

# Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 10 Issue 3



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Front Cover: **BOXER**, 8" x 10", Marker on Paper

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## THE OLD TURKEY CALL

Joey McClure

John Estel was rummaging around in his old smoke-house, not looking for anything in particular, just killing time. The ancient building had not been used to smoke meats for years and had become storage for his forgotten past. There were tons of stuff he had chucked in over the years: old motor and car parts, broken furniture, fishing tackle, antique bottles and jugs, boxes of old handwritten letters; a lifetime of memories. As he wandered around aimlessly, he picked up a dusty little cardboard box lying on a shelf and blew it off. It was his old, almost-forgotten turkey call; he had not been turkey hunting in years. He removed the wooden, box-shaped device from the cardboard container and set the empty box back on the shelf. He walked out, closed the door behind him, then leaned back against it staring down at this old relic.

In earlier days, John Estel Holmes was known to be the most fierce turkey hunter for miles around. It was accepted as fact throughout the county that the reason the state made a turkey season limiting hunting to only a few months a year and then set a bag-limit was to keep John Estel from killing off the entire turkey population completely. John Estel could get up in the morning, walk out his back door and a couple of hundred yards into the woods, call up a big gobbler, kill it, clean it, put it in the oven and get back in bed all in less than an hour. Unlike most hunters that used shotguns, John Estel used a .22 rifle and just shot them in the head. When there was a community event that demanded food enough to feed a passel, he could in short order provide as much turkey meat as needed. When the State of Alabama established its turkey season and a bag limit, it not only put a damper on his past-time but it just stopped being fun; so he boxed up his turkey call and forgot about it. But to hold it again in his hand stirred something in his soul. He scraped the lid across the box and its chatter made him smile, which was a rarity. Maybe he would make one more hunt; after all, it was turkey season.

John Estel arose the next morning, slipped into his overalls, chalked up his old call box, breached a bullet in his rifle and slipped quietly into the woods. He had no doubt that there were turkey around because a flock usually meandered through his yard at one time or another most every day so they likely roosted close by. John Estel found a little thicket with a huge oak tree in the middle behind which he stationed himself.

He scraped the lid of the box back and forth emitting that old familiar squawk mimicking the chatter of a hen seeking a mate. Experiencing once again the delight of the hunt, another hint of a smile briefly crossed his lips and a twinge of excitement fluttered in his gut. A light, warm breeze blew through the trees and through John Estel's thin, graying hair carrying the pungent aromas of early spring.

Before too long there came an answer from a ways down the hollow. 'It looks like turkey for dinner tonight,' John Estel thought. He picked up the rifle and peeked around the right side from behind the oak. Strain his eyes as he might, there was no sign of movement, no waving and thumping tail feathers he could see. He pulled back and made the box squawk again. He waited. Finally, there was another answer. And a rustle of something moving cautiously through the under-growth. He peeked around the tree again. He could barely make out slow but intrepid movements through some heavy brush on the other side of a small clearing. Just a little more and the bird's little head would be in his sights.

One last time he slid the lid across the box, more quietly this time and he once again felt that apprehensive excitement he had missed for so long. Instinctively he sensed the movement stop. He knew if he peeked around again his prey would detect him and would flee into the brush before he could get a shot off. So in one quick, fluid motion, he stepped from behind the tree while raising his rifle searching for a turkey head down his rifle sites; then KABOOM. A chunk of the tree he stood beside exploded into splinters just above his head while, at the exact same time Ellis Moore's goofy face (looking down the barrel of his shotgun) appeared in John Estel's sites. John Estel had called up another turkey hunter -- who had almost killed him.

"GREAT GOD, ELLIS!! WHAT THE HELL ARE YE DOIN?" yelled John Estel as his heart raced and pounded in his chest.

"S'that you, John Estel? What's you doin' here?" asked the squint-eyed old man.

"I BY GOD LIVE HERE. THIS IS MY LAND."

"Well, SORRRRY! Didn't thank you hunted no more. I's just trying to kill me sompin' good to eat."

"Ellis, I really don't think you could get enough meat off me to feed you, much less you and your brothers.

"Well, I didn't know it was you. I though you was a gobbler. You knowed I can't see nothing." Ellis and his two brothers who all lived together in a little shack next to Shelton Creek down in the bottom of the

hollow were longtime alcoholics preferring rot-gut moonshine from which the lead had about blinded the three of them. "Shore am glad you didn't shoot me."

"Get you some damn glasses, Ellis. You know you nearly killed me, for God sake," John Estel said, looking up at the blown off part of the tree.

"I said I was sorry. I can't afford no glasses. Anyway, it was just bird shot; I ain't got no buck-shot," Ellis said, as if the bird shot could not have killed him just as well. He removed his slouchy straw hat and raked his filthy fingernails across his ragged head.

John Estel explained to Ellis that he had to stay a little further away from his house when hunting and then it was agreed by both men that this episode would never again be mentioned to anyone; EVER. They both turned and left the scene the way they came. About half way back to the house, John Estel turned around to retrieve his gun where he had dropped it beside the tree. The smell of flatulence still lingered.

'There wouldn't be turkey for dinner tonight,' he thought. He absolutely could not believe he had called up a turkey hunter. When he got home, he walked directly to the smokehouse, returned the turkey call to the old cardboard box and placed it back in the clean spot on the shelf exactly where it had been found. John Estel walked out, closed the door and went back into his house to change his pants and fix breakfast. It would be a long, long time before he would venture into the old smokehouse again.

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**"It is not enough to succeed. Others must fail."**

**--Gore Vidal**

## **BRIDGE TO LIFE**

Linda Owens – 2012 HACKNEY AWARD WINNER

Edge of science,  
Edge of life  
Sirens screaming, machines beeping  
Bright lights glaring, doctors preparing.  
Heart swells and weakness shows,  
Child fading into the light.  
Finally, the decision is made,  
and tubes are inserted.  
The Box starts ticking, ticking, ticking  
Pumping,  
pumping,  
pumping.  
Pale skin returns to pink.  
Waiting, hoping, wishing..  
soon.  
When? How long? Will it be soon?  
Waiting, playing, learning to walk,  
Attached to the rectangular box.  
The life-giving mechanical box.  
Waiting with feet propped up,  
Relaxed feet waiting  
on the ticking box.  
One month, ...two months, ...three months  
Waiting  
Family and the ticking, helping, living box.  
At times under the child's feet it sits,  
While caring, sustaining, and pumping  
for his life.  
The Doctor soars into the sky.  
The jet takes him to the beating heart.  
Where is the heart so needed?  
Will it be the perfect match?

Toddler with his metal box  
Ticking, ticking, ticking,  
Pumping, pumping, pumping.  
Waiting for a heart,  
with feet propped up  
on his Berlin Box.  
The Doctor soars on a jet,  
Now returns with real heart in hand.  
Death flew out the window on birds' wings,  
While life stood before the boy with the ticking box  
in the form of a real beating heart.  
No more box needed to sustain his life,  
To prop up the sweet feet of innocence.  
Now, finally a heart beating inside.  
The Box is just a remembrance  
of past heart beats,  
Outside the body,  
Inside the box.  
Sheer joy and jubilation  
Dad, mom and son going home at last.  
The box is missed at his feet  
But life is his to keep.

Ellie, Lane, Alex and Ollie too  
said goodbye to the Berlin Box  
and said hello to living. There were as  
many as 90 or so other children who bridged  
their life on the Berlin Heart until  
a transplant was available.  
FDA stands for Food and Drug Administration. The Berlin Heart was  
finally approved on October 31, 2011. Over 100 children have received the  
Berlin Heart and in one trial at Duke University, 90% survived.

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*Linda Owens lives in Hattiesburg Mississippi. When she was a child, nature drew her  
into its folds while playing with helicopter seeds or sitting at the base of a tree trunk  
reading. Now her greatest joy is seeing others understand something new and  
wondrous and the light shining in their eyes. [Ibohwo@att.net](mailto:Ibohwo@att.net)*  
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## HANDS

Cameron Hampton  
Oil Pastel on Paper

*Cameron Hampton is a Gold Medal Circle Member with the International Association of Pastel Societies, a Signature Member of the Pastel Society of America, the Southeastern Pastel Society, the Alabama Pastel Society and a Juried Member of the Degas Pastel Society. She has many works in private and corporate collections throughout the U.S. and Europe, has won many awards and has had her work published in numerous magazines and novels. She lives in Madison, Georgia.*  
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## GRANDMA'S BUTTONS

Nancy Owen Nelson

The year is 1905. My grandmother, Nannie B. Russell Chandler, births her first and only child, Nannie B. She dies an hour later. Nannie B. is sent to live with Aunt Mary.

Little Nannie B's life will be shaped by the loss of her mother.

After my mother's death in 2001, I determine to find out more about this mysterious woman about whom no one spoke during my mother's life. In spring of 2012, I visit her grave in a small Primitive Baptist church graveyard in Madison County, Alabama. Months later, after a year or so of online research, I track down Grandmother Chandler's second cousin, Helen, whose grandmother, Mary Russell, took my mother in for three years.

I speak with Helen by phone two times before she dies in the spring of 2013. Her voice is strong. She does not hesitate to tell me stories about my mother, who played piano for Helen's father. She loves to tell me passed-down stories about my grandmother. She is glad to hear from me, to have "found" this part of her family.

During one conversation Helen says, "I may have some buttons from your grandmother's clothing in my sewing box. I'll look for them and let you know." What an extraordinary thought, that I could actually touch and hold buttons that had been fastened to Nannie B. Russell's clothes.

I email Helen's granddaughter, my third cousin Dixie, whom I also found during my ancestral search. Dixie promises to look for family photos and share them with me. She also says she will look especially for the buttons.

A week later, she emails me an amusing story about climbing over some loose pipes in Helen's bathroom, dressed in a short skirt, to reach the sewing basket. She took the basket to Helen, who found two buttons in flower shapes fashioned from a pearl-like material.

Dixie sends me a photo on Facebook. They are resting in the palm of her left hand. The photo is a bit fuzzy. They are sweet flowers, like mother-of-pearl. One of the buttons is chipped.

I do not care. I want them.

A few days later, a box arrives via UPS. Inside, the buttons are wrapped in bubble wrap, each taped carefully all the way around.

I open them in my living room when my husband is out of the house. I want to be alone. This is an encounter with Nannie B. Russell. She touched these, and perhaps she sewed them herself on a dress or a blouse.

I walk upstairs to the guest room where some of my mother's personal items are stored in a drawer from the dresser she inherited from my step-grandmother whom we called "Big Mama." Eleven years ago when my mother died, I sat on the floor of another guest room in a different house, pieces of my mother's daily life spread out on the floor. I cried as I cleaned her hairbrush, put a small bit of hair into a plastic bag. *What if I cloned her? I thought. Would she be the same woman, born and raised in a modern time? Would she look and act the same? Would she somehow carry the same sorrow and loss she suffered in birth?*

In the guest room, I open the dresser drawer, which smells of old wood and lacquer, and I take out the bag holding my mother's hair. I open the box with Nannie B. Russell's buttons, and I weave the tendrils of hair around the buttons so that the hair embraces them.

*This is the first time you've touched in 107 years, I say aloud.*

Suddenly I feel light-headed, weak and nauseous. I put the buttons and hair into the box, put them away, and lie down on the bed. It's around 11 a.m. Not even lunch time yet.

As I rest, I picture Nannie B. Russell struggling to give birth. It is July 12, 1905. I remember my own struggle in childbirth, sweat running down my face and in my scalp, pressure on my back relieved only by pushing the baby out.

There she is, perhaps with her mother, Delilah Jane Chapman Russell, or perhaps one of her sisters, Viney, Mary, or Sarah. Her husband Robert, well over six feet tall, is in the next room, perhaps pacing, perhaps sitting still and wringing his hands.

Her sister or mother lay cold, wet cloths on her face while a grim-faced doctor dips rags into hot water in the corner of the room.

She pushes again, and again, gasping in between pushes, her face red and hot with the struggle. Finally the baby comes out. It's a girl. She is small, maybe seven pounds, wrinkled and crying. The doctor wipes the bloody mucous off of her struggling body and hands the baby to her mother. Robert Chandler enters the room, trying to restrain his excitement, his eyes tearful and his face as red as his wife's.

Nannie B. Russell Chandler looks at her daughter.

"We'll name her for me, Robert? She says her statement as a question. Robert answers,

"Of course, dear. And she will be as beautiful as you are. And she will play the piano and sing, just as you do, to lighten my heart."

Nannie B. smiles, and then she seems to go to sleep. The doctor takes the baby from her arms quickly and gives her to one of the sisters who moves close to the lit fire. Suddenly it seems cold in the room, even in the middle of summer.

"Robert, you must leave. Now!"

"What is it? Is she ill?"

"Leave the room!"

For the next hour, the doctor works to staunch the blood as it seeps from Nannie B's body. He cannot stop it. He cannot wake her.

Finally, he goes to the door and calls Robert.

"I'm sorry. Your wife is slipping away. I can do nothing more to help her."

The tall father kneels by the bed and holds his wife's hand, prays for her to a god he hopes will listen, a god who, from his Primitive Baptist faith, condemns no one to hell, not even the uninitiated baby.

Soon, the room is silent. The woman's breaths that had come so urgently during the birthing have ceased. The only sound is the weeping of the father.

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The buttons are where they belong. Mother and daughter have been apart far too long.

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*Nancy Owen Nelson attended Birmingham-Southern College and Auburn University, where she earned a Ph.D. She teaches college English and has published poetry and prose in books and anthologies. She is currently researching and writing a memoir about three generations her Alabama family -- her grandmother, her mother, and herself. [nelnan@aol.com](mailto:nelnan@aol.com)*  
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## PRAYERS UP, BLESSINGS DOWN

Tyler Dennis - 2012 HACKNEY AWARD WINNER

Evangeline is etched Corinthian leather with  
inky, eggplant gums.

Eddie'd sweat out a perm by noon without  
a wide-brimmed Mr. Jones on her head.

Evangeline has hair like Lola Falana's  
best wig, but wears a pillbox in confederacy.

They play Costly Colors after Word, praisin'  
God and Madam C.J. Walker in equal measure.

"There's a difference between singin' and dyin' --  
somebody oughta let Patti know."

Eddie says *Amen*, puts the needle to  
Dionne Warwick instead.

If one has a brick of biscuit, a spit of sawmill gravy,  
she sure will share with her sister-in-Christ.

Eddie's hands, lithe as Josephine Baker's pet  
cheetah, scramble the deck.

A warm-hearted pepper box pistol stands  
between them. Referee.

In the corner, a fat man sits Indian style.  
Godless clay. A kitchen floor turned cranberry bog.

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*Tyler Dennis was born and raised in Rainsville, Alabama, the self-dubbed "sock mill capital of the world." A senior at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, Tyler likes to write poetry and fiction whenever he isn't making or boxing pizzas.*

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## COUNTING SHEEP AT THE FIRE STATION

Ben Thompson

It's three a.m. and there's blood on my boots. I can feel it sticking to the floor each time I take a step. The hose hanging out back is what we use to wash away stuff like this but I'm too tired now. I just want a couple of hours.

I empty my pockets and put everything into my hat so I'll be able to find it all again in the dark. My boots are staying on. If I take them off I know we'll get a call. I lie down at an angle and let them dangle over the side of the mattress.

Over the partition wall the rest of the guys are snoring. It sounds like they're running a sawmill. When one man snores in, another whistles out. As usual, I'm the last to fall asleep. I rub my eyes and remember our last call: empty Steel Reserve cans scattered across the coffee table, their tops peppered with cigarette ashes. I can hear the man breathing through spit and gritted teeth. I see him, dying on his back in the kitchen, linoleum peeling up in one corner.

He was on the third floor. We strapped him to a board and carried him down, lifting him up over our heads to make the turn at every landing. It was like moving a couch. All his neighbors were watching. We had to push them back to shut the doors of the truck.

The man had taken a gunshot wound to the head but he was still breathing. I looked into his eyes with my penlight. The pupils had blown and blacked out all color. His body was trying to live but his brain had already left the building. No miracle, only science.

In the emergency room a row of nursing students was waiting against the wall. They all wanted to see the hole between his eyebrow and ear. When we rolled past they all stretched their necks to see. I heard one say to another, "I thought it would be bigger."

Lying back on my pillow, I feel the dried sweat in my hair. Summer has arrived. I put one hand down the front of my pants and rest it there. I don't grab or scratch; it just feels good to break the seal created by the elastic band of my underwear, a small distraction from my collection of nighttime dead that lines up in chronological order. The first died while

racing his motorcycle. He was cruising along around 140 when one of two cars on that stretch of road made a left, creating a barricade he could not avoid. His motorcycle bucked him off, sending him through the air for half a block. It was there he met the other car, driving the speed limit, in the opposite direction. He hit her windshield and splattered, just like a bug.

I roll over on my side and find that sweet spot on the mattress. I pull my hand from inside my pants and tuck that arm between my knees. My head sinks to the correct depth on my pillow. A fan would help.

The second one died in her bed. No one had seen her for weeks, but they didn't call till they smelled the odor. Flies gathered on the outside of her windows, separated by a single pane of glass from reaching their rotten paradise. I was the rookie, so they sent me in alone to look. I took a breath and followed the stampede of flies buzzing in from behind me.

The third, fourth and fifth were all found naked in a pile. We tiptoed around bullet casings trying to get a look without disturbing the evidence. The police were all gathered in the yard. The family stood in a half crescent, the shortest in front, the tallest in back, and cried in the street.

These boots are coming off, I decide. I peel them off and let each drop to the floor. The air seeps through my sweat-soaked socks and my eyelids begin to relax.

The bell rings.

I reach through the darkness for my hat and empty the contents into my pockets. My feet slide into the humidity of each awaiting boot. Walking towards the door, I feel my boot soles trying to stick to the floor, each step like peeling up a Band-Aid. Maybe I'll rinse it off when we get back. It's only a little bit of blood. And besides, there's plenty more where that came from.

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*Ben Thompson is a firefighter assigned to Birmingham's west side. His work has appeared previously in Birmingham Arts Journal [benthompson11@yahoo.com](mailto:benthompson11@yahoo.com)*

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## INDIGESTION

Klarissa Fitzpatrick

Hooper often had gas, so it was a godsend we were on a boat. Office hours with him had been bilious, but at least now we had a deal: All gas passed on deck.

We were below, looking at undulations of sonar readout when I heard the first faint grumble.

I peered at him in trepidation. We had had burritos for dinner. He caught my glance.

"What?" he exclaimed. "That wasn't me."

"Well, it wasn't me," I retorted, raising my eyebrows.

We were here to map, me -- the reedy, red-cheeked and -nosed blonde -- and Hooper, the browned professor. We'd been on the boat for two weeks, taking mud samples from the ocean floor, watching sonar pick up the waves of the sea's topography -- its bathymetry. The storm, Sandy, had redistributed the ocean floor, and we were here to track the changes, the sand's new intestinal undulations.

Living on a boat was mostly fun. Hooper's years of bachelorhood meant he could sear a steak, and my mother's pancakes hadn't failed us yet. But the close quarters meant a few awkward run-ins -- Hooper was still apologizing for walking in on me in the bathroom. And if you've got indigestion like Hooper's, compromises must be made.

Another growl, but this time the deck vibrated beneath our feet, and the sonar jumped.

"Definitely not me," Hooper said, bending over the computer.

The noise came again; too high to be a grumble, it vibrated like a wookie. The sonar fritzed. The boat, a cramped 28-footer, swayed noticeably.

Hooper looked at me, his deep, marbled blue eyes wide.

"Whales," he whispered.

We tumbled to the door, scrumming on the way, our puffers crinkling. Out on the deck, the frigid air snuck under my collar, carrying

the creaking of the whales with it. We pressed against the rail, but couldn't see below the black, wind-chopped waves.

We could hear their mumbling wails though, echoing up through the waves like a tremendous tummy, growling and finicky.

"I told you it wasn't me," Hooper shouted over wind and waves and wails.

Suddenly the water broke apart, two white foamy rushes parting across a black, barnacled back. The looping, wobbling song tingled in my parted, frigid lips as I leaned over the side. The whale's back arched, and suddenly a putrid, warm gush of water burst from its blowhole. The water struck us with the force of paintballs, hard enough to bruise. The stench of sun-warmed, tinned sardines hung in oily particles around us.

"I don't believe it," I shouted. "It smells worse than you!"

I tilted my head back and laughed, marine vibrations in the soles of my feet extending up and out my vocal cords.

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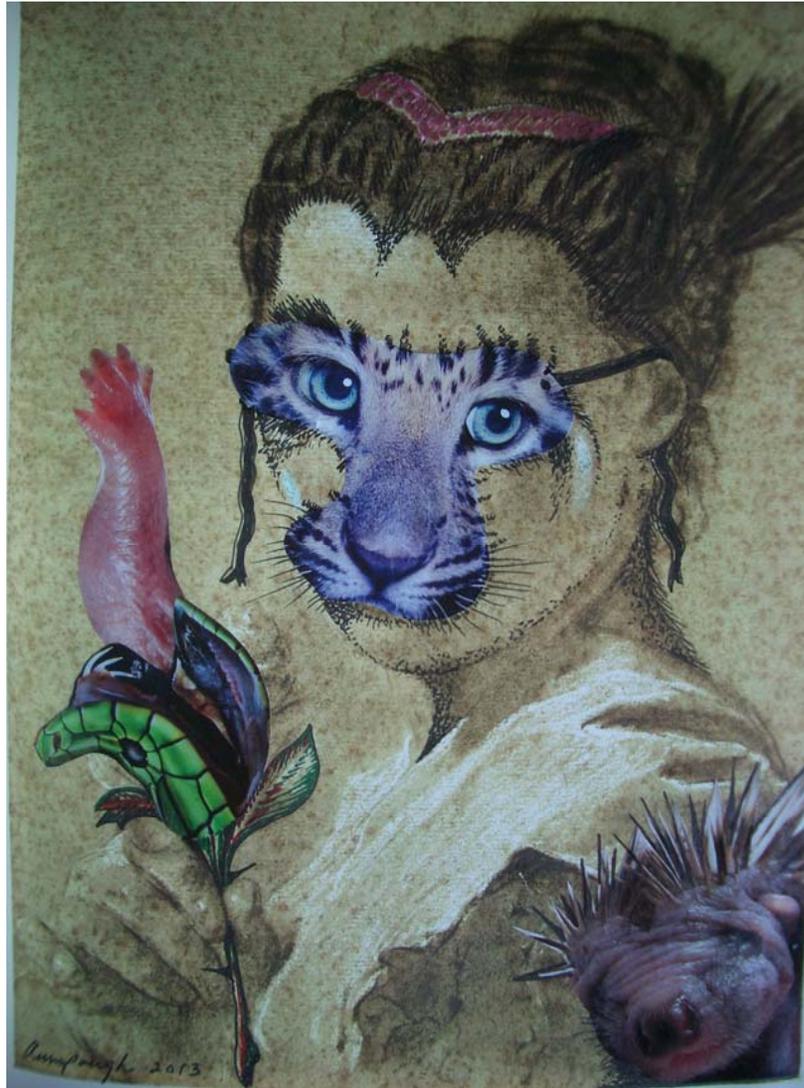
*Klarissa Fitzpatrick is a 20-something student living in Texas with her kitten, Crazy Willie. Her work is forthcoming in contemporary haibun online.*

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**"Fiction is like a spider's web,  
attached ever so lightly perhaps, but  
still attached to life at all corners."**

**--Virginia Woolf**



**ANDREA DEL SARTO AND ME**

Dick Aunspaugh

Mixed Media collage, charcoal and glue

8" x10"

*Dick Aunspaugh, a native of Dunedin, Florida, retired from teaching art at Young Harris College in Young Harris, Georgia. When not making art, his other passion is kayaking. [aunspaugh1196@windstream.net](mailto:aunspaugh1196@windstream.net)*

## THE WAMPUS CAT

Steve Edmondson

We was having a hard time getting me ready. The list said I had to bring four eggs, two tomatoes, four potatoes, some collard greens, four ears of corn -- roasin' ears, we called them -- some beans or peas, and any other fresh things from our garden. Then I was to bring some sliced ham or bacon or cured pork. We had some of this stuff, but I wanted to get it exactly right. Ma said we could get close, but I wanted it just like called for.

I was supposed to bring a sheet, a pillow and a blanket or quilt. The cabins would be furnished with some sort of mattress pad. We didn't have a pillow that I could bring, and my sheet was a make-to-do sort of thing -- four opened and bleached fertilizer sacks sewed into a large square. I had half an old homemade quilt, and that had to do.

Then I was to bring pajamas which I for sure didn't have, and a change of socks and underwear and extra pants and shirts. What these camp folks didn't know was this was going to be about everything I owned as far as clothes, not counting my Sunday pants and shirt. Well, I did have a shabby, too tight winter coat but that warn't called for.

Ma got all my stuff bagged up in a brown paper bag and a clean flour sack with the printed label of Sunny Morning Flour still showing. She assured me the other kids would be about in the same shape as me. I took that to mean scared, scraggly and smelly, and dirt poor. We were to catch a ride with neighbor Mr. Copeland over to the 4-H Club camp by Cold Springs. Cousin Phillip's bags of stuff looked about like mine, maybe smaller. Turned out they warn't so particular about getting it exactly right.

I had never been there to the camp but knew sort of where it was. We was riding in back of a pickup truck, and when Mr. Copeland turned off the paved road and went up a piece, we saw the camp ahead in the woods. Looked like four or five smaller cabins and a big log cabin, with a big meeting room. There was lots of kids about, unloading, turning in their food bags, and getting assigned to cabins.

The cabins was really bare, with about six or eight double-decker wooden bunk beds, clear of anything except dust and spider webs. I didn't see no mattress pad. We picked out our bunks together, Phillip on bottom and me on top, and then headed back down to the main building for the meeting with everybody at four o'clock. Nobody had a watch; I guessed they would just holler for us.

There was one grown man and four or five older boys that was going to basically be in charge, and they laid out the plans for the four days. We was going to do crafts there in the big room a morning or two, more if it rained. We was going to learn about how to farm better, and we was going to have to listen to a speech about family and patriotism and education. I guess that is where the 4-H Club thing came from -- *head, hands, heart*...well, there must have been another H word to make it 4-H. I can't rightly remember right now what it was.

Amongst what seemed to me like a lot of planned activities, we had time each afternoon to just lay around the big cabin or play in the woods, or maybe try our hands at crafts, something new to me. At home, most everything we did was like crafts, making something out of nothing, because that was the only way to have it. Ma sewing our own shirts and pants, brother building a chair, me drawing pictures, sister making a corn-shuck doll. It was just the way we had of doing things, not knowing we was really good at *crafts and stuff*. We was just trying to survive.

After that first meeting where they told us what all we was going to be doing, we were to gather behind the big cabin where a cook was fixin' supper for us. There was a big fire pit with something roasting over it. A big pot had tea in it and smaller pots held some of our beans and greens and corn, the vittles we had brought. There was tin cups and plates and spoons. No forks, for that was for later when we became sophisticated. Just spoons and plates and tin cups. At home we had at least fruit jars for tea and water, and maybe one china cup for Ma and her coffee. Still, these tin utensils and an open fire made for an exciting event.

The biggest thing of interest at that first supper was the cook. He was a large man, with a big belly and a big smile showing a mouthful of gleaming teeth. He was jolly and entertaining and fun and had on a big white cap. He seemed to like us and like what he was doing. As he cooked he kept up a chatter of interesting stuff -- about farming, and teachers and women and working and being rich and poor at the same time. I wondered about that one.

One time he leaned over toward Cousin Phillip and asked him in a conspiratorial voice, "Does you know what a *Wampus Cat* is?" Phillip didn't know. I sure didn't. He looked around at the ring of us boys surrounding his cooking domain.

"Does any of y'all know what a *Wampus Cat* is?" We all kinda looked at each other and at him and nobody spoke.

"Well, now, ain't that something. Don't nobody knows what a *Wampus Cat* is. Well, I'se a'gonna tell y'all for sho before you go home."

Dern! We warn't going to find out tonight. What really caught me though, was he was a Black man. Living mid-century in rural North Alabama, at the very place where the Appalachian and Smoky Mountains peter out and flow into the Tennessee Valley. I had never seen a Black Man up close. Once when big brother drove me and Ma and Sister to Decatur, trying to find Pa and his girlfriend, we had seen Black folks on the streets downtown. As we was driving around looking for the boarding house where Pa stayed during the week while he was working there in Decatur, in "the valley at public works," Sister and I started a game, "Count the Black people!"

"I see one! No, I see two! You didn't see that one by the redlight!"

"Lookit, that one on that there pore mule."

After a couple of minutes Ma caught on to what we was doing, "Y'all hush your mouth right now! Don't talk like that!"

I remembered something about my Ma writing to the editor of our weekly paper. Some folks said she was taking up for Black folks when she knew better and oughta kept her mouth shut.

I knew Uncle Felix had worked with Black men in Akron, Ohio at a Borg Warner plant, and hadn't thought nothing about it. Uncle Felix liked most everybody, even me. He talked about a nice Black man that was a good mechanic, and helped him work on his Buick Super Straight 8. Before that, I didn't know that Black folks could be mechanics. All I knowed about was cooks and ditch diggers and field hands. Now remember, I didn't know none of this firsthand.

Late each afternoon at camp was special as we gathered around Willie the Cook and watched and listened. New stories, funny talk and dern good cooking. Leroy from Falkville said all Black folks was good cooks and cooked for a lot of rich white folks. He offered as proof something we all were supposed to know, that all Black women was fat because they cooked so good for their family. We all nodded in agreement, though I wasn't sure just how I knew that. I guess Leroy knowed about Black folks more than I did.

The crafts stuff got old pretty quick, and the hiking trails warn't much more than my walking trail across the creek to where we looked for arrowheads. The speeches by the main man got old after the first one. Our last full day there, me and Phillip and Leroy and Darrell, whose daddy had got killed by a bull last summer, went exploring. Down past the full-of-mud swimming hole was a small cabin, barely visible in the woods. We walked down to it, and around it, but couldn't see anything inside through

the cracks. Leroy popped a rotten board out of the wall, and then we all pulled another one down and there was room to crawl in, and crawl in we did. It looked just like some junk stuff, boards and rope and a shovel with its handle broken off.

Then over in a corner was a little wooden crate, with a rotting cardboard box beside it. There was some kind of sparkly looking stuff look like it had leaked out of the wood box and dried on its edges. Kind of looked like sugar crystals. We was curious about that so we pried the top off. For a moment we were puzzled and then I recognized the box was full of sticks of dynamite, lined up straight. Must have been 20 sticks or more, each wrapped in what looked like heavy, brown, waxed paper, about 10-inch long sticks maybe an inch and a half in diameter, with the paper crimped and folded in at each end.

I had seen dynamite before, as Pa had used it to blast stumps out of a patch of land reclaimed from the original forest. Big brothers had used dynamite sort of like real big firecrackers after good firecrackers got outlawed because they was too dangerous. And Hershel Smith, that dug our water well at our new house while Pa was still home, had used dynamite a bunch of times, blasting through the hard blue stone underlying the dirt and sandrock of our farm. He had found a little water stream at 19 feet, and dug on down a couple more feet so's the water would flow free, he said. This dynamite must have been left over from years back when the highway people had chewed a roadway down the rocky hillsides to the Valley.

A case of dynamite would have wiped out the cabin and me and my friends and perhaps everything in a 100-foot radius. We were scared, not because of the extent of the danger from old dynamite, but for fear of getting caught. We knew we had to get out and never mention this to anyone. Leroy picked up the cardboard box. It was full of detonating caps, to 'shoot the dynamite.' These would have used fuses, and not the more modern electric caps, so we assumed they were safe since we had no fuses. He grabbed a handful to take with us. Before we got back to the big cabin, we hid our blasting caps behind our cabin and went on to supper.

We kept up bugging Uncle Willie about that Wampus Cat. Was it a bobcat from the nearby woods? Was it a wildcat? My great grandmother had written about panthers in the forest when they first settled the land up on Sand Mountain but I don't reckon nobody had ever seen one.

"Now come here, little white boys, and I is a'gonna tell you about Wampus Cats. You don't never see one except after midnight when's a full moon is about, and you'll a'hear it a'wailing for its partner. Don't mess

with it, because a Wampus Cat is awfully mean, and youse don't want to tangle with it. People used to say a Wampus Cat is half cat and half woman, and meaner than both!"

We all were quiet, wondering if this was true, what it was all about, why we oughta be a'skeered of Wampus Cats.

One boy toward the back of the circle eased forward and asked, "Uncle Willie, how we gonna know it's a Wampus Cat?"

"Now ain't you the smart one? You see a cat under a full moon after midnight." He continued to laugh, now big belly laughs. "You see that cat, look close, but be keerful. You'll know when you see a Wampus Cat. They be a black cat with a white ass! Now you white boys go home and be careful you don't aggravate no Wampus Cat. They be one mean cat!"

We all looked at each other, not sure of what to say, but maybe giggled a little. Then Uncle Willie, now stern of voice, "Now don't y'all go tellin' nobody Uncle Willie done told you about Wampus Cats! Dat be bad luck, so promise me, boys, you don't go a'talkin about Wampus Cats and Uncle Willie. Bad luck. Always is. Bad luck!" He sounded real serious.

After pork chops and fried potatoes and collard greens and all the banana pudding we could eat, we mosey'd back to our cabin. We lay up in our hard bunks and talked for a while, quite happy now our last night at camp. 4-H Club had turned out to be all right, and maybe, just maybe, I'd take part during the year and come back next year.

Then Leroy came up with an idea that caught on: "It must be about midnight now. Let's go outside and see if they's a full moon, and if they is, go looking for a Wampus Cat! Reckon there is really such a thing?"

Darrell chimed in, "Let's go, right now!"

We all quietly put our shoes back on and eased out, so as not to show our hand. It was nearly, but not quite, a full moon. Leroy allowed as how that was close enough; a cat wouldn't know the difference no way, so we began our search, walking about the camp. There might just be a Wampus Cat somewheres near.

We soon knowed we was getting nowhere, so Phillip said we might as well go back to bed and be done with Wampus Cats. Warn't no such thing no way. Uncle Willie was just funnin' us we reckoned. Still, it had been fun learning about such cats from Uncle Willie. He was fun; about the best Black man I had ever known. And yeah, the only one also.

Just before we got back, Leroy motioned for us to follow him around back of the cabin to where he had stashed his blasting caps.

"Let's get us a couple of these caps and go back up in the woods a

little ways and smash them with a rock. Them dumb city boys in our cabin will think it's somebody shooting at them. We'll put a real skeer in 'em! We'll tell 'em a big mean black man shot at us and chased us away from his Wampus Cat!"

Leroy was almost beside himself with excitement, so we all agreed. We all went back up in the woods a piece to find a flat rock to lay a cap on and another flat rock to hit it with to make it blow. Leroy was explaining, "It oughta be about like a big fire cracker! This is a'gonna be fun!" He found the right rock, and in the soft gentle moonlight laid a dynamite blasting cap on its smooth surface, and then took another similar but smaller rock to pound it.

"Watch out, fellers! This is a'gonna be big!" And with that he smashed down on the cap. There was a small explosion, more like the dynamite we feared than the firecracker we thought to expect. A flash of bright light from the exploding cap, an echoing explosion through the woods, and then Leroy hollering: "I'm hit, I'm hit bad. It done blowed my hand off! I'm bleeding like a stuck hog!"

We were all terrified. Maybe Leroy was going to die! Maybe we needed to call a doctor, or the main man at the camp. We grabbed Leroy and held him and made him show us his hand. It was bleeding, but it was all there. He wiggled his fingers when Darrell told him to. I took off my shirt and Darrell wiped the blood from Leroy's hand. It was still bleeding. Darrell was about two years older than the rest of us, so he knew more what to do. He told him to wrap the shirt around his hand and shut up crying and wailing while we figured out what to do.

We was afraid to go tell the main man. We thought maybe if Leroy kept his hand wrapped up it would be all right and heal quick. The bleeding seemed to stop while his hand was wrapped up so we decided to go back to the cabin, sneak in and try to sleep. Leroy wanted somebody to help him but wouldn't let us do anything or tell anybody. I just felt downright rotten inside.

We sneaked in and crawled in our bunks. I wished I had a'stayed home and never come to this 4-H Club camp and nothing like this would ever have happened. But Leroy made it through the night. A couple of times we heard him crying a little, and Phillip reached over to pat him and tell him it was going to be all right.

Morning came and we got up and Leroy was still alive, a little surprise to me. His hand hurt real bad he said, but it looked a lot better. We went to breakfast and we helped him with his plate while he kept the cut hand in his pocket, still wrapped in part of my sleeping shirt. He

looked pale and didn't eat anything at all hardly. It was easy to guess why. We helped him sack up his stuff, and soon it was time to go.

"What you gonna tell your Pa when you get home? How you gonna explain what happened to you? Are you gonna get a whupping for it?"

I knew I would if it had a'been me in the same situation.

Leroy "looked pore in the mouth," as my grandfather might have said.

Then Leroy took a deep breath, "I got it figured out. That big old mean black cook found the caps and gave them to me and told me how to shoot them like firecrackers. I didn't know no better, and I was a'feered to tell anybody what happened because he done threatened me if I told anybody. Y'all all heard him threaten us!"

I thought for a minute about the harmless tale of the Wampus Cat and the caution not to tell anybody he had told us such a story. Being a Black man in the 50's in rural north Alabama, his fears, even of such a simple situation, were well founded. Now we were conspiring to prove his fear on a solid basis.

I thought to myself, now this ain't right. Leroy's telling a big lie. It ain't like that. Yet, I said nothing. I knew Ma would have expected me to speak up, but I didn't. We were just too scared, too afraid of Leroy, too afraid of our situation, our fears, ourselves.

Darrell spoke up, as we were ready to say goodbye: "Do you think your Pa will believe you?"

Leroy, now the brave Leroy, spoke. "Yeah, he'll believe me. He knows about Black folks. He'll know Willie put me up to it. Black folks is like that."

I backed up, dropped my head, hiding my shame. Now Leroy continued, with more confidence: "Anybody oughta know that. Black folks is just like that."

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*Steve 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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## EASTER EVE WITH ELTON

Nancy Jo Maples

Benny plays pinball in the sky  
with the wizard, wearing diamonds.  
Lucy's by their side.  
Mars ain't the kind of place  
To raise a kid. Outer space is lonely.  
Easter Eve with Elton.

Tiny Dancer misses Rocket Man.  
Rocket Man misses Earth and his Wife.  
She, a seamstress for the band.  
He, a music man.  
Blue jean babies and Jesus Freaks  
And Suzy, ah, she can rock all night.  
We create the circle of Life  
'til lightning strikes.  
Sorry seems to be the hardest word...  
don't let the sun to go down on us.

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*Nancy Jo Maples writes in Lucedale, Mississippi. [nancyjomaples@aol.com](mailto:nancyjomaples@aol.com)*  
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**"A poet's job is not to write about  
love. A poet's job is not to write about  
flowers. A poet must write about the  
plight and pain of the people."**

**--Matiullah Turab**



## SUNDAY MORNING

Acrylic on Canvas  
60" x 48"

*Lillie C. Minnifield is a self-taught artist working from a small studio in her Birmingham, Alabama home. She uses a variety of media, painting on anything that will hold paint. Lillie has been painting and drawing since childhood. "To me, art is addictive, it's in my soul, and it drives me." [minnilillies@msn.com](mailto:minnilillies@msn.com)*

## LOVE LETTERS

Ashwini Gopal

As he walked into the lane of our bustling colony, he stood out amongst the crowd in his khaki uniform. This had to be a policeman, we said. The younger children scattered and ran while the older ones giggled. My mother said, “No, no he is just a postman, and he brings us letters. But remember he does know the police so if you are naughty...” Oh, I should have known, the unkempt hair, the Gandhi *topishifted* on sides, that’s not how the policeman in my textbook looked.

The next time he came, children observed as he dropped packets of anticipation in blue, brown or white. We would receive these sometimes. Most were boring office work for my father but sometimes my grandmother would write us a letter, or we would receive birthday cards.

I wished I could write letters; draw patterns in ink and send far away to someone who knew what those meant. Finally, when I was nine I learned how to write a letter. The teacher taught us how to invite our friends to the most glamorous event of the year, every year, the birthday.

Who shall I write the letter to if not to my friend Ria? We used to be called twins. I found it hard to believe, her delicate stature against my bulky athletic self. When I asked Chicha about this, she said, “Your plaits look the same.” Seeing that I wasn’t really satisfied with the answer, added, “oh, and your shoes look the same too.”

After reaching home, I could hardly wait to get to the important task. I, being the one who had to be prodded into doing the homework, quite surprised my mother.

I would have liked an authentic postcard but for the burst of enthusiasm a page torn from the rough notebook sufficed. After the address came the content which promised quite a ‘bash.’ But just words won’t do, there had to be some colours. So out came the sketch pens and the letter got an artistic touch by an attempt at a self-portrait. Deep within (as deep as could be possible at that age), I knew how it looked but I thought my friend would know.

As soon as I thought it looked okay, I ran to the playground and handed it over to her, all smiles. She was a year younger than I and was quite surprised at the colourful paper thrust into her hands.

She opened and read through it. "But your birthday was just last month?"

"I know," I said, "this is for the next birthday." She rolled her eyes at the boy next to her. Then she smiled and said, "Okay."

I thought something was wrong but she said "okay" and that was encouraging.

After that day, I would write a letter to her every day adding a line or two or adding a new drawing. Instead of handing it over to her, I assumed a Santa-like secretiveness and slid it under their door after playing. This was incredible, to write the letter and to deliver it myself. This went on for a week. Surprisingly, she never mentioned those letters, ever. Did she not find them?

Then on a Saturday, I came home early and wrote the letter, and instead of "posting" it I thought I would hand them over to her and ask her about the previous letters.

I was sitting on the building *katta* when I saw her coming. She was in her uniform, carrying her school bag. She came up to me and opened her bag. I could see some colourful pages tucked into her bag. I looked at her, my skin prickling all over in anticipation, and hands ready to hand over the day's letter. But before I could realise what was happening, I found something blowing in my face. When I opened my eyes I found foliage of my own letters at my feet. My face grew moist with sweat and tears. A group of kids standing by fell into rolls of laughter.

I could think of nothing. I collected the letters and moved home. I spent the whole evening going through each and every letter trying to find out what exactly might have hurt my friend, but found nothing. Evening play suddenly became unbearable.

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*Ashwini Muley is cofounder of an eZine called Wordweavers India. She has a Master's Degree in English Literature and a keen sense of what makes a good reading but whether she can write, she is in the process of finding out.*

***ashwini.gopal.mail@gmail.com***

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## SISTER EASTER

Jerri Beck

1. My sister has lost 40 thousand grams.
2. Nonetheless, she bakes a ham.
3. Are pigs possessed by spirits demonic?
4. Is a BLT ironic?
5. My cat demands tuna.
6. I comply.
7. Do doubts of Thomas still apply?
8. What next can anyone deny?
9. Upon whom do we now rely?
10. Will the dogs have ham tomorrow?
11. Will the hungry live in sorrow?
12. If a throng should crowd the temple, what beggars will the rich men trample?
13. Let's feed a crowd with fish and bread.
14. Hide deviled eggs once all are fed.

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*Jerri Beck grew up on the Qualla Boundary, better known as the Cherokee Indian Reservation in North Carolina. She is a "white Indian" and bridged the Native American and white communities as a child. Beck has won national recognition for her writing, including a Hackney Award for poetry. Her most recent book of poetry, tribal markings, reflects her lifelong attempt to assimilate white and Native American cultures. [aphra@att.net](mailto:aphra@att.net)*

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**"What's right is what's left if you do everything else wrong."**

**--Robin Williams**

## THE ROAR OF THE MOTOR, THE THRILL OF THE HILLS

Jim Reed

I'm off my rocker today, and I'd like to stay off it as long as I can. The ol' rocking chair don't got me yet, but sometimes I can feel it beckoning.

Looking in the mirror is kind of awkward to a geezer my age, since how I feel deep down inside doesn't in any way match up with the image I see reflected back at me.

In memory ever re-booted, I'm still a teenager back in the village of Tuscaloosa, way back before you were even thought of.

Back then, the roads are two-lane blacktops, the terms *fast food* and *convenience store* don't exist, a screened-in porch is the only air conditioning in most homes, movie theatres pour *real* butter on their popcorn, and any kind of wheels you can conjure up provide the best and cheapest thrills imaginable. My elders weave tales of *their* teen years -- all about how the only way to get a reluctant date to put her arms around you is to take her for a spin over Thrill Hills.

That gets my attention: How to get a pretty girl to hug you.

Back then, Thrill Hills is the stretch of winding road between my home on 15th Street and the east side of town, near the Veterans' Hospital. The hills are closely packed, and if you speed up while cresting one of them, you'll begin a descent so fast that a near-weightless state occurs. The stomach turns, the roller coaster you momentarily pilot almost leaves the asphalt, and your companion screams, grabs hold of you and hangs on for dear life, whether or not she feels so inclined.

I think about Thrill Hills for years until, one day, I get a chance to propel myself and a date along the route. It works. If lucky, it might occasionally lead to some smooching, but that mostly is just in my mind, not hers.

Many decades later, I drive to Tuscaloosa to find the Thrill Hills stretch. It exists no more. The hills have been "developed" and smoothed down and multi-paved, so that there is no real leap of death. The Thrill is gone. What do teenagers do for cheap thrills nowadays? I don't want to know, thank you.

One other hill in Tuscaloosa has disappeared, too. Let me describe it to you.

Back then, Downtown Tuscaloosa and the City of Northport are connected by a giant Erector Set of a metal bridge spanning the meandering Black Warrior River. Going over that bridge from T Town to Northport, you get ready to descend a long hill. These days, it, too, has been smoothed down, the bridge demolished, and a streamlined, multi-laned overpass replaces it. But back then, making the return trek from river-level Northport back into the City is a real challenge.

Late at night, having finished my midnight shift as a teenaged announcer at WNPT radio on the north bank of the Black Warrior, I board my Cushman motor scooter and prepare to ascend that long, long hill. The Cushman is friction-taped together, and the motor barely runs. But, as my sole source of transportation, it is a thing of beauty. Only problem is, it takes about a mile to work up enough speed to get to the top of that hill. Luckily, it being the wee hours of the morning, there is little traffic, so I head north for a stretch, u-turn toward the bridge, and accelerate to the limits of the motor. I usually make it on the first try, but now and then, if forced to stop or slow down, the process has to be repeated.

So, most of my teenage thrills are free...the thrill of soaring over hills with a girl my age, the thrill of conquering the Northport hill several times a week, and the additional motor scooter thrill that only motorscooterists know about. Asking someone you just met to take a ride with you cuts through weeks of excruciation dating. Do you know a quicker way to get a girl to wrap herself around you, squeeze tight, and yell, "Faster! Faster!"?

Well?

Nor do I

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*Jim Reed is curator of the Museum of Fond Memories at Reed Books and author of the weekly blog: <http://redclaydiary.com>*

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## THE MESSENGER

Frank Dawson

If I could just get you to listen to me for a moment, I believe I could clear up a few things. In fact, I've needed an opportunity like this, someone to talk with, for quite a while now. Please, if you don't mind. Sit. Be comfortable. Splendid. This won't take long, I assure you. I'll get right to the point.

Yes. Well, you see, it all boils down to this. I'm not reaching my potential. I've recognized this for quite some time now. A person in your position can readily see, without need of tests or written interviews, but by a single brief encounter such as this, that my full range of talents has not been utilized. Pardon my hands. They are filthy. I've been working on a project. It's highly secret. Later, if you have time, I'd like for you to see it. I really shouldn't show it to anyone in its incomplete state, but just this once won't hurt.

Are you a smoker? Go ahead, if you like. It won't bother me. It's been years since I smoked. Over there are some of my other, more complicated designs that are now being sought by several major industries. That one. It's an excellent example of my craft. Pick it up. Examine it. Don't you think it speaks eloquently of my technological ability? Did I hear you say that it's snowing? I love snow. So calming, soothing -- the way it rounds the rough edges of things. One can cover the most squalid community with it and the total, I mean the final, effect is one of wholeness. Snow makes everything look like a Christmas card. It cleans up a filthy yard rather well, don't you think? I wish it would snow more often.

But you haven't got time for weather talk. I'm sorry. All this is probably very boring to you. No doubt you have to hear this kind of chatter several times a day in your work. I think what you do is essential. By the end of the day you must be exhausted. I couldn't do it. I'm afraid I'd grow weary of other persons' insincerity and tell them what I thought. But then, that wouldn't be very diplomatic, would it? Diplomacy is the key word, I'll bet, with you. Did you have to train a long time for this kind of thing? Well, no doubt you did, or you could not hold the job. Competition is fierce, I know. It is with us. Wolves at the door. Ten men in line for my

job every day. Everyone is expendable. My former position is now filled, you know, by some incompetent pup who couldn't be satisfied until he wormed me out. Do I sound bitter? Yes! It is true, I've been awfully upset by what happened. A man works his life away, giving everything to his job, only to come to this. Would you be bitter?

They lied. I have nothing but contempt for the lot of them. My position was sound. If it had not been for a minor incident, I would still be there. You do understand that I've since had several offers of positions with equal responsibility, but because of my present limitations have had to regretfully decline them all? Liars. I've held myself above pettiness and character assassination, only to be victimized by underlings who practice their black arts. Devious patterns of injustice. A web of intrigue and suspicion. Is it getting dark outside? Here, let me turn on this light. Excuse this room. It has its merits, but won't stand close inspection. I appreciate your patience. You must be tired of hearing all this. I'll try to state my case and be done.

Can a man take it from subordinates without retaliation? Who is strong? I'm not the man I was when I started. Even my wife was upset. She'll tell you. Have you spoken with her? Fine woman. Faithful, devoted mother of two splendid boys. It makes me shake to think of them. They stand by me even now. It was international in its scope. My every move was watched. The final trip to Washington tipped me off. Mary, that's my wife, caught it immediately. We looked for electronic devices in the phones and we talked only in hushed tones. It was a friend. My friend. He's now second vice-president. Sold out. International cartel. Bloody business. It's warm in here. They keep the heat too high. I'm dissatisfied with the arrangement. But then, you must know the story -- they take advantage of leaders. Talk behind their backs. I'm surprised anything gets done. Any word from a certain someone for me? I'm supposed to ask. I believe the courier said it would take a month. Say nothing if you are bound to secrecy. I'll understand.

Where was I? No one would understand. Still no one understands. Only you. I'm so glad you've come. It opens a whole new aspect. Only I'm embarrassed for the way I've rambled on. It's certainly not like me. I've always prided myself on certain things. Punctuality. Resourcefulness.

Graciousness. Lice! They are like lice. Infectious. Destructive. Scum! The world will gladly be rid of them. If I could get hold of just one person responsible. Do you notice a certain problem with these lapels? I'm bothered by the constant style changes. But then I see you must by all standards be up to date in your wardrobe. I'm gathering a few capable fellows Saturday noon for cocktails and lunch. If you find it your choice to join us, I'd be most obliged. Will you come? I've noticed you've talked very little. How wise. The inscrutable observer of life! Indifferent to someone else's pain. I suppose you find me amusing? Don't sit in judgment, if you please.

Did you bring a message? I trust I've not waited here in seclusion for nothing! Surely you're not just like the rest. You accepted my hospitality. There must be a message! You're here to find out my secret. Here to spy on my work. You're one of them. I thought I could trust you. I needed someone to share my secret. You brought no message? I can't continue until I get it. I've been told by my superiors not to go on without it. I've been told you would bring it. You will not be allowed to leave unless I receive it.

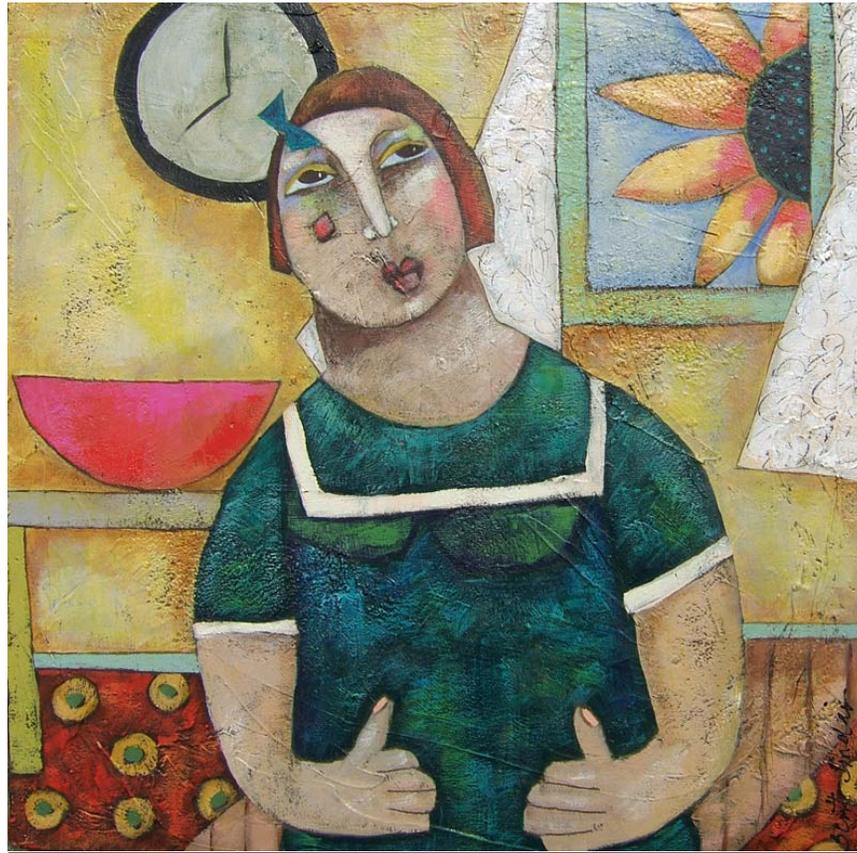
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*Frank Dawson, a native of Leeds, Alabama, writes poetry, essays and short stories, emphasizing parody and satire. He paints, draws and sketches, often using caricature and cartoon. [jdawson@uab.edu](mailto:jdawson@uab.edu)*

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**"Our lives begin to end the day we  
become silent about things that  
matter."**

**--Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**



## **RISE AND SHINE**

Ebeth Scott-Sinclair

9" x 12"

Mixed Media

*North Carolina artist Ebeth Scott-Sinclair interprets old world themes with a unique contemporary southern vision. Her work is characterized by a fresco-like surface texture and an interplay of warm, vibrant color that conjures a world of juxtaposition. She is represented in galleries throughout the southeast.*  
***[www.ebethscottsinclair.com](http://www.ebethscottsinclair.com) [emss@mebtel.net](mailto:emss@mebtel.net)***

## OF ALL THE THINGS THAT I'VE HAD BEFORE

Paul Morris – 2012 HACKNEY AWARD WINNER

I looked at the man as he sat in a daze  
From his head to his feet all covered with age  
I spoke to him gently and clear as I could  
For him to understand I hoped he would  
With all due respect sir I have to say  
That during your lifetime you've seen many a day  
Many things you've seen and you've done  
And known a way of life that's all but gone  
I have but one question to ask of thee  
I beg of you to please tell me  
Of all the things that you've had before  
Tell me the one thing you would want once more  
His eyes went on a journey as if back in time  
On the stool next to him I did climb  
His voice was loud and clear as could be  
This is what he said to me  
Her morning began before the cock crowed  
A good while before the sun arose  
The coal oil lamp guided her way  
For her to begin the things of the day  
Mixing the lard, buttermilk, and flour  
Sometimes using milk about to go sour  
Rolled in a ball and hand patted out  
Then into the oven to rise like a sprout

They would rise to a flake shaped like a dome  
Then out of the oven so hot they would come  
Always full and browned just right  
About that time I would wake from the night  
My eyes would open as I would awake  
Just in time to see day break  
Day after day you I will tell  
Momma's biscuits were the first thing I'd smell  
I'd break them in half and add gravy or jam  
I remember sometimes we even had ham

There were many days when times were lean  
I would eat those biscuits with nothing in between  
As a young man half the world away  
I'd watch the sunrise day after day  
In a place of fighting and some called hell  
Early in the morning momma's biscuits I'd smell  
I wrote in a letter and sent it back home  
That said, Momma, your biscuits, I wish I had some  
Stepping off the bus and walking up the drive  
I smelled a smell that was coming from inside  
I opened the door and what did I see  
But a whole batch of biscuits just made for me  
Happy as a kid with a new ball  
I sat right there until I ate them all  
As time went by day after day  
From a boy to a man I found my way  
I traveled the world both far and wide  
Doing my part for all mankind  
No matter where I laid my head at night  
I knew I would wake to sheer delight  
As sure as the sun rose it never failed  
Momma's biscuits were the first thing I smelled  
Some of things you never forget in life  
Riches to famine and even much strife  
To answer the question you asked of me  
The answer is easy so you will see  
Of all the things that I've had before  
The thing that I've had that I would want once more  
Is I would absolutely love to take  
Another bite of a biscuit that momma used to make

.....  
*Paul Morris is from Tusculumbia Alabama. The idea for this poem came to him when he heard an elderly gentleman say 'Momma ain't here and those biscuits ain't either.'*  
*Paul has been writing since 2007. All of his poems tell a story in rhyme. He looks for good subject matter and writes so they come together step by step making you feel that you are a part of the story. **hayman@hiwaay.net***  
.....

## TRAVELER'S SCROLL

Thomas McConnell - 2012 HACKNEY AWARDWINNER

The Mogao Caves in China's western Dunhuang prefecture constitute a treasure of Buddhist devotional art, important for their murals, sculptures, and architecture. The site lies along the Silk Road, a braid of camel tracks followed by trading caravans plying routes between the ancient Middle Kingdom of China and ports on the Mediterranean and Black Seas and dating from antiquity.

The route was the Internet of its day, a slow but still super information highway along which goods and ideas made their way thousands of miles from their culture of origin. Some caves demonstrate Greek influences, others Hindu. A Bible in Syriac was discovered here.

In about AD 1750 -- for complicated reasons Taoists then dominated the complex of chambers hewn into the cliffside sandstone -- a Taoist monk cleaning a mural in what is now designated by experts Cave 16 collapsed plastered brick to reveal another chamber, afterwards designated Cave 17. Hidden in this forgotten chamber were more than fifty-thousand sacred Buddhist scrolls, the vast majority unique in the world and virtually all remarkably preserved because of conditions in the sealed space. Singular among the finds was one secular scroll in rather poorer condition than the others and purporting to narrate episodes in the life of an anonymous person from an indeterminate time but certainly among the earliest instances of autobiography among those not of high station in the eastern world or any other. Perhaps the scroll is composed of fragments from a diary or (as one Chinese scholar from Xinjiang province has submitted) notes for a memoir.

Stories in the form of legends, sagas, and epics there have been for millennia. The impulse toward autobiography is a relatively new phenomenon. Or so we believed.

Human habitation of this region dates from about twenty-thousand years ago, though we are unsure which ethnicity these people were. We do know that Europloid peoples migrating east inhabited the region, along with other ethnicities, until about 100 BC. The narrator of this scroll, as the reader will see, must be a descendent of this tribe though a very distant successor of the original inhabitants.

We have decided to present the narrative unencumbered with footnotes or other textual apparatus and to allow it to stand alone in a translation that renders this interesting and unique text in its own rhythms and direct prose, hewing as closely as possible to the speaker's rare dialect. Lacunae in the text, arising from the condition of the scroll, have been marked rather than speculatively completed. The translation itself represents the collaboration of many minds and hands.

--The Editors

\* \* \*

TRANSLATION BEGINS: The fort lay open still to the sunset and to the emperor's guards examining the baggage on the camels when the skin drum rapped and all the square fell silent except the braying animals and the officer pronouncing the sentence out of his scroll. The prisoner stood alone facing the line of uniformed cavalry and when the officer had wound his scroll two soldiers came forward on foot without signal and bent up the prisoner's arms behind him and one took a fist of his hair so that the officer could brand the brow between the eyes without interference, the mark that means no gate in the kingdom would ever admit him again. His face winced closed beneath the iron and his skin sizzled like raw sausage but there was no other sound from him. One soldier removed his knife and slit the rope that bound the prisoner's wrists and then the two soldiers turned him west by his stooped shoulders and each with a hand at his back forced him through the port. Six sentries shouldered the gates closed and dropped the beam into place with a hollow sound. The sun flung its last spear through the planks and the square darkened so quickly that if the man had still been within the walls we could not have seen his black hair. In the dome of the sky the cold stars blinked without light and no moon rose.

What was his crime? the Venetian asks.

I say I do not know.

The lighting of torches along the walls carries the square back from the night, walls the color of the sand we stand on. The officer mounts and the line of cavalry heels and raises the dust toward their stable.

The officer did not say?

I did not listen.

The Venetian frowns. Probably smuggling, he says. Jade, or cocoons.

The shadow of the Muscovite comes from the door of the customs tax speaking to his boy, the customs official in the door still clutching the frame of his abacus at his elbow. The boy says, He wants to know where in the Jade Gate Fort a man drinks.

I raise my chin and they follow. At the table I do not sit. The Muscovite spreads his fingers over the boards, speaks. The boy looks up at me. He says for me to say that we have reached the fort. He says it is the first success. He says you must drink with us. Because we have contracted you for the remainder of the journey. It is customary.

The boy looks back to the Muscovite to see if anything more is to be spoken. The Venetian watches me.

I say, I must see to the camels. The journey begins tomorrow.

The Muscovite speaks, the boy looks up. His chin wears its first fur.

He asks what have we been doing these fifty days if not journeying?

Under his robes the Muscovite seems to have lost none of the belly he began with, none of the jowls under his beard.

Tell him you have been riding camels. As I bend at the lintel I turn. Tell him that tomorrow we start across the desert in the sun because we have lost the moon. Tell him that tomorrow we may begin to die.

\* \* \*

When the Muscovite's boy asks I show him that under the desert there is another world. Every three days we stop and dig a well for the camels. I point to plants. There are few and we must dig whether there are plants or not. I show him that if the sand is not damp at the depth of his hand thrust into the desert then we must begin another hole.

Each morning I have the camels walk two by two with blankets tied between them. When the blankets are sodden I have them wrung into the empty jars. The Muscovite watches, speaks. And why must we do this, the boy asks, if the lake is only two days away?

Because there may be no lake when we get there.

Under hot sky and then a cloud. I close my eyes to each day by day and the camel takes the way he knows to go across the dunes. Between two so high they make a canyon of sand the camel trots through a last winding and we are there. At one tip of the crescent lake three date palms curve from the winds and in their shade four tents. They fling open and the young come forth crying their trinkets. Beads from other caravans, oval stones fallen black from heaven, shriveled figs, flat breads browner than the child's dirty hand that lifts them to our eyes. A little water. The boy looks at one of the stones, touches it with all the points of his fingers, looks to the Muscovite who doesn't look at him, who is putting a fist of dates into his mouth. It is just as well. The stones are heavy.

The old with apricot faces are already hobbled out in the heat of the day to fall on the dunes, raise sand cup by cup of their pouring palms. The grains cover an ankle or an elbow or knee, both legs entirely, or they inter themselves to the neck. When they rise the sand rains away and they reel down the slope hobbling a little less.

When I came here first this lake nearly filled the floor of the vale, was surrounded by trees, by tents. In the water a man could stand on the shoulders of another man with his feet in the bottom mud and still not catch the air to breathe.

The shore sucks at the camels' toes as we haul them away. We come out of the pit. Turning I see the tents billow in the wind a final time. They are at war with the desert and seem not to know that the sand is on the march.

From the crest of the next dune I see mountains. Black mountain, white mountain, flaming mountain. But we have long days of desert before us.

\* \* \*

The camels rock and jar their riders, their loads. Heads and spines, all sways.

One hoof moves solitary, then the next.

The great knees almost touch.

The globes of eyes in the one behind behold the globes of dung born from the one before.

The sand whispers with every tread as the two slow toes splay and disappear but what does the sand say?

Each believes he approaches nearer to paradise one ancient hoof at a time.

Paradise always rests at the horizon beyond that shimmering curtain of water always fleeing before us. The blue of our skies at morning pales to bone at noon.

The Muscovite for his profit, the Venetian for his caves, the bearers for their pay.

How long have I been following these creatures into the sun, leading them into their long shadows?

In its forerunner's dung the hoof slips again and wakes me.

They cry out when the masters beat them to their knees. The front legs collapse and the joints bald of hide strike the flagrant sand. In their faces the lip split like a hare, like the monstrous children born to every village.

Do we have any eggs remaining? the Venetian asks.

On the last camel but one if we do.

Thank you. He collects his hands, bows. He speaks easily with the Han and the Mohammedans, nods at all the Han say, replies and bows correctly. Even the boy is learning from him.

The Muscovite shakes the boy by the shoulder.

What are you doing? he asks the Venetian, a nest of dusty eggs in his hand. If you bury one in the sand it will cook faster than in a pot.

May I have one? the boy whispers.

The Venetian smiles and digs them out and the Muscovite takes three.

\* \* \*

At each oasis those born since I passed stop their games to peer up at my hair. They rise on their childish toes, stay their hands and then reach quickly after the bravest shows the way, surprised it does not burn their fingers. They have never seen one such as I am. Their fingers safe, it becomes a trial of courage among their black heads. They pull at my hand, wrench my jaw by its beard before they shriek, their hems trailing with their flight.

The animals chew their camel grass under the glittering shade. For all these years I cannot understand how the needles do not pierce their lips, tongues. I remember as a boy walking beside a bush and scratching the blood from my leg. I wail but no eye looked down to me, no hand reached. So they chew on blinking slowly at the pain and will not have to eat again for fifteen days. Even then I was a slave. My mother walked before me, her feet in rags, stumbling with hunger, her wrist knotted to the wrist of the woman beside her. My father would have walked before her but he was dead already.

Beyond the barren mountains of pink and gray stands a darker range, the summit ridge saddled with snow.

As far as I know I am the last of my kind.

\* \* \*

Against the wind we mask our faces with cloaks, against the cold cloak our shoulders. The eastern sand rises to carve the skin from our hands, our collarbones. The camels cast down their great lashes and raise one hoof after another as they ever did though the land tilts against them.

When clay crops out of the dunes, red clay chipped and broken, we come to a cluster of mud houses stacked together against a red hill. We sit our animals.

Who lives here? the Venetian leans to ask above the wind.

No one.

How do you know?

No smoke comes from the chimneys.

What happened to them?

They are dead or gone.

We should search the buildings, the Muscovite says. Saying this, the boy's eyes blink quickly with fear.

If they left they took everything of use with them, I say. If they died whoever killed them took everything.

The Muscovite tells me we will search the houses and to the boy I say, I do not leave my mount.

You were right, the Venetian says when he returns. Of course only the corpses were left.

I nod.

Two women. Dressed in black.

I nod again.

No one will bury them, he says.

No. No one will bury them.

The Venetian rises, his camel rises. The Muscovite's animal cries out beneath the groaning frame of his saddle as the boy helps the leg over. The creature stands and the Muscovite topples onto its neck and the camel cries again through the embrace.

At least they are facing the wall, the Venetian says. In the Middle Kingdom there is always a wall to face.

\* \* \*

Long days and we struggle through the western gate of Kashgar. I lead them to the bazaar, leave them, buy three fat plums from a woman stirring flies with a switch, climb the hill into the alleys of the old town. Before I reach the first turning a clop comes behind, the Venetian running over the stones, the folds of his cloak jolting in his hand. He stands panting in the alley.

I should like, to see, the old town.

You must be careful not to be lost. Or robbed.

I walk on.

I have heard it is a maze.

To either side I can reach the walls the color of disturbed sand. There is no sun in the narrows above and in that shadow we walk beneath faces watching us, speaking to other faces across the way.

A man stumbles out into the street, falls and rises to laugh, to run from the woman at the threshold who screams at him so loudly her black hair shakes as if in a wind.

What did she say? the Venetian says.

That the bottle is always more important than the cork.  
The Venetian also laughs. I point down a wider way.  
His eyes stare along the path of my arm and then into my eyes.  
If you follow here you will soon find what it is you want.  
What is it that I want?

Whatever it may be lies down this passage. You will find it or it will find you. And if not they will call from the windows as you pass. After, you should take the same path never turning from it until you come to a road with carts. Follow downhill and you will lead yourself to the bazaar again.

He takes his long sleeve across his face and when it appears again there is a smile in his beard. He was shaven when we began. He looks down at the plums crowded in my hand.

Which way do you go?  
I am going another way.  
How long will we stay?  
Long enough for him to buy and sell what he wants. Two days. Three days.  
Tomorrow I must go to the cattle market to replace the dead camels.  
I would like to see the cattle market.  
Ask in the bazaar. Someone will show you.  
His black eyes watch mine, eyes black as the Muscovite's.  
I will find you there?

I nod once and he walks as I have shown him. If his eyes turn over his shoulder I do not know.

The way is unchanged, the scrape of the grit old beneath my steps, the ghost clothes drying from ropes across the alleys, the little girl squatting to make water between her feet, the skewbald dog that laps it from the stones. I rap at the old man's door while two boys pass and their eyes watch mine. I rap so the boards rattle. After a time it parts from the frame and his sound eye looks out.

When that one narrows and wrinkles the door opens onto the other eye pearled with darkness and he takes me into the dark room by the shoulder.

Let us play elephant chess until she returns.

I smile. I leave the plums on the table under the window. His feet scuffle and scuffle back and he arrays the board.

Why do you always turn the board so that I am the barbarians?  
What?

I speak again.  
Well you could hardly be the Chinese, could you?  
He moves a soldier, squints into the dark, the sane eye, the eye of milk.  
Who are you leading?

Two from the west. I move a soldier and he reaches for a catapult. One for silks, one to see the Buddhas in their caves.

How long is the caravan?  
Sixty-two camels. A short one. You play this game too quickly.  
What?



## FINDING CENTER

Brian Mark Lundquist

Acid on Stainless Steel/Gold and Silver Plating

38" x 38"

*Brian Mark Lundquist applies various acids on stainless steel and carefully creates color, enhancing his ground-in images with blowtorches or dry ice to reveal ghostly images of the subconscious merging to the conscious. His work is in numerous private collections, including the Witt Family Memorial in the National Cathedral, Washington, DC. He resides in South Portland, Maine. [www.brianmarkart.com](http://www.brianmarkart.com)*

I lift an ivory elephant, replace it.  
How long have we two played elephant chess?  
I am no counter of years, he says, but I know when we began I had no white  
in my beard.  
There was such a time?  
He squints at me again.  
You need drink.  
He returns with wine in the clay jar, pours it into the clay cups.  
This will mend you.  
What is wrong with me?  
You must ask her.  
Is she well? Are you both well?  
She is well. I know because she argues every day. I know I am well because I  
always win.  
He shifts his soldiers at points across the river, blocking my elephant's eye.  
In the palace I place a scholar before my general but it does little good.  
The end falls quickly.  
You have not been playing.  
I have no one to play with and no pieces and no board.  
They're not heavy. You should carry one.  
I say, We will see.  
My horse is hobbled, captured. He makes a final move and I smile for his  
eye, shrug.  
More wine, he says.  
He begins to laugh and before he stops the boards of the door rattle and  
light strikes the roaming dust and she limps into her own shadow, a basket on her  
arm.  
Where have you been? He has been waiting.  
We all know what it is to wait, she says. Her eyes watch the stone before  
her. But I always return, she says and her eyes return suddenly to mine.  
She places her basket on the table under the window, silently places the  
plums in the basket.  
Have you eaten?  
What?  
Have you fed him?  
No.  
She frowns.  
We have eaten of the vine, he says, lifting his cup.  
She shakes her scowling face.  
I will put water on the fire, she says.  
That I did, he says, raising a finger. It should be hot.  
The next room is warm with smoke. Are you going west or east? she asks.  
To the interior.

And when your way does not come to Kashgar how many other women do you have to make your bath?

None.

Why do you lie to me?

I take the bucket from her and pour the stone tub full. On the wall the air becomes water again and weeps. As I lower myself she points at my rib.

What is that?

Nothing. I hold my hand toward her. A fall.

You fell on a blade?

Yes.

From her shoulders the robe falls and her crooked foot rises over the stone and her curled toes bend the water. The other foot, slowly. My hand empty. We watch across the water washed into small waves like a desert.

Do not speak to me, she says.

In the night when she sleeps I take coins from my drawbag and leave them in the dust under the bed. When her eyes open at the first light they smile.

I did not believe you would be here. I will cook.

I must go to the market. I have camels to buy.

When do you leave? Her hand lies upon the woven blanket at my shoulder and her eyes watch her thin fingers. Will you play elephant chess with father tonight?

I nod.

The Venetian walks in the cattle market among the beasts. Udders swaying low as their calves are led away, the bulls mount one another, their black eyes wheeling. A ring of men with raised fists shouts at a cockfight in a pit.

The Venetian lifts his brows, says, I suppose there are no Hindus here.

The camels are tied under the trees. A trader grasps my hand.

My friend. It is good to see you. How many do you need this day?

He is Han, a little beard pointed south, a little mustache pointed east and west, all gray as granite. His fingers in the nostrils raise the split lip to the gum while his other hand pulls down the jaw and the creature lurches at him with the long crusts of its stone teeth. A boy behind bats its haunch with a board and the flies rise and complain; the camel lifts its long head to cry out.

A bruise larger than a third eye lies over the boy's cheekbone and with the board he strikes at flies in the air.

I examine one hoof after another while the trader runs the boy for tea. The sun climbs to light the mud until it stinks like the dung of all these animals. The men in their ring watch two dogs growl for one another's throats.

For five of his tethered herd I offer coins that the trader counts a third time before his face can smile and I tell him I will send a Mohammedan with a single ear to gather them. Hidden among the five while the Venetian speaks with the Han and the boy chases the man selling ginger I smear a cross of dung and mud on the gray belly of each animal. The Venetian wishes to see the growing ring more closely and over closed shoulders I watch two men roll and punch, bare chested,

lathered in mud and dung in the pit. The circle throbs round them and throws fists as one fighter thumbs the other's eye and I leave the Venetian among them.

In his tent the Muscovite shouts and the boy whispers, Where have you been?

I have been buying camels. He owes me for five.

That is too much, the boy says. He listens. It is more than was agreed.

We lost four, I say, looking into the Muscovite's black eyes under his black brows. We need another for this heap he's bought today.

His fingers overspread his belly. He listens to the boy. He eats grapes from a silver plate on the cushion beside him, he eats them pit and all. I hear his jaw grind like a camel's jaw. Through the meat of grapes he says, We leave now.

Today. We have the moon. Pack the animals before it rises. By sunset I will have the last camel standing at the gate. He snaps his fingers and the boy takes the plate. We cannot load them by that time.

He yawns. The boy says only that we will leave at sunset and I find Ali. He leans his whole ear to me as I tell him to hurry the five camels bearing five crosses and see them watered.

As the sun lies down the long shadow of the minaret falls across the bazaar, the last call to prayer hollows out to silence over the quarter of the Mohammedans.

The bearers are pulling the girth straps and I follow their work in line while the camels squall, testing the leather in my own hands because the Muscovite will not leave them time for Mecca. I look up to the old town on its hill, the crooked smokes rising from the roofs. The Muscovite slaps the boy across the face, slaps the flank of his camel. We ride through the eastern gate with the glow of the moon lifting from the horizon like the memory of a ghost.

With how many does the old one play elephant chess when I am not in Kashgar?

But she must feed him some way.

\* \* \*

At morning as we halt a series of smokes in the distant east rises toward the wind from unseen fires. At nightfall while we wait for the waning moon to cool the sand we can see the fires.

Who are they? the Venetian asks. I count seven.

Horsemen. Nomads. I shrug inside my robes. Marauders.

The Muscovite pulls down the long snout of his pipe and looks at me over his jar. The boy speaks.

Other caravans?

No. Those fires are solitary. Except the last.

It too appears alone.

But it is not a human fire.

What is it then?

A volcano.

\* \* \*

South we cannot track deep enough to miss the wars. A day away we can smell them. The village is burned, the mud walls melted black. No roof is left with thatch or beam but all the fires are dead now and all the villagers. When my boots pass in the dust the black flies whine and wheel from all the purple guts of a man spilled into the sand and then the flies return to their supps of blood.

Even the dead are disturbed, the bodies robbed up from the grave. I must see this, the Venetian says. It is history.

We walk among the unearthed corpses but some still sleep in their long holes. The raiders were interrupted after breaking the ground.

A general with jaw strapped to skull inside his helmet, his corpse bowlegged from decades in the saddle, decades in the grave. They are all turned skin to stone. A painted man, ram's horns curling round each eye from cheek to temple. A woman, green hoops of copper in her ears, nails umbered with henna, the dead lice standing in her sanded hair. Wheat seeds spilled from a raveled bag.

The bundled infant lies alone at the end, his eyes covered with blue stones so he will not see evil in the next world. In the hole beside him for companion the sheep's breast that says his mother died in childbirth, that they tried to save him. The Venetian comes to stand beside me.

What is this?

Nothing, I say.

The mouths of the dead stretch into their scream at death. They cry out forever but their eyes are blind and sunk and none can hear them.

In Tibet, the Venetian says, the people hire professional cutters who dismember the dead for the birds, leaving the limbs and torsos clothed in one layer only to help the beaks falling to the flesh. There the vultures in their feathers are as shaggy as mountain cattle.

In those ranges, I say, that is necessary.

In Persia the Zororastrians do the same. They build arenas for the corpses to be devoured.

I nod. Ali calls to me, waves toward a hill of sand with three trees as white as giant's bones thrust dead into the crest. Growing from the sand on the far side three skeletons clothed in hides, black sockets in their jaws grinning at the sun. The horsemen missed them or thought them unworthy of plunder.

Who are these people?

The Venetian has followed me to see this history.

These are my people.

Between two fingers I lift a dead vine of hair to show him. Red hair still gleaming in the red sun. The gray skull beneath half buried in the desert. Black mines drilled for eyes, a few mute teeth.

When will we reach the caves? the Venetian asks.

I let the hair fall. I look at the horizon.

More days than we now can count. But have you not seen enough of darkness?

His narrowed eyes search mine.

We will have torches, will we not? he says.  
I nod and turn away.

\* \* \*

Before the fire that night the Venetian says, A man of the empire, Pliny the Elder, thought the Chinese were tall and redheaded. I stare into the fire though I see he stares at me.

Like you. The boy points.

A log breaks and yellow sparks fly up the night and go silently blind. I put more camel dung on the coals. Tomorrow we must find wood for the camels to carry. I settle, close my eyes to sleep.

The Venetian says, Pliny died at the volcano of Pompei. The volcano is there today to be climbed.

The Muscovite's nose begins to roar with sleep.

Tomorrow the sand will whisper. The Venetian will long for his caves.

The Muscovite will turn his coins. The Mohammedans will pray five times in the sand.

All will thirst.

Each believes he approaches nearer to paradise one ancient hoof at a time, that I am the guide to paradise.

For the man a camelback Mecca is the next oasis, his mihrab the camel's ears.

They do not have eyes to see that I have been an exile from paradise all my life. That what awaits us all is the sand to lie beneath.

.....

*Thomas McConnell's work has appeared in the Connecticut Review, the Cortland Review, Shenandoah, Calabash, Yemassee, and the Emrys Journal. His collection of stories, A Picture Book of Hell and Other Landscapes, was published by Texas Tech University Press and nominated for the PEN/Bingham Award and the John Gardner Award for Short Fiction. [TMCCONNELL@uscupstate.edu](mailto:TMCCONNELL@uscupstate.edu)*

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**"I get in fewer arguments when I'm alone."**

**--Paula Poundstone**



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