

this shade

How the night comes on

a lyric over the land

In the midst of fierceness

the spiked reed, bruised

blueflax

All manner of manwoman well

whether bent or upright

(Blest this firstearth sleep!)

and faroff greenwaking wind

THE UNEXPECTED STORM

Sylvia Barker-Osborne

I backed my car cautiously out of the parking space. The image of the building was reflected in the rear view mirror. The strong glass and steel medical complex building; the building of surfaces like the news I had just received—sharp, hard, cold. How appropriate there should be a drizzle of rain today—or is that my personal rain?

Where should I go? The urge to flee filled my heart but my brain knew there was no escape. No matter where you go, there you are, I mused, remembering the words I often repeat. I drove through the rain to the pier for a walk. The gulls and I can talk this over. They will give voice and sound to the loud screams I am unable to utter.

Standing on the pier I tried to concentrate on the beautiful sunset. I should write a note to remind me where to view this spectacular event each day. A sight much too lovely to lose. I once wrote of "watching the wind ride the waves to shore. The ebb and flow of the tides of everyday life washing the shoreline. The old and washed thin shore being covered with new sand as the tide worked to renew the edges."

This was the design, now the scene was fading. A system, that is what I need. I must begin to document my life. What do I eat for breakfast, who do I love? I must write addresses, telephone numbers, little clue words to enable me to guard the news a bit longer. I tried to remember the last years of my mother's illness—not yet, no, not yet. The blank slips in thoughts and time have been frightening. The ability to gloss over anything unpleasant or unfamiliar, and this certainly has been both, has been a tiring exercise in fear. I do not know how long I can continue the charade. Soon I will notice pity in the eyes of friends, see the exasperation of family members as they attend to my needs. I will watch as my reflection fades from the mirror.

I sat on the beach surrounded by the squawking gulls and knew this was my day for acceptance. Now I can begin to fight, plan, and

attempt to dream. The news has taken my breath away. I pulled my sweatshirt round my neck and ears seeking warmth and comfort. If I could turn off the noises maybe the news would go away and I could return to the undiagnosed truths. I know desire cannot take me back in time. Now is the time for all good women to come to the aid of...blah, blah, blah, I chuckled.

.....

Sylvia Barker-Osborne spent her youth in Chickasaw, Alabama.

HappyL7221@aol.com

.....

**Do what you can for as long as
you can, and when you finally
can't, you do the next best
thing. You back up, but you
don't give up.**

--Chuck Yeager

HOW TO WRITE ABOUT A PEBBLE

Jim Reed

I am regarding a pebble.

This particular pebble rests comfortably in the palm of my right hand.

Editorial correction: A pebble, which is inanimate, cannot rest comfortably, since that suggests some kind of will, a sort of purposeful action on the part of the pebble. It would be more accurate to say, “I am balancing this pebble in the palm of my hand, where it will remain until I decide to move it. It cannot move itself.”

This pebble is smooth and time-weathered and at first cold to the touch.

Slowly, heat from my palm transfers to the pebble, making it less than cold and closer degree by degree to the temperature of my palm.

Editorial correction: From my human perspective, I am making assumptions that may have no basis in known reality—I don’t really have proof that this pebble has been worn by nature, since it might have been thrown into one of those rock-smoothing machines and forced into simulated time-weathering. It might be more accurate to say, “This pebble is smooth, made so by forces of which I am not aware...” Was this the pebble slung by David to topple the bully Goliath? Or is it just a foundling awaiting the next post-holocaust race of small children who will pick it up for their homemade slingshots, or paint a tiny face thereon in lieu of store-bought dolls?

Editorial correction: We don’t know whether the Goliath story is accurate—perhaps he wasn’t a bully but a conscripted warrior who, because of his size and political vulnerability, was forced to battle the kid with the pitching arm. Maybe he was just a scapegoat or a foil. And so on.

Storytellers and philosophers and scientists and artists see pebbles in different realities, in sometimes diametrically-opposed mythologies.

Each has a right to see a pebble in a highly individualistic way. Each is allowed to describe the pebble according to wishes, desires, training. Each has a special parallax view. It is up to the writer of the moment to pull these disparate perceptions together into a work of art—such as a story or a treatise or a rainy-Sunday-afternoon meandering column such as this one resting within your field of vision

.....

Jim Reed curates the Museum of Fond Memories at Reed Books in Birmingham, Alabama. His weekly blog is at <http://redclaydiary.com/>

.....

**Worrying does not empty
tomorrow of its troubles; it
empties today of its strength.**

--J.R.R. Tolkien

ANYTHING

Erika Donald

Maybe all this will
 converge
the sky
 and the sun rock
 and water
 until there is one
 I keep looking
 in the strangest places for answers
 as if
a cobweb could reveal
 the universe
 like a cloth whisked out from under
fine bone
 china
 solid as a table
 I keep trying to step over myself
 to get out
of my way
 to see
 like a leaf,
to hear like a tree.
 I'm telling you river don't
meet
 the rock
 don't know
the shore
 don't
 know
 anything.

.....

Erika Donald holds a Master of Arts degree in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Her work has appeared in The East Bay Express, Faultline, Nibble, Palooka and Calliope. Her essay about life in an Internet call center was voted one of the top ten stories of 2011 by AlterNet.

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THREE RED TREES

Jill Billions

12" x 12"

Acrylic on Canvas

Jill Billions lives in Vestavia Hills, Alabama. When she is not practicing medicine, raising a family, and gardening, she finds time to paint.

INTERSTATE LOVE SONG (When I Sixty Five)

John Woolf

This one goes out to
Eva Falkville,
Lacon Vinemont,
Cullman Moulton,
Hayden Corner,
Warrior Robbins,
Finley Boulevard,
Pelham Helena,
Jemison Thorsby,
Pintlala Tyson,
Georgiana Starlington,
Grace Garland,
Lenox Castleberry,
Brewton Repton,
Wallace Flomaton,
Bay Minette,
Satsuma Creola,
and all the rest
who helped me find myself
when everything went south.

.....
John Woolf has been publishing poetry for literally tens of months. Professionally, he teaches children of Mobile, Alabama, the Language Arts, including such insight as, 'Everything you know about Haiku is self-congratulatory, anglocentric oversimplification' and 'IT'S is a contraction of the words IT and IS.' He is 32. jrw905@jaguar1.usouthal.edu
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I LIKE THINKING

Melanie L. Yancey

I like thinking;
Planning the hardest things
I'll never do.
Like the heaviest feather sinking,
I can procrastinate
Faster than you.

.....

Melanie L. Yancey lives in Glencoe, Alabama, with her three children and two cats. She is devoted to Shakespeare and lives in fear of math. Amidst the constant chaos of children's activities, graduate school, and designing costumes for community theatre organizations, Melanie finds time to write poetry, a relaxing activity that keeps her sane.

.....

**We also know how cruel the
truth is, and we wonder
whether delusion is not more
consoling.**

--Henri Poincare

OCTOPUS EYE

Emily Brisse

We're giddy. It is 88 degrees, and humid, the kind of humid you complain about in June, July, and August, but on a Minnesota May day, it is all good, baby. In fact, it is downright sublime. "Give me more of this stuff!" I yell out at the edge of the deck—I'm perched there, reveling in the sensation of sweat—and the words fly back at me atop hot, fat wind. See, along with the humidity, the 7:00 night is cooking up a whole mix of tight, angry air. Dark, booming clouds are rising higher and higher along the south skyline. It's storm weather. Yet this doesn't bother my husband and me. Anything severe usually comes our way from the northwest, and we simply cannot stay in on such a summer-like night. So we pull on shorts and t-shirts, strap into sandals, and hop on our bikes.

For the record, I do look back and up over my shoulder more than once. I notice it: the clouds aren't just dark. They're a kind of a pink-orange black. And their denseness rises up like a wall. One of us says, "Are you sure this is safe?" But the fact that we aren't doesn't deter us. It is hot. Have I mentioned that? We are, for all practical purposes, on a different planet.

That's when we see it. We're aiming toward sea-blue skies. We're cruising away from the storm into a perfect evening punctuated by birdcalls and butterflies, and yet miles from any storm cloud, we look up to see dropping shocks of electricity. Heat lightning. I pedal forward in awe, not scared, completely present. Like some crazywoman. And right as I start to sense the true wildness in the air, my husband calls out, "Em! Did you see that?" I'd been still staring into the blue. No sooner do I say so, than a penny-sized disk of hail pings in front of me off the cement. We

don't know how we have so miscalculated the direction of the storm, but as another piece drops, and then another, we understand that to turn back now means certain pangs and pangs all along our precious heads, so we both yell, "Go! Bike for your life!" and hot-pedal it to the old train bridge we both know is up ahead. We are underneath the bridge for no more than thirty seconds before the hail turns from penny-sized to golf ball, then from golf ball to clementine. At first we stand several feet from the edge, listening to the whaps and bams of the ice snapping small branches and crashing into the bridge's top. But then we move back, toward the middle, because though the concrete tunnel we are standing in is long, the wind now is fierce and cold, and it starts to propel the hail and rain all the way through. My darling, sweet, manly husband wraps me in his arms and blocks my body as best he can, but we are quickly dripping, quickly shivering, and just as we'd been this whole time, still giggling from our bellies, reckless and ridiculous, yes, but laughing, laughing like we are twelve years old. The hail only lasts for five minutes. When it stops, chunks of busted ice cover the trail, and larger, unbroken pieces dot the grasses like transparent Easter eggs. The rain quickly transitions from blinding to steady to mist, and by the time I gather a few purple spring beauties along the tunnel's edge that have survived the pummeling, the storm has completely passed.

We laugh. We kiss. My boy-husband picks up a few ice eggs and flings them at the tunnel wall, easily entertained by their fantastic splatterings. Then we bike home. Hail is everywhere, huge pieces that are still melting on roadsides fifteen minutes later. And those clouds? From the back-end—an accurate description this time—they are gargantuan, something out of a myth, a roiling gray monster octopus that keeps showing me his behind-the-head eye. I realize we

are no longer laughing. Our throats are already stretched from looking up, our mouths just open.

.....

Emily Brisse earned a Master's Degree in Fine Arts from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in publications including Minnesota English Journal, The Writer's Chronicle, Orion, New Plains Review, Roadside Poetry, The Talking Stick and Minnesota Conservation Volunteer. emilybrisse@gmail.com

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THE LETTER

Chervis Isom

The return address jumps off the page. My heart stutters. I hadn't seen or heard from her in, what? Fifty years? Ours had been a brief affair. I barely remember her face. What could she want?

Her letter recounts that pleasant day. As my hungry eyes survey her handwritten memories, my motor kicks over into a healthy hum and then accelerates in anticipation....

I quickly reach her final line. "I'm old now," she writes. "Are you?" The humming stops.

.....

Chervis Isom is a practicing lawyer in Birmingham, Alabama. His favorite past-time is pushing words around. He has been published in the Birmingham Arts Journal and in AlaLitCom of the Alabama Writer's Conclave.

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BLUE

Jennifer Horne

I am sitting in the back seat reading my book, and my mom is in the driver's seat with her head back on the head rest and her eyes closed. We are in the drive-through car wash, basic cycle, for the third time this week that I know of. Mom says at four dollars a pop it's cheaper than therapy. Dad says Mom needs something to alleviate her stress and that Mom should take up yoga. Mom hates yoga. I heard her telling her best friend, Cyd, on the phone that if God had meant us to do yoga he wouldn't have invented bourbon. Still, you'd think Dad would notice how clean the car's been lately. I don't tell Mom because I think it would freak her out, but I have a great idea for a horror movie. It takes place in a car wash. A couple of teenagers go for the deluxe wash so they'll have more time to make out, but when the wash ends there's blood all inside the car windows and the car behind them starts honking for them to move forward, but they've been slashed to pieces by the Car Wash Slasher. That's why I always make sure the doors are locked while we're in the car wash. A psycho, one who didn't mind getting all wet and soapy, could get in your car and kill you and it would be hard to drive away and no one would even see it happening, especially with the big blue and white ribbons this car wash uses.

Sometimes at night I try to imagine what happens when I go to sleep. Does everything stay in the same place or does it move around and then get back in place before I wake up? Maybe my dog and cat talk to each other. Maybe my hamster dances. This is what my teacher, Mrs. Huff, calls being fanciful. If she called it creative, that would be a positive thing, but fanciful means I make too much up and I'm too much in my own imagination.

As far as I can tell, my family is pretty normal. Our house is like other people's houses, our cars are like other people's cars. Mom and Dad work, like most moms and dads. Lots of families just have one kid, too. If Mom wouldn't have lost the baby, there'd be two of us, which is also normal. One weird thing about us is that the door to the nursery is always closed now, and sometimes Mom goes in there and cries when she thinks I won't hear her. The nursery is blue, which is a color I am starting not to like. After she lost the baby, she and Dad fought over Dad not having finished putting up the wallpaper, and Dad said it was a moot point now, and Mom just said "Moot." Mom and Dad told me about the baby, who would have been my baby brother, although he does not seem real to me anymore than praying does. Mom says that in Japan there are shrines for babies who died before they were born, and that she wishes we had those here. I don't tell her but I think dead-baby shrines everywhere would be creepy.

When the car wash ends, I like the part where the big frame glides all the way back into place in front of the car, and the sprayers are still dripping a little bit, and the green "THANK YOU" light comes on, and Mom shifts into drive and we go over that little "clunk" place and emerge from the dark of the car wash into the light. Mom and I say together, "Out we go," and she always smiles back at me as we turn right onto Cantrell and head toward home.

.....

Jennifer Horne's publications include Bottle Tree: Poems, Working the Dirt: An Anthology of Southern Poets, All Out of Faith: Southern Women on Spirituality, and Circling Faith: Southern Women on Spirituality, forthcoming 2012. This story is from a manuscript titled Land of Opportunity, stories in the voices of Arkansas women and girls. She lives in Cottdale, Alabama. hornejw@yahoo.com

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LAIKA IN AETERNUM

Lesa Shaul

[In 1957, the Soviets, anxious to win the "Space Race," launched a live dog to orbit earth. It was a one-way trip.]

Did you howl at the moon,
The bright orb suddenly not so far
But right outside the tiny porthole,
The wolf in you resplendent.

Did you curl up and go to sleep,
Tail tucked around your haunches,
Tickling your nose as you dreamed
Of digging, digging, digging.

At least Laelaps is there to play with you,
Serious about the scorching stars,
Chasing meteors across the sky,
Until Orion, at long last, whistles you home.

.....

Lesa Shaul lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, with her four cats, two dogs, and one partially domesticated child.

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GRAFFITI

Derrell Richburg
Acrylic on Canvas
20" x 16"

Derrell Richburg is a self-taught artist living in Vestavia Hills, Alabama, and a member of the Birmingham Art Association.

FRAGMENT

Benjamin Patrick

It is still going on somewhere back there on the road. The black van that stops next to your car has been through the same rain. Water comes down over the windshield in rivulets. The wipers flick back and forth once before resting as the headlights go out. You look for the driver but he is covered by the curtains gathered to one side of the motel room window. They smell faintly of smoke. The low, late daylight reveals clouds of dust that cake the glass. There is in the luster after a rain something hidden, as though the light we see by is not our own but escapes from a door left open. A view of the timeless, the sensation attained in the knowledge that it will soon lose out to time. You hear a conversation from across the wall to the next room, one that recedes with the light. The wind picks up when the view from your window falls dark. In the gray, the wind sends workers to chase after traffic cones bounding over the near shoulder of the highway. The reflective borders of their coats fly as they walk the cones against the current to a waiting truck. There are tall stacks of the red plastic in the truck's bed by the time the men form a circle around the overseer. Because of the wind, you could not have heard his instructions from ten feet away, much less at this distance, but by his motioning toward the vehicle you assume that he is telling the team to haul out. Is that how it's done? What if the road crew is not conceding to the weather but has been paid to make the work last another week?

The apartment buildings behind, the ones that have been visible since the rain stopped, was it the same for them? Columns of white balconies stacked high on those hills fronting the road, they might come sliding down with the next earthquake for not being built to

code. Which isn't as easy as a work stoppage, that takes some real money. There are inspectors to pay off and engineers to keep quiet. The town councilman who pushed the project through will have a newly finished house on the beach where he spends weekends with coeds. And if you had followed the road past the gas station you stopped at before checking in? You would have come to the house where the missus was found, the fat bruise forming in the shape of an oak leaf, with a section of extension cord tied around her neck. You had seen the station attendant when you stepped inside to use the ATM. His bicep had a faded tattoo and he the look of a contract killer, his cheeks speared with sparse white bristles as if in a kind of corporal punishment. It is the lesson from the Garden, that every human enterprise begins with a transgression. The science to save lives is gained at the harvesting from countless mice their hearts. Wedding bands are purchased from the pawn shop. We cover the balconies in white, but either the land is stolen or the foundations slanted or the materials subpar. For the board room, it's enough to call in a favor. The rest of us, we have to hide from our wrongdoing, which is why you are certain by now the woman at the front desk handed you the keys to your room under an assumed name.

The cloud passes. Having piled into their truck, the workers join the slow-moving traffic at an opening and are gone. As they take the final rise into the city, the last bits of sun glint off the cars' metalwork. Assumed names? Those who seem to struggle with the climb are guilty only of heading home early for the weekend. They are housecleaners between tasks, retirees. Absent are the felons concerned about calling the attention of highway patrol. Out of place, a sports car weaves frustrated through the heavy commute.

Loudly, the van complains with that popcorn sound cars make after a hard drive. You have seen no one come out, sitting at the

desk, but in the gloss of the laptop monitor bared calves scissor by from a room near the motel's front office. As you turn to the girl in a paisley dress, she pauses to affix an earring by the passenger-side door. She watches the road, turns to the shadows long over emptied parking spaces. She looks back over the row of close-set windows and, seeing you, narrows her eyes and moves on....

.....

Benjamin Patrick is a student at the University of Alabama School of Medicine and lives in the Birmingham, Alabama, area. Part one of "Fragment" was published in Birmingham Arts Journal in 2011. Other work can be found at www.theveryflesh.blogspot.com.

benpersons@hotmail.com

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Instant gratification takes too long.

--Carrie Fisher

PARASITE TIME

Allen Johnson Jr.

When is a tick not a tick?
When it's partnered with a tock
From a clock.

If not arachnid, it remains
A small parasite,
Sucking away our lives
Second by second . . .

.....

*Allen Johnson, Jr. writes poetry and plays music from his Mercer Island,
Washington home.*

.....

**A bull in just about any shop is
gonna be a mess.**

--Sarah Silverman

WATCHING WINTER RAIN

Sylvia W. Dodgen

Unlike summer thunderstorms that blow in from the sea and crash and boom in the afternoon, then blow away, leaving the coast bathed in yellow sunshine, winter rains here fall hard for hours, sometimes days, and bring a sharp coldness to the air. It feels as though tiny needles penetrate the throat and lungs. The winter wind pushes whitecaps in the bays and coves, which do not freeze over but have a glittering crystal look, like shaved ice. Watching winter weather on Wolf Bay from the reading room at the back of the Orange Beach Library, seems to be a favorite pastime of people called “snowbirds,” who visit from much colder, more isolating weather up north, places like Michigan, Missouri and Canada. The picture windows in the reading room are large and uncurtained. Snowbirds shift in their chairs and rattle newspapers, but their concentration seems to be on the weather outside the warm library. No one talks; they are considerate of each other’s need for quiet. Many of them seem to have a wistful look on their faces as they gaze out the windows. Some leave their coats behind and walk out to the brick patio to stand under the overhang just out of the icy wind and rain. I wonder if they are missing the snow and ice of their home states. Even though these people are strangers to me, I feel a sense of intimacy, sitting in the cozy confines of the library, reading newspapers from around the globe and watching them watch the weather on the bay.

I cross the reading room and step out onto the patio. I want to talk to a snowbird; I want to know why they come. Is the cold hard on arthritic bones or is it, as I have heard, cheaper to rent an off-season condominium here than to heat a house in winter there? A tall man with white hair is smoking in a corner, where the building juts out. I move in his direction and say that the smoke from his cigarette smells good. I tell him I miss smoking even though it has been years since I quit.

The man glances down at me then says, “We are creatures of habit; my wife used to say.”

“Have you come here for the winter?” I ask.

“From Missouri,” he replies.

“Is it that much warmer here?”

“It is much warmer than the hills of ‘Misery.’ The snow gets deep in the hills.”

“Ah ha, misery, Missouri, I see.”

He looks out at the bay and speaks, as though to himself, “My wife Rose is buried in Missouri above the creek where I had to dig through snow to get water and haul it back up the hill when I was a boy. Rosie loved those hills, but she loved this beach too. So I keep coming back.”

He stares at the rain, “‘We are creatures of habit,’ my sweet girl said.”

.....

Sylvia W. Dodgen, a native of Ozark, Alabama, attended Sullins College in Virginia and graduated from the University of Alabama in 1970 and 1977 (Master’s). She was employed by the State of Alabama for more than thirty years and is currently retired, living and writing in Orange Beach, Alabama. dodgen.jean@yahoo.com

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**Life gives you the test first, then
the lesson.**

--Derek Hutton



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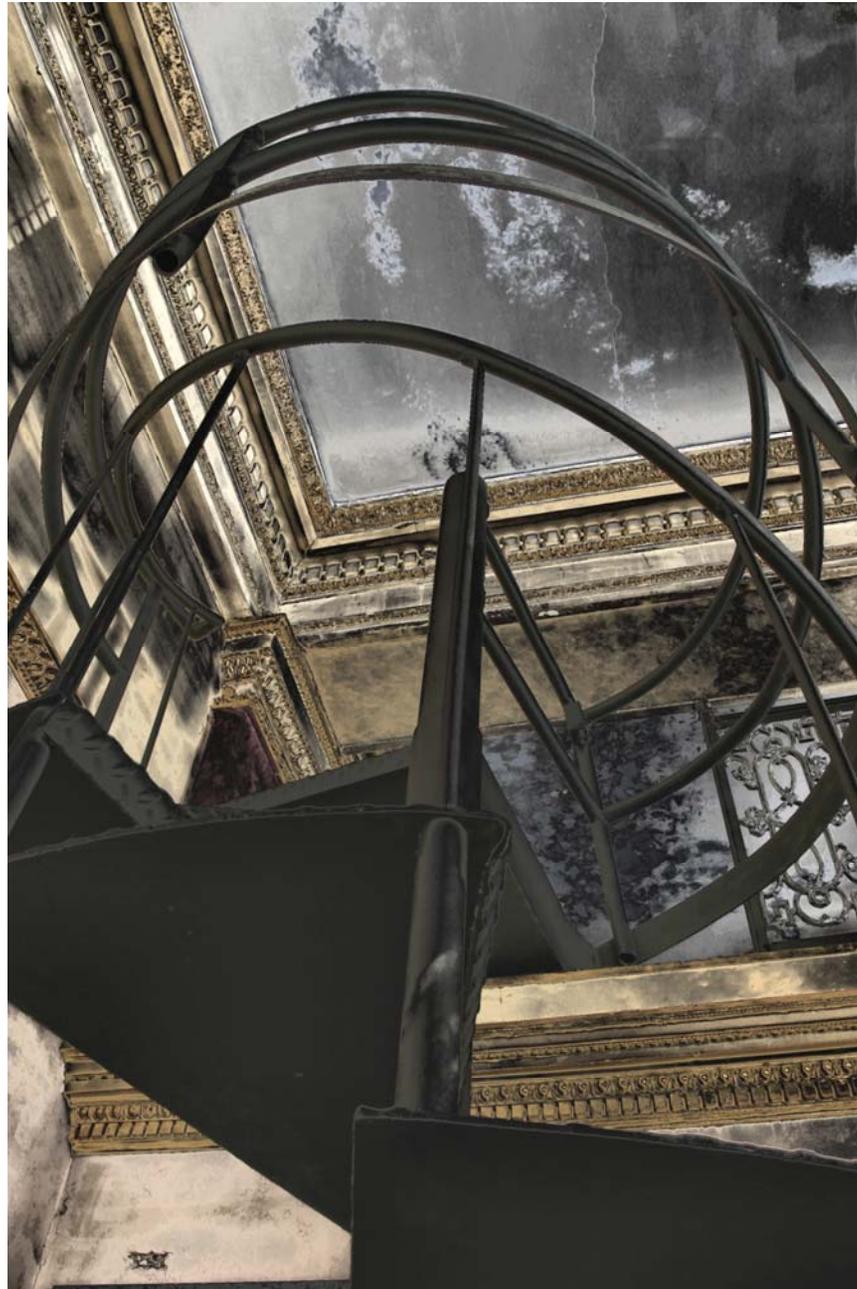
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