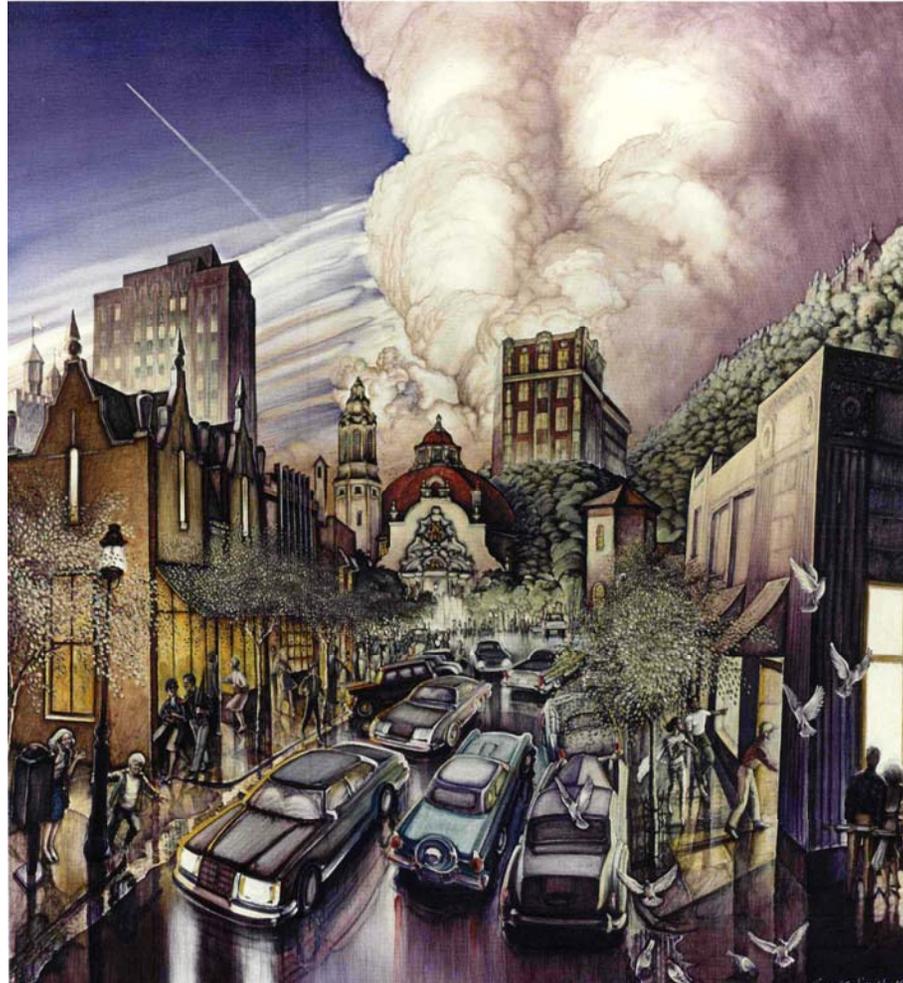


Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 11 Issue 1



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Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **FIVE POINTS SOUTH**, Amasa Smith

*Amasa Smith lives and paints in Birmingham, Alabama. His work was awarded both First Place and Best of Show in a recent Birmingham Art Association juried show. www.amasatheartist.com.
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Back Cover: **BIRMINGHAM IN LIVING COLOR** – Digital Photo. Larry O. Gay
*Larry O. Gay photographs iconic structures and landscapes in his native Birmingham, Alabama.
logay@bellsouth.net*

IN BLUE VEILS

Margaret Gibson Simon

We drape her in silk veils of blue
and blur the lines of fame and truth.
We speak of heaven; say we know her,
the other we paint in azure.

We behold her framed in gold.
She's the lapis lazuli of the Silk Road.
Her constancy like ocean waves
rocks and cradles the Son she gave.

So we drape her, cover her face.
Imagine a beauty- a place
we cannot touch. If she could see
through this broken glass, our uncertainty.
Would she want to craft us anew?
Cover us, too, in shades of blue?

.....

Margaret Gibson Simon lives on the Bayou Teche in New Iberia, LA, with her husband Jeff. She has been an elementary school teacher for over 25 years and has published poems in The Aurorean. Her latest young readers novel is Blessen.

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"To find that light within---that's the
genius of poetry."

--Julie Harris

MOTHER'S DAY ATTACK

Joe Whitten

Mothers' Day, and the sunroom buzzed with relatives trying to coax memories and intelligible responses from Alzheimer patients. Gail and I did that, too, although it's been years since Mom spoke words into sentences, known our names, or visibly responded to her name.

This day we'd shown her the cards her children and grandchildren had sent, then we'd taken them to her room and put them on the wall in front of her bed. We always hope that she notices, knowing that probably she does not.

We concluded our visit, told Mom bye, and were walking toward the sunroom door when a woman said to me, "You need to visit her more often."

Such an unexpected greeting stopped me, and I asked, "I beg your pardon?"

"Your..." she faltered, not knowing the relationship, "Your...your mother. You need to visit her more often." She ended her remonstrance on a confident note.

"We do visit her," I replied.

"Well," she retorted, "I've been coming here since February to see my mother, and I've never seen you before.

"I've never seen you either," I replied.

She did not include Gail, my wife, in her chastisement; all her passion was directed at me. And she announced again, "Well, you need to visit her more often."

I said, "Thank you," because that was the only thing I could think of, and we left the room. In the hall I stopped, took several deep breaths, and wondered how many more she would accost before this Mothers' Day was over. I said to Gail, "She needs to be told something."

That was my first mistake. I didn't stop to consider that there are some people you don't tell anything, but I returned to the sunroom. Miss Righteous was now seated at a table with her relative. Leaning down, I

said in a low voice, “It’s not your responsibility to rebuke people about their visiting habits. You don’t know them or their schedules or their circumstances.” And I walked away.

Her trumpet voice stopped me dead. “God must be convicting you or you wouldn’t have come back to say something!” Her eyes sparkled with justification, pleased that every visitor in the room had heard her pronouncement.

Foolishly I returned to her table, again leaned down and said quietly to her alone, “But it’s none of your business,” and started away again.

Her voice rang triumphantly through the room, “My preacher preached about you today!”

By this time I was shell shocked, and speechless, thank God, or I might have gone back. It had grown so hot in there—and so quiet—that I thought I might have a stroke. Every eye followed me out of the room. In the hall, I joined my wife, who said, “You’re awfully red.”

Naturally I pondered over this incident during the afternoon. I wondered if the woman were struggling with guilt for having been forced to put her own loved one in a nursing home, or if she were merely on a self-righteous warpath—feeling herself God’s spokeswoman for the day.

Along toward 3:30 I called to my wife, “Well, I’m praying for her.” Gail was delighted I had been able to turn it over to the Lord until I said, “I’m praying somebody will really let her have it before the day is done!”

It still seemed unseasonably hot, however, so I turned the thermostat down again. Gail put on a sweater and asked, “Do you want an ice pack?”

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Joseph L. Whitten was born in the mountains of north Alabama but grew up in Glencoe, Alabama. He began teaching in Odenville, Alabama, in 1961. Now retired, his work has been published numerous times.

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WHILE I WASN'T LOOKING

Richard Luftig

they built a house at the edge
of the lake where I fished
as a boy. Bacon and eggs
became bad for you, and
the Old Math made way for New.

Later, I learned that the laws of physics
didn't matter, there was no certainty,
only chaos, no there or here but all
depending whether you were looking
or not. Then, when I wasn't,

you entered my life and filled in all
those empty spaces like a magician
scattering about a filigree of stars,
all the while promising that the gentle sun
might still make an unannounced return.

While I wasn't looking, one by one,
children grew and moved to states of their own,
people we loved drifted to distant
zip codes. Then, stairs become difficult,
hairs began growing in all the wrong places

and we were left alone with our eyes and ears
resting on the nightstand, but with late-night
embraces held tightly against our chests,
waiting for our bodies to give us the news,
when they would seek out some new places to reside.

.....
Richard Luftig is a former professor of educational psychology and special education at Miami University in Ohio now residing in Pomona, CA. He is a recipient of the Cincinnati Post-Corbett Foundation Award for Literature and a semi-finalist for the Emily Dickinson Society Award. His poems have appeared in numerous literary journals. luftigrl@miamioh.edu
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Lisa Oestreich
Digital Photo

See bio on page 29.

THE PAVILION

Daniel Slaten

The sky is a water color-like blend of red, orange, grey, blue, and purple when he drives by the outdoor pavilion where he played so much basketball during his youth. From the road he thinks he sees a solitary figure shooting hoops at the basket on the far end of the court, and he wonders who would be out here at this hour practicing alone. When he slows the car and takes a closer look it is clear that the court is empty, and there isn't anyone out here this evening.

He pulls into the parking lot and parks the car. He's wearing jeans and doesn't have a basketball with him, but he gets out anyway and takes a walk around the court. The dull ache in his knees is his body's way of being thankful he didn't bring a ball tonight.

There are six hoops beneath the pavilion's roof - two on the west side, two on the east, and one each on the north and south ends of the pavement. He remembers specific moments that occurred at each of them, so many years ago. He remembers running and jumping and draining shots from all corners of the court. He remembers hundreds, maybe even thousands of missed shots, the clang they made as they hit the rim and bounced off still as loud and as real as if the shots were being missed now. He remembers faces as well, faces of friends he has long since lost touch with but who seemed like such an integral part of his life at the time.

This is where he honed the skills that would take him to the state championship game in Tuscaloosa one afternoon in the early 90s. He vividly remembers that game, a game his team won despite all of his missed three point attempts. It was the last truly meaningful game of basketball he ever played in his life since there was no college scholarship awaiting him at the end of high school. In the ensuing years, his basketball playing has been confined to pickup games played in driveways and rec league games played in empty gyms, and eventually even those moments were lost to the storage locker of his memories. A knee injury in his early thirties brought a complete end to his playing days.

Bounce. Bounce. Swish.

The sounds echo in the semi-darkness, but they seem to come from the basket at the far end of the court. He turns again, but there's no one there, even though he swears he heard someone dribbling and then making a basket that hit nothing but net. He squints his eyes and tries to see clearly through the haze of dusk. He thinks he sees the net swaying ever so slightly, but that's probably just a product of the wind. He turns back to the basket in front of him and mimes a shot he remembers taking over his older brother once upon a time.

Bounce. Bounce. Swish.

Again, he turns at the sound, and for the briefest of moments he thinks he sees the outline of a figure shimmering in the shadows. There is no one there, though, and he decides it's time to go. He looks at each of the baskets one last time before heading back to the car.

Halfway to the car he hears it again.

Bounce. Bounce. Swish.

This time he doesn't turn around and look. He knows exactly what he would see if he turned around. A young man, probably fifteen or sixteen years old, slender, wearing baggy blue shorts, and a sweat-stained red T-shirt. The young man would have dark hair and a hint of peach fuzz growing on his upper lip, and he would look exactly like the young man captured in fading photographs buried inside an old album at his mother's house in Montgomery.

If he had a ghost, this is the place he would be most likely to haunt.

Bounce. Bounce. Swish.

He gets back into the car and drives away, leaving the pavilion and its ghosts behind one last time.

.....

Daniel Slaten lives in Montgomery, AL, and writes short stories and poetry in small notebooks and on sticky notes. His recent and forthcoming publications include work in Belle Reve Literary Journal, Seven by Twenty, Scifaikuest, and Leaves of Ink. djlaten@aol.com

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CHERRIES IN A BOWL

Kathy Lumsden
Oil on Canvas

Kathy Lumsden is a self-taught artist who has been painting exclusively in oils since 2004. She finds painting a wonderful, creative outlet and stress reliever after working a hectic 12 hour shift as an RN in the intensive care unit at Brookwood Medical Center. She lives Pelham, AL. KathyLumsden.com & kathylumsden@yahoo.com

"It is only by selection, by
elimination, and by emphasis that we
get at the real meaning of things.

--Georgia O'Keeffe

EMILY AS A CONCEPT

Darren C. Demaree

Old facts, flesh
favorite of mine,
Emily is fictional
& un-fictional, she
is the hum
of my hungers
& for a woman
of her height, I've
extended her
name into myth,
the elegance
of which, lyric
& hypnotic,
overwhelms
the folding birds.

.....

Darren C. Demaree's poems appear in The South Dakota Review, Meridian, The Louisville Review, Grist, The Main Street Rag, and Whiskey Island. Demaree is the author of As We Refer To Our Bodies and Not For Art Nor Prayer. He is the recipient of Pushcart Prize and Best of Net nominations. He is currently living and writing in Columbus, OH, with his wife and children.

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MR. EDGE'S ENCHANTMENT

Bradley Sides

The parents stay behind and watch as their children march off to join the growing line. The fence is tall—at least twelve feet—with a tint that favors blazing charcoal, even shimmering in the distance. Above it all, a sign flashes with rotund, chalky bulbs that display “Garden of Childhood Enchantment.”

Every two hours, he appears without fail. Mr. Edge, with his walker, steps from behind his dilapidated shed's door. He waves to his crowd of young explorers, and they welcome him with applause and squeals. Some of the children jump to smack Mr. Edge's hand, as he walks by them, on his way to the entrance. When he reaches the gate, he waves to the parents in the background. Only a few acknowledge his courtesy. He explains what his guests are soon to witness. The children gleefully turn to one another and snicker. Then, Mr. Edge asks, “Are you ready?” With that, he pushes the handle and enters.

Back in the waiting area, the parents sit and wait.

“I think I heard something,” Molly's mother says to the adults surrounding her.

Molly's father is the one to reply. He says, “You are just hearing things. It isn't real, dear.”

The other parents laugh and agree; quickly, they go back to talking among themselves.

“Look! Look! It's dancing!”

“Wow! That's awesome!”

“Check it out!”

The children giggle and point to every corner's of Mr. Edge's creation. They talk and shout. They run in the rows that sit parallel to the fruits and vegetables. The raspberries sing in harmony on their bushes in a high, screeching pitch, bouncing at the speed of their melody. The children gather around and laugh. The raspberries finish and begin again. “Oh, they never stop singing. Pick a couple of them. They love it,” Mr. Edge says. Molly reaches to grab one, as does Theodore. They pop the raspberries onto their tongues, and the singing grows louder.

Theodore lifts his shirt above his navel. “Look! Look! It's still bouncing!” The children watch as his belly bounces. They all laugh.

Mr. Edge calls for attention, as he lifts up a few carrots from the moist dirt. As soon as they appear, they are glowing. Then, they jump free from Mr. Edge's grip. They land on the ground, root tip first. "Okay," the carrots say together in a laughing chant. "Let's exercise."

They begin jumping up-and-down in the air. Two carrots assist another one, serving as arms, to do pushups. The children watch, unable to look away.

Around the garden, the entertainment continues. Strawberries, like torpedoes, shoot from their vines; potatoes uncover themselves from the dirt and walk like zombies; lettuce leaves break free and fly into the air. Almost everyone avoids the grapes because they explode whenever anyone gets too close.

As time expires in Mr. Edge's Garden, the children finish filling their bags. One-by-one, they exit and run to their parents, eager to share their experiences. Mr. Edge closes the entrance and walks quietly back to his shed.

"How was it?"

"Did you have fun?"

The parents question their kids.

"It was great. The raspberries were hilarious."

"You wouldn't believe it. You should've seen the carrots doing pushups. It was so funny."

The children respond.

"Kids will believe anything, won't they? Everything is real," Molly's father says to some of the other men.

Picking up the bag, Molly's mother feels a few jumping movements. "Raspberries," she whispers. She remembers her own childhood adventure to the garden. Molly notices her mother and winks.

.....

*Bradley Sides is a graduate of the MA in English program from the University of North Alabama. He currently teaches junior English in Tennessee. His work appears in Boston Literary Magazine, Freedom Fiction Journal, and Inwood Indiana. He resides in Florence, AL. **Brad.Sides@Yahoo.com***

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LEAVINGS

Katherine H. Elwevar

Leavings

salty run-off from the fissure in my mind
trickles its slow way to the open sea
the creative flow is an erosive accelerant
though it leaves complex rock formations behind
pretty to look at sometimes
especially in a play of colored lights
but they're more impressive in the dark
where phosphorescent angels slide their robes over the stone
people try to see pictures in them
shapes they recognize and
faces they've seen before
but I can see only the empty crevasses and tunnels
the holes and wells of frenzy's carapace
barren rock where I thought I saw jewelweed growing in loam
glittering dust where my visions tried to go to ground

.....

Katherine H. Elwevar is a medical ghostwriter whose poetry has been published in The Healing Muse, Talebones, PKA's Advocate, Thema, The Storyteller Magazine, Leading Edge and Tales of the Talisman. She lives in Sonora, CA. www.elwevar.org

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CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE OF LIFE ON EARTH

Jim Reed

There are more amazements on the frozen streets of Birmingham than are dreamt of in all philosophies.

The vampire wind tries to nip a pedestrian beneath her scarf as she scurries to work. She tries valiantly to clutch the cloth to her throat. She successfully keeps the bite away, thus forcing the carnivore air to search elsewhere for her skin. She thinks: *I have to face this again on the way home tonight.*

Ignoring the temperature and all parental precautions, a group of seventh graders and eighth graders invades the shop, writing students from the Alabama School of Fine Arts who hope to pick up new ideas in well-thumbed pages. They warm their hands and minds with ideas burning inside each volume. They think: *This is great, but what's to eat?*

I visit for an hour with students at Birmingham-Southern College, spreading the gospel of reading and writing and thinking outside the hum of the hive. They sit around the Arthurian table to see what I have to say, or to see what the teacher wants them to hear me say. Perhaps my most attentive listener is the teacher. She thinks: *I wish class could be this much fun every day.*

The college room walls are lined with books locked inside sturdy cabinets, longing to join their free ranging comrades but resigned to the concept of Waiting. Waiting for someone to unlock the shelves and touch them once more. They think: *I have all this wisdom. Wish I could share it.*

Back at the shop, an Atlanta book dealer braves the weather to stroll and examine my paginated orphans, to see what's in the store...to see what's in store. He thinks: *How can I make some money off all this stuff I'm purchasing?*

Outside the shop, the coldness becomes mundane. We've all talked about it too much and want to go on to some other subject. But the vampire wind will remind us who's really in charge, when we brave the sidewalks once more, with only large warm books hugged tight against the chest to keep the heart warm and the mind afire

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Jim Reed writes in Birmingham, AL, where he curates the Museum of Fond Memories at Reed Books. www.jimreedbooks.com

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**IF YOU ARE A POET, YOU WILL SEE CLEARLY
THAT THERE IS A CLOUD FLOATING
IN THIS SHEET OF PAPER**

Susan Luther

. . . the wheat that became the bread for the logger to eat,
the logger's father – everything is in this sheet of paper.
– Thich Nhat Hanh (Being Peace)

The sun. The atmosphere. The clouds. The rain.
The dirt where the tree rooted that gave itself to this
piece of paper, and the exact clouds that rained into the dirt.
The nursery hands that raised, and the delivery hands that V-
bladed this, among thousands of seedlings, into the sorry land
favored by longleaf. Drought. Rain. Sap. Green. A little girl, playing
lonely in the sinkhole sand; her father, the farmer who claimed the land,
and the slaves who worked it – the generations who held her ground,
planting trees over run-out King Cotton. The forester, hands on the
wheel, chasing timber thieves; sealing deals with the logger, and the
logger's father.

The Heli-Cropter pilot, laying in weed-shrouds of Velpar and hexazinone;
resin scent, birds, wind in the wheedling branches. Ghosts of deer, quail,
turkey, shot and eaten by hunters sky high in tree stands before
the lumber saws, shredders, conveyor belts, acid baths, presses, shrink-
wrappers, boxcars, the check-out clerk's ancestors to the farthest trace
of DNA: the dust of stars. The eyes that read this page; the hand that
wrote the words, that typed the words, that spooled the ink that shaped
the words, the words' history – and the hand that holds a cloud, sun,
atmosphere, rain, life and death: everything, a sheet of paper.

.....
*Susan Luther lives in Huntsville, AL. She has a family connection to poetry through
her mother, and to the visual arts through her father and grandfather, who were
accomplished amateur landscape painters. She and her brother still grow trees on a
farm in north Florida that has been in their family since the mid-1800s.*
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REWIND

Irene Latham

The towers don't fall,
they bloom,

you fold the newspaper
and carry it to the porch.

Instead of walking away,
you back into me,

gentle as butter
melting into pancakes.

We slip from robes
and sleep, peacefully

unaware
of our awakening.

.....

Irene Latham first learned to love poetry while sitting on her father's knee while he read aloud books by Shel Silverstein. Her third collection of poems, The Sky Between Us, features poems on the subject of what we can learn from nature about being human. Her first collection for children Dear Wandering Wildebeest: And Other Poems from the Water Hole is being released by Millbrook Press/Lerner. Irene lives in Birmingham, AL. www.irenelatham.com

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REMEMBERING ROCK AND ROLL

Beau Gustafson
Digital Photograph

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

WILD BOUQUET

Myra Crawford

Oregano and garlic, Papa's Place was down in it. Inside, like the kliegs to my pupils, yellow cats' paws flicked above twisted tallow. I had made it over from Fredman the Freak's bouncing along a marshmallow sidewalk, all glory blue day with myself intact and a head aswim with Larry. Love. Love and Larry. A tall, thin begging that burned down low like something to scratch. Larry. Larry and late; liquid and love.

Still up, I was at Papa's halfway to unempty bed in a kangaroo coat that came from California in a sextet, astride this toe-trained Amazon on her way to the Whiteway the hard way.

Larry and late; shed the skin. Pasta face with brush mustache pushed a cloth with noodle knobs, wiping, order.

"Scotch, neat."

Something neat to seat the heat, undilute in the wake for Larry the Late. A shallow skin-warming after the kicky kangaroo. I let my eyes over the sticks and pricks suckling sodaed whiskeys and domiciled beer. Some I passed seemed familiar, but only in the faraway before I rearranged remembrances so I wouldn't have the bother of the priapus I left behind. Yoo-hoo. Silent sound waves rippling from there to here. Larry the Late, now Larry the Lost.

The swoop was that of the great horned owl one. Owl eyes ablink behind Hornie rims. While he was on the wing, I fumbled out a straight weed.

"A lady should never have to light her own cigarette." Owl.

Eyebrow up, I settled inside a suck and blow and sensated the expiration of my trip, and I came back in, slow and still sweet.

"Pardon me, if I seem aggressive, but I've appointed myself a committee of one to see that chivalry doesn't die."

Eyebrow still up, I dragged a small high through the tobacco. He had himself turned on and I tried to plug in.

"No offense intended, ma'am, I'll retire to my table and friend across the room. If you need a light again, simply signal. Salbert O'Beckett at your service."

“It appears, O’Beckett, you’d make a spectacle dashing to light me all evening. I smoke a lot. Ask your friend over and we’ll party.”

He settled in the corner of the booth and friend rambled over and down. Viking and white teeth.

“This is my friend, Paul Artell, Miss...”

“Blatz,” I pushed it out with my tongue. “Something to forget. Wanda is to remember.”

“Wanda is kindness, Paul. She invites us to share this booth with her so that I will not be inconvenienced to light her cigarettes.”

“That would be no inconvenience. What about a drink, Wanda?”

“A scotch will happen soon.” As at command, a pasta mustache planted one, iceless, at my elbow.

“That’s a big drink.”

“I’m a big girl.”

“I couldn’t help noticing.” Owl’s eyes licked my breasts.

“Most can’t.” I split the week and tried to wash a clean with half the glass. Only, the low Larry-ache came back and I wondered if he had flipped out at Fredman the Freak’s and should I happen over and brew up to reach him.

Owl Eyes was communicating to Viking.

“Miss Blatz, you’re refreshing.”

“I said Wanda. Only Wanda. Sorry to mention the other. My more intimate friends make it to Winkie.”

“Winkie.”

“I spoke intimate,” I hung that one out for Owl Eyes, looking hotter than the Viking with the cool.

“We’ll get to that,” he pinned me in.

“You from here?” Viking.

“Home-flown.”

“Tune me in.” Owl Eyes.

“Was here, went there. I loved on the coast for several moons. It moved. Then a six-some spread from New York the hard way. I dropped out for a recharge when we swung through. Magnolia madness.”

“Speak Southern, Miss Magnolia. I’m having difficulty following you.” Owl Eyes.

“You’re not receiving? I’m sending.”

“Let’s say I’m having trouble tuning in to your frequency.”

“Mouthed by the earth-bound. You never been up?”

“I need a program. Can’t figure this one out!” Owl Eyes ablink.

“Wanda,” said Viking, smiling, nibbles and beer bubbles, “question. Acid?”

“You’re hip, Northman.”

“Owl Eyes rolled. “Where’s my translator!”

“Acid, Sal. LSD. The hippie’s answer to the beatnik’s pot. Trips for flower people into the psychedelic world of the self. Something stirring on the West Coast and in the Ivy World. Due here in about seven years at the standard rate of operating procedure. However, I presume the world might be shrinking for it seems that our Wanda-Wink is very with it. Am I warm?”

“Radiating, Northman, Viking cool. I’ve been on a trip; just returned.” Laughter giggled up and my cup was empty.

“See, Salbert, pays to stay tuned in to the younger generation.”

“I’m moving toward you, Paul. I recall the media reporting a group of seekers centered in California and spreading. It’s just this first-hand confrontation with the afreet is teeth-rattling.”

“Afreet? No. Hippies are love, love, love. No bad spirits. Maybe some turned on souls explore their private nightmares while they’re out there, but all’s beautiful in the acquittal.”

“That’s encouraging to hear. Is flower power all love, love, love, Winkie?”

“Don’t be shovey, Owl Eyes, we’ve not intimidated--yet. A happening it will be. Love is surrender. Sex is conquest. We’ll conquest. Hang up together like a receiving line handshake. I’ll see you crawl out of hiding where you cringe behind that funny face. We’ll make love, not war. Take it out, touch it, put our fingers in it. After all, it’s just us and that’s only people and living.”

“You speak a powerful language, woman.”

“Truth is on my tongue. Naked and unashamed.”

“As you say.” His horny glasses fogged up. “I dig your semantics.”

“Wanda, another drink?” Viking.

Assent sent; he signaled. Liquid dispensed and down. Larry the Lost was left. We cut our minds on more glass-trapped debris, then the Viking pulled anchor.

I took myself out and dangled it for a moment between me and the Owl. But the thought eluded me like wind whippets so I hid me back beyond my skin and let the world whirl, skimming along, light points in pirouette.

“Shall we move on to the elsewhere?” Words spun through. “I have some French LP’s that may turn you back on. Translated, of course.”

My laughing feet began to dance forward toward my skinny dipping in the sheets.

I focused on the slit and sagging wallpaper lacing the air high over my head. Eyes, all four, of the hornie owl were intruded on the scene. Oh, the child fingers of day were crawling across the ceiling and the low-down ache was gone, but the Larry was still there. The bed was full of the Owl but the vacuum was still unbroken.

“Hey! Do that again!” He spoke.

“Again?”

“I was talking about your eyes, kook! Shut your eyes and open them again. Your left eye opens first. The right one sticks.”

“You are now informed from where the Winkie comes. My lead balls are out of kewack. You know, the rubber band sags. Been twanged a lot.”

“Rubber band? You mean like a doll?”

“Had one once. Bride baby all mummy in white virgin’s lace. Her lead ball was off kilter, too. A head peeper said I identified. Fascinated him...the wink. Took a regular fancy to examining it. Free of charge.”

“Wanda the Winkie. What happened to him? He cure you?”

“Cured himself. Got so he just wanted to watch the wink without the examination. The stud was a dud. He finally went back to attending concerts with his wife and raising African violets. All that was left to up.”

“After this long night, I can see that a steady diet of you would take its toll. You’re good, good, good.”

“I work at it. I need to stare eye to eyeball with a sunny-side up.”

Salbert the O. rearranged his hornie rims and stared off into the empty.

“You can take a look around downstairs in the fridge, while I attend to other business. I’ve got to be at work in less than two hours. Hustle up what you find. Probably not much, I don’t stay around here as a habit.”

Bastard beat me to the w.c. so I tread the worn wood down and counted catshup, unkosher dills, a mildewed cheese and three things green beyond recognition. I sampled a tall black bottle of wet that I found on the top shelf and shut it all back into its icy grave. Shock waves rocked my stomach. A chill rustled around my neck in this sunless room of eating. Corn, with tongues flapping, grinned yellow teeth looking to crawl down from the walls in single file and bite me bit to pieces. Across the room, head high, were sick brown streaks, too up for puke or other vile eliminations, too dark and brooding for casual kitchen accidents. I fled the carnivorous paper teeth to where I had shed my wrapper and the kangaroo skin.

“You want in here?” Owl Eyes called from the w.c.

Wanted out. Back in, to the warm, the womb, ah, Mother’s icicle igloo. Any soothment to skin so newly gnawed by the yellow paper teeth.

“I peed in the sink, let’s go.”

That brought him out and I ducked inside.

The one drying rag in the room smelled so of him that I had to gulp down the kitchen water as it came bubbling up. Relieved, I returned.

.....

Myra Crawford is a native of Birmingham, AL, where she has operated the international Hackney Literary Awards Competition since 1969. This piece is excerpted from a story written decades ago and recently resuscitated.

mcrawford@uab.edu

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EARLY FROST

Debra Goldstein

“Looks to me like the frost came early this year. Usually, it takes a few games into the season for it to be this cold.”

Tabitha ignored him - choosing instead to pull her red jacket more tightly around her. “Come on, Tab,” Peter said. “It’s not like your team isn’t winning.”

“That’s not the point and you know it.” She lifted her face so he could see her eyes blazing from beneath her red cap. Hard as it was, he held her gaze. She stared back.

“I honestly don’t know. What did I say to make you this mad?”

He reached for her hand, but she swatted him away. She turned back to focus on the game. “It isn’t what you said, it’s what you did.”

Peter tried to think of what he had done to change her mood so drastically. She had been happy when they entered the stadium, content when he bought her a foot-long hotdog and a Coke, and practically giddy when her team scored on the first play of the game. Tab even had been polite when, after the beer-breathed orange and navy blue clad guy behind them wanted to know the name of their quarterback, and she had responded, “For me it’s AJ McCarron, but for him it’s Nick Marshall,” the guy had jumped up and down pointing at them yelling “Mixed marriage. Mixed marriage.”

That was it! The frost had settled in just as the laughter was dying down from Peter assuring everyone in listening distance that there was “no marriage here. Elephants and tigers don’t mix well.” He looked away from Tabitha. Two could play at this game – probably better, based upon the scoreboard, than the two teams on the field.

As his hand brushed against his jean pocket, he felt the anger slip away from him. “Uh, Tab,” he said, waiting for her to acknowledge him. “You know, sometimes you make it darn hard in football season to compete with your feelings about the Bear or the present second coming,

but maybe we could create a neutral memory?" He pulled the small box from his pocket. His words were lost as the crowd cheered another touchdown; but, when he slipped the ring on her finger, he could see the frost melt.

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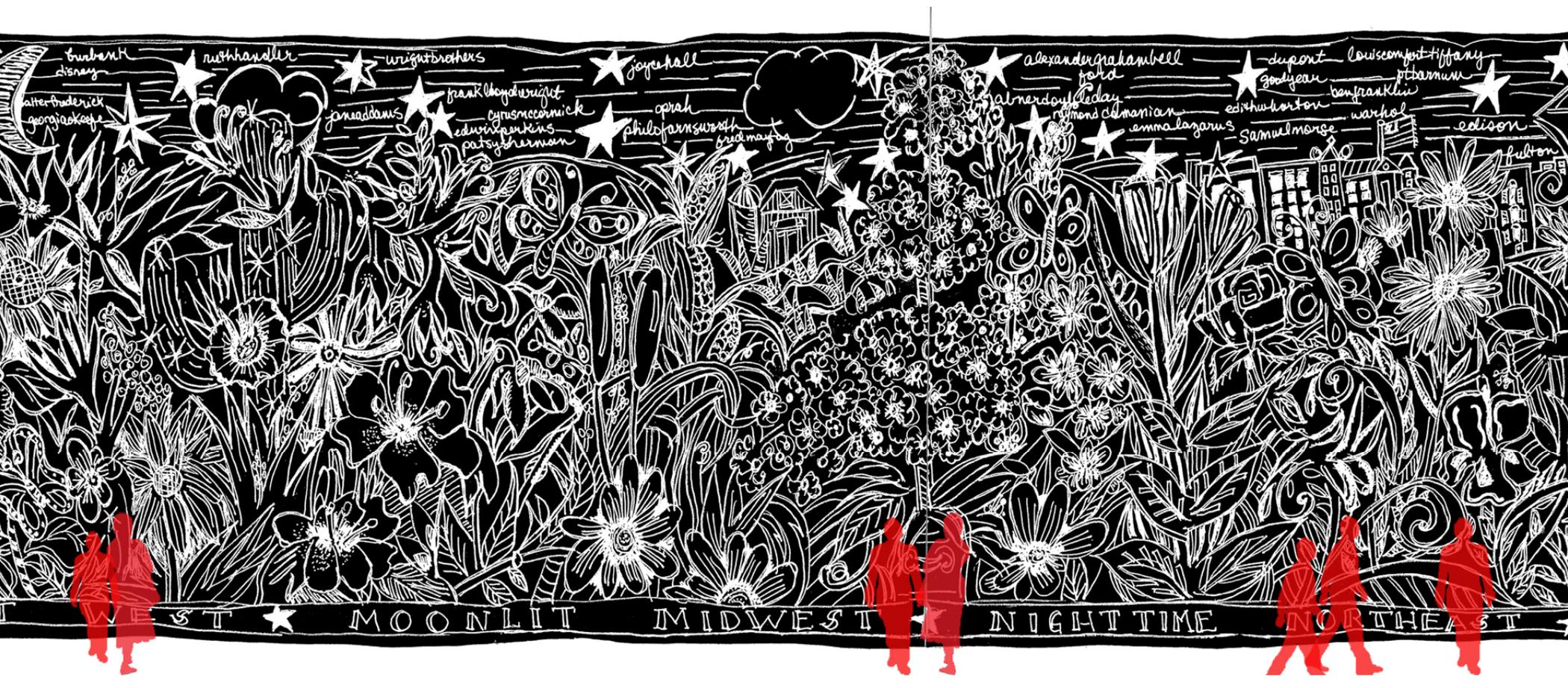
Debra H. Goldstein is author of the mystery novel Maze in Blue, an IPPY Award/Harlequin Worldwide Mystery selection.

www.DebraHGoldstein.com & DebraHGoldstein2@gmail.com

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"Love is---I know not what; which comes---I know not whence; which is formed---I know not how; which enchants---I know not by what; and which ends---I know not when or why."

--Madeleine de Scuderi



AMERICAN DREAMGARDEN

Ben South
240' x 30'

Ben South's art combines the sophistication of French Post-Impressionists like Matisse with the simplicity of Southern folk artists like Mose T. The "American Dreamgarden" project as proposed is acrylic paint on un-stretched sailcloth and is designed to travel to various cities across America and be displayed inside civic auditoriums or hotel ballrooms. The artist is represented by Midtown Gallery in Nashville and his work can be seen at www.southernness.com. He lives in Cullman, AL sthrnss@bellsouth.net

SLAP-HAPPY?

Rick Hartwell

It was a slap that could have been heard halfway across the island. As it was, Greg was only half a block away, on his bike, delivering the *Newport News*. His bike was a midnight blue, three-speed Bianchi Sport with handbrakes. It was a final gift from his grandmother and Greg treasured it. As he rode closer, he could also hear arguing and the swearing.

“ . . . and a two-bit bitch!” from the man.

“I’d already told you to leave; so just get out and take your crap with you, you bastard!” from the woman.

Another slap from the man that connected more with Greg than it seemed to with the woman. Greg yelled at the man to stop. At the same time Greg kept accelerating. He jumped the curb with the bike, jerking on the handlebars and lunging his pudgy weight upward at the last instant, allowing the rear wheel to hit the curb and bounce over it and onto the sidewalk.

Just as Greg regained his precarious balance and started pedaling again, the man turned towards him, yelling, “Get out of here, you little son of a bitch!”

Just before he rammed into the man, Greg responded, “Leave her alone!” Then screamed, “Stop hitting her!” It was at that moment that they connected.

Greg had aimed his bike straight into the man who, only at the final instant before impact, had turned half around. The man took the blow off to his right side, mostly on the back of his leg and buttocks. The momentum of the bike and Greg’s weight, a hefty one-fifty even at only thirteen, knocked the man into the Corvette parked at the curb. It was probably the man’s car, judging by the clothes thrown into the passenger seat. Greg fell off to his right, absorbing most of the fall with his right arm and shoulder. There would be bruises, bumps and abrasions he would come to appreciate only later with the sting of hot water and soap.

The woman was not hit at all, not anymore and not by Greg either, but she screamed the loudest all the same. Her voice was too shrill and anguished to make out the words, but her anxiety seemed sincere, although in Greg’s mind, misplaced. She ran over to the man, now pushing himself away from the car and kicking at the carcass of the bike that lay between Greg and him. The woman was asking him how he was and if he was all right, over and over.

It was obvious that he wanted to take out after Greg, even though he was a kid, but the woman was hanging onto the man's left arm, guiding him across the sidewalk. They passed Greg, still prone and dazed, the woman not even wasting a look on Greg or his wounds. The couple walked through a small, white, picket gate and into the house where the door had been left open.

Greg finally gathered himself enough to stand and then to retrieve his bike. The handlebars were twisted and the front wheel was bent, the tire flat. Half of his paper route was scattered across the sidewalk and into the bushes on one side and off into the gutter on the other. It took about ten minutes to gather the copies of the *News*, replace a few broken rubber bands, and place them all back into the pack hanging off the rack over the rear wheel. He knew he couldn't ride with the flat and the front wheel all twisted askew. It would be too clumsy walking the bike home like this, so Greg shifted the canvas bag to the front, over the handlebars. He straightened the bars as best as he could, straddling the crooked front wheel and leveraging his weight to realign the handlebars. One handbrake was broken.

After this Greg started walking the bike home, knowing that he would later have to finish his route on foot, crisscrossing Balboa Island more than a dozen times. As he turned the bike around and started backtracking towards the corner of Park Avenue and Onyx, Greg looked back over his shoulder at the house where the man and the woman had disappeared and not returned. The door was now closed. "Dumb bitch!" was Greg's comment, said aloud as he violently bounced the bike down the curb and onto Park, which he crossed obliquely

Didn't she say she wanted the man to stop? Wasn't that all that he, Greg, had done? These thoughts went unanswered then and, although Greg didn't realize it at the time, they would trouble him for the rest of his life; much like women in general.

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*Rick Hartwell is a retired middle school (remember the hormonally-challenged?) English teacher. He believes in the succinct, that the small becomes large; and, like the Transcendentalists and William Blake, that the instant contains eternity. If not writing, Rick would rather be still tailing plywood in Oregon. He can be reached at **rdhartwell@gmail.com**.*
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at night

A.J. Wright

my young daughter always
kicks the covers off

as if to say
here i am

see the way
i can curl

and uncurl
in the darkness

like those morning glories
above your grandparents' porch

see the way
i can toss and turn

.....

A.J. Wright has worked in the UAB School of Medicine for more than 30 years and lives in the Birmingham, AL area. In his spare time he is personal servant to three cats.

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like that beached fish once did
for you and uncle richard

as if to say
i'm only three years old

as if to say
pull no white sheets

over me

just yet
dadd
y



Lisa Oestreich
Digital Photo

Lisa Oestreich sought a career in photography but was discouraged by what she perceived as fierce competition in the field. She followed her other love, medicine, and practices in the Student Health Center at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. In her spare time, she pursues her passion of documenting light, form, and texture.

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THE OLD WOMAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

John Richmond

It probably didn't help that they had watched "The Blair Witch Project" the night before, but they did and it would sit there on the edge of their consciousness until they saw the old woman.

When the weather cooperated, they committed their weekends to hiking as much of the Appalachian Trail as they could access within a three hour drive of home.

Usually, it was just Steve and Susan, but today their teenage daughter, Melissa, came. Today's hike took them to Delaware Water Gap and up Mount Minsi where they intended to hike a two mile section of gravel road as far as two communications towers.

The day was clear, sunny and cool. Their 2.3 mile ascent up the mountain took them from 300 to 1,480 feet which meant a constant climb but they knew that once they reached the top it would be an easy- and flat-ridge walk.

As they climbed, they passed a few hikers coming down and then a few more at the top. Everything seemed normal until they were about a mile and an half down the gravel road -- that's when they spotted the old woman.

The woman was easily in her eighties, dressed in jeans, boots and an insulated vest. She wore a small backpack and in front of her she was carrying a sleeping bag. But the strangest part about seeing her was that she was exiting the woods at a forty-five degree angle to the road. It was obvious that she was not hiking the trail, but that she had been camping.

The three of them made eye contact with each other before turning back to watch the woman.

Nimbly, she made her way through the brush and onto the road. She was headed in the opposite direction--back toward Mount Minsi. She smiled and nodded at them as she passed, but said nothing.

That's when the movie came rushing back at them.

"Whoa, what was that?" Steve asked once they were beyond earshot of the woman.

“She looks like a witch,” Susan said, shaking her head and looking back for the woman who was now out of sight.

“Yeah, the Blair Witch,” Melissa chimed in and proceeded to draw the Blair Witch symbol in a muddy section of the road.

The rest of the way to the communication towers--and back--they talked about the old woman and what she might have been doing in the woods. They talked until they reached the muddy section and noticed that the symbol was gone.

Immediately, they thought that its disappearance was odd, especially when they caught sight of the old woman on the road up ahead.

“Come on,” Steve said with a sense of urgency, “let’s pick up the pace and pass her.”

Finally, when he felt that they had put enough distance between themselves and her, he called for a water break. Yet, as soon as they lifted their water bottles to their mouths--there she was right behind them.

“Let’s go,” Susan said, capping her bottle.

Twice more, they walked even faster, took a break--only to see her behind them.

“No more breaks until we get to the car,” Steve decided.

“Good idea,” Susan concurred and then added, “and let’s go park somewhere else and eat our lunch.”

“No kidding,” Melissa voiced nervously.

Silently, they made their way down the mountain to the car and drove across the Delaware River all the while looking back--and watching--for the old woman of the mountain.

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John Richmond has “wandered” parts of North America for a good portion of his life. Along the way, he has not only seen a good number of things but he has also lived with--for varying lengths of time--an equally good number of people. More recently, he has sequestered himself in his basement office where he divides his time between writing and discussing the state of the world with his coonhound, Roma.

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FATHER

Eric Latham

You are the alcoholic who fell
in love with long distance.
You bred a fleet in the false
warmth of your company.
Your stay was too short to raise,
and too long not to damage.
You left us here, in the darkness
of a winter night, where we sleep
between sorrow and insanity.
You left your mark, with one message--
Hello, Goodbye.

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*Eric Latham is a music student at Alabama School of Fine Arts. He wrote this poem
in response to The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams.*

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“A room without books is like a body
without a soul.”

--Cicero



CAUTION

Roberto Mendez

Mixed Media

18" x 12"

Roberto Mendez is from Patterson, CA, where he began painting at age 5. He holds a BFA from CSU-Stanislaus and an MFA from CSU-Sacramento.

HOME ON THE RIVER

Joan Dawson

The reason we moved to the Cahaba River was because of Sloopy. We realized how much he loved the water when we took him on picnics on the bank of the Black Warrior near Cordova. While we hunted for wild ferns, he would wade right in, belly deep, and lap up river water. He loved to fetch sticks out of the river.

Sloopy was a water-loving dog and never missed a chance to get as wet and as messy as possible. If the word “poodle” is related to “puddle,” then Sloopy was true to his breed. He was a standard poodle, black with a white throat and chest. There was never a happier, more independent dog. He had a great smile. The fact that he had chosen to live with us made us want to choose a place that he would enjoy.

We knew of a fishing cabin that belonged to some dear friends. They didn’t use it much any more, so they agreed to let us rent it until we found a real house. It had a million drawbacks, but it was in the woods with a trail down to the Cahaba River, and we knew Sloopy would love it. It was perfect for wading in—belly deep—to get a drink.

Our little Manchester-Chihuahua, St. John, wasn’t a water dog, but he tagged along wherever Sloopy went. Their favorite sport was cornering large turtles and barking incessantly. They had a special “turtle bark” that did not let up until I hacked through the deepest, thorniest part of the woods, hid the turtle, and took the dogs back up the trail to the cabin.

We spent many hours exploring our little parcel of woods and riverbank. There did not seem to be any place as wonderful, so we finally stopped looking for a real house, and the cabin became our cozy, comfortable home.

We’ve been in the river house for forty-six years now, and Sloopy and St. John are still close in memory. Sloopy lived with us for almost seventeen years. He brought half the river and its sand into our house, but

he was such fun to watch, we didn't mind sweeping up. Besides, we owed Sloopy. If he had not loved the water so much, we might never have belonged to this place by the river.

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Joan Dawson lives in Leeds, AL, with husband Frank and a variety of four-legged creatures, indoors and out. jdawson@uab.edu

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"A cigarette is like a squirrel, it's completely harmless until you put one in your mouth and light it on fire."

--Argus Hamilton

CONCRETE BABY

Libby Rich

Years ago when I was just starting out in business I would get up early and drive to Plantersville, Alabama to buy plants directly from the growers. It was the only way to get some of the plants I wanted to sell, as my store was so small and my purchases insignificant. I'd get in my pickup truck with an attached camper and drive down country roads, hoping growers would have what I wanted in stock. These were the days before fax machines or computers. I spent the hour and a half it took me to get there looking out the window, admiring open fields and pastures, smiling at cows and horses, acknowledging drivers coming from the other direction with the wave of my hand or a nod.

Many times I passed a particularly beautiful garden and promised myself that one day I would stop in. One morning, when I had a few extra minutes, I pulled in for a close-up view. A little old lady started walking towards me. She had a big, floppy hat that touched her shoulders, a checked scarf around her neck, and a long-sleeved shirt underneath a pair of overalls. On her feet were boots that looked as old as she did. Her skin was the color of the earth, her hair grey, her face covered in wrinkles, her hands bony and misshapen.

"You lost?" she said, as she came closer.

"No, ma'am," I responded. "I just stopped to look at your garden. It's beautiful."

She just nodded, and I said, "Is it alright if I walk through your garden?"

Again she just nodded, and started walking away. I imagined she was thinking I was some crazy white girl she'd never see again so why bother with names. This was the early 70's and race relations in Alabama were uneasy at best.

I'd never seen plants so beautifully cared for in my life. The leaves were deep green, large and unblemished. And there were no weeds anywhere. I followed her, asking,

"Scuse me, ma'am, may I ask you a question?" She turned, nodded; I pointed to a plant and said, "How do you keep that squash so gorgeous?"

She looked at me and said, "That be zucchini." I blushed.

"Isn't this a lot of hard work?"

"That be my food," she said, then she added, "You concrete."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You be a concrete baby, ain't got no dirt under your feet."

My face turned quite red; I was embarrassed, humiliated, and ashamed about my lack of knowledge. One part of me wanted to storm back to my truck and say things that were not nice about that little old lady, but the other part of me wanted to learn, and I knew if I didn't tick her off too badly, she could teach me. And so I put aside my pride and began laughing. And I laughed long and hard.

I said, "You're right, ma'am, I am a concrete baby, but I would like to learn."

I spent an hour with her in the garden that day, following her around asking a hundred questions.

"How do you keep the insects away from your plants?"

"Wood ash."

"What type of fertilizer do you use?"

"Dried cow patties."

"How do you keep out the weeds?"

"Ten sheets of newspaper."

"Don't you use any chemicals?"

"Don't need no chemicals 'cause God give us what we need."

And so the hour passed with my asking questions, she giving me short answers. It would take a while to understand the principles behind her wisdom but she was right on all counts. This did not surprise me; rather it proved just how little I understood the workings of Nature.

I cannot tell you how many years it would have taken me to learn what she so freely shared with me in that hour. When I'd ask a question she didn't like or that revealed my inexperience, she'd say, "Concrete," and I would flinch. When she offered me a cup of well water I inhaled it. What I really wanted to do was to take a bucket of that cold water and

pour it over my head. Sweat was dripping off me, I was dirty and tired. I looked like Pigpen while she had barely broken a sweat, glistening just a little bit, no dirt on her, and she had worked circles around me. She took small sips of water, wet her scarf and wrapped it around her neck and dabbed her wrists with her wet sleeves. I carefully observed this and noted I would be dressed in a similar fashion on my next visit.

When I left that day, I thanked her profusely for spending her time with me. I asked if there was anything I could bring her on one of my trips back. She, being a woman of few words, just shook her head. I smiled all the way to the growers, ruminating about her answers. I was late to the growers that day and late opening my store--but so grateful that I had stopped and promised myself it would not be the last time.

The next trip down, I loaded five bales of hay, a stack of newspaper, and some turnip seeds as an offering. I did not see her when I pulled in so I placed the hay, seeds and newspaper where it was out of the road but clearly visible. On the way back, I saw she was out working so I stopped. She didn't mention my offerings but I noticed they had been moved. I was grateful she wasn't going to toss me out or ask me to leave. I valued what she had to say and what I could learn.

"Concrete, you want some vegetables?"

I smiled and said, "Yes, ma'am."

She taught me how to pick vegetables without injuring the plants, how to tell a melon was ripe and when to leave it on the vine, how to remove suckers from the tomatoes and how to keep borers off the squash. "Wrap a thin sheet of paper around the stems. Aluminum foil if you got it." When it came to picking the okra, she cut one, rubbed it against her overalls, and handed it to me, saying, "Here, try this.' I'd never had raw okra but there was no way in hell I was going to refuse her. She must have seen the half-hearted smile on my face because her next words put me at ease: "We eat everything else raw." I was amazed at how good it was and to this day it's my favorite way of eating okra.

I spent time with her on two more occasions and loved every minute of it. We never talked about anything personal, just plants, pests and preserving the yield. I asked questions and she'd answer:

“How do you preserve the harvest? “

“Can them.”

“What about leftovers?”

“There ain’t any.”

“What to do about deer?”

“Shoot them and eat them.”

I knew I would never see her again when I passed by one day and her garden was unkempt. I stopped, cried, and gave thanks for her teaching this brash, young, white woman so many great lessons. This old lady never told me her name, and she only referred to me as Concrete. She never invited me into her house but she opened her mind and her knowledge to me. Our differences were vast but that did not stop the bond that formed between two women who loved the earth. Though I never knew her real name, I deferred to her as a teacher and always called her “Ma’am.” Over the years, anytime I thought I was too much of a know-it-all, I would image her face and say, "Yo, Concrete."

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*Libby Rich retired after 38 years as the owner of a garden center on Birmingham's Southside. She also retired from her role on the TV segment "Ask the Gardener" after appearing 30 plus years. She has written three books: The Odyssey Book of Houseplants, approved by the American Horticultural Society; Edmond and the Baby Hummingbird, a true story about a long-time employee rescuing a baby hummingbird from the greenhouse, and Halloween--A Short History. She continues to consult with people in their gardens, write various articles, read and spend time with her dogs and birds. **plantodyssey5@aol.com***
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"To give birth to a desire, to nourish
it, to develop it, to increase it, to
satisfy it: this is a whole poem."

--Balzac

FOR THE CANARY IN YOUR HEART

Kwoya Fagin Maples

“If these delights thy mind may move,
then live with me and be my love.”

-- Christopher Marlowe

Chantell teases— as are your eyes are bird’s eyes,
two baths of menthol wings.

Our babies, she says, would surely be
wild-eyed and winded to fly.

I, having no free tickets to the moon,
I’d love you. Hair your beards,
carry you shoreline bald or shelled,
it’s neither here nor there.

Your ears pick up sounds, strum leaves
abandoning trees. Your ears pick sounds
and give leaves as presents.

What I want:

Your hot hand testing for fevers.

Your hot hand in my middle rib.

I’ll give your bone back, Sweet.

I’ll rock you into.

Plus I’ve got doves from sand dollars.

Five doves to a dollar.

And you can bet your last—

I’d give your beet lips a reason to answer.

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Kwoya Fagin Maples is a poet from Charleston, SC. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Alabama. She now lives and teaches in Birmingham, AL. kwoyafagin@yahoo.com

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CYCLAMEN

Linda Stephan
8" x 11"

Watercolor on 140 lb. cold press paper

Linda Stephan is a native of Birmingham, AL. Paris is her other favorite city. In addition to her black and white photography endeavors, Linda is a free-lance writer, amateur painter, and adjunct professor of Art History at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Inewby@aol.com

CONFETTI KITES

Sally Yazwinski

Mirrored moths will mimic the leaves that flutter and sway sideways. Mushrooms like thimbles, nuthatches that cling to bark like magnets, the sound of breaking glass as a cicada falls off its branch, and a green gust through the trees that steals a different season for now. I see and hear all these things with one eye to the sky, an August sky, resolution.

Like lightning licking a new night, a silent jet unzips the sky. Its trail of cloud intersecting with others and soon the tiles that have appeared from the vapors may find their way down, falling and forming a floor to these woods.

Kites pop confetti bright in the air. Purplepink, and slategreysilver, imagine them wrapping around themselves, a makeshift maypole. All of them, their strings sing to the small hands that hold them. Howling and hooting, it's all too much, the smile lines near their eyes pinch and grow.

The tips of their fingers red, their nail beds are Cheshire Cat moons. Gripping and twisting, pulling and tugging, it's my wish to see these children way up there. To watch them hop scotching planes and parachutes, playing hacky sack with a helicopter. With their heels in the dirt, molars melded and clenched, they strain to remain with their feet on the ground. They look to each other, laugh into their bare summer sun shoulders, and use their river pebble toes to keep from slipping.

As the afternoon pours on, tired from trying to tether themselves, one by one, fine fingers release, and important colors are found in the sunset. Children kneel and cross their ankles over each other, their chins to their chests, and solemnly sink into their knees.

Wishing that, since they found out and science aside, anything can happen.

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Sally Yazwinski is currently earning her MFA in fiction. Before pursuing writing, she was a middle school special education teacher. She grew up on a dairy farm in Western Massachusetts, and holds New England close to her heart. sally.yazwinski1@gmail.com

DEAR BONNIE: 1: CONCERNING AGING

Ann Cohn

Dear Bonnie,

It was lovely hearing from you. Did you ever get your problems with the Social Security folks settled? Surely verifying your age should be simple enough.

I remember when social security was inaugurated. That brings me to thinking about all the changes that have taken place during my lifetime. Have you ever thought about this? Everyone wants a long life but nobody really wants to get "old." And what is old anyway?

Thanks for letting me bend your ear. Stay well and let me hear from you soon.

Love,

Hannah

P.S. I promise my complaint department will be closed by then and I'll be open to yours.

.....

Anne Euchvitz Cohn was born in 1919 to immigrant parents and grew up in early Birmingham, AL. In 1940, she married her childhood sweetheart and moved to Gadsden, AL, where they founded the family business, Marvin's Hardware and Building Supply Co. Now widowed and a grandmother, she lives in Birmingham, AL. She is the author of How Little Annie Got to be the Matriarch.

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BEHIND ME

Nathan Leslie

I can feel their eyes on me. I don't mind it. The one behind me to the right wears pleated pants, smells like leather and cologne and a whiff of suntan lotion. He's talking about his leagues. Sports, sports, sports: like I care. The other one is the listener. He's glum, smoking a clove to the nub, holding it like a joint, nodding his dark and glistening hair. He's older. His forehead crinkles. Striking worry lines. His eyes are on my shoulder blades, arms, waist. The other goes directly to the more concealed areas.

Feeling the invisible brush of eyes: what kind of sixth sense is this?

I'm wearing my black and white shirt, the striped one. I'm freckling in the sun; I can feel the vitamin D soak into my eyelids. This is life. We're out at the concert, listening to the tender pluck, snap, pluck. The instrumental guitarist brings tears to my eyes. Wishing I could play an instrument. Never had the talent, really. My mother encouraged me to no avail. Recorder lessons. A bit of piano. Never took.

When I was a little girl I was a little girl. Did they pay me any mind then? Hell no. But now that I'm gangly and reclining on the grass they'd have me in a second. It doesn't bother me, I swear. It's flattering actually. I mean, it is. If they weren't behind me maybe I'd give one of them a shot. Not both. I'm not...Degraded, immoral stuff. Not that they would mind that one bit, or at least one of them. The other one would hold me tight no matter what. He would love.

The guitarist finishes one shimmering, gorgeous number and the crowd claps. The picnickers swish wine glasses, nibble on cheese, carrot sticks, cherry tomatoes. The sporty cologne man whistles between his teeth. The melancholy clove smoker claps slowly, holding the nub between his teeth. It's almost overwhelming: the smell of grass and mulch and pine needles and clove cigarettes. The guitarist clinks and clanks and picks his way through the next number, tapping his right foot to keep time. One man and a brown guitar. I have to admit, I am jealous of his enthusiasm. Why am I empty and diffuse?

Then the hushed baritone: "Do you have the time?"

I do, and I tell him without looking back. In the past he could tell by the angle of the sun. All that lost knowledge. My freckled wrists are thicker than I want them to be. Ankles too. The clove smoker looks at my large hands.

“You know,” I say, softly, fixing my gaze on the guitarist. I fix a light irony in my voice. “I’m not really a big fan of people looking over my shoulder. They say there is some biological element in that, something about defending against predators.”

The guitarist shakes his hair out of his face, lifts his head to the sun. I do the same. That golden orb. My peripheral vision: a weed between the smirky teeth of the sporty guy, the seedy end of it dangling, probing the air. I wave a huddle of gnats away.

“What?” the melancholy man says. “I couldn’t hear you.”

The other one snorts. At least one of them could—the one I wanted to.

“Never mind,” I say, shaking my head. “It’s not that important.”

I watch the clouds scud by, close my eyes, bob my head. In the darkness I can see the clouds. I can see the leaves, the bark. I picture the entire scene—the picnickers, the men, the guitarist, the grass. Opening my eyes I notice what my imagination missed. Leave me to my delirium, will you?

“You want to dance?” the melancholy man asks me, leaning forward. He doesn’t touch me, though I’d like him to. I wouldn’t mind if he simply brushed his hand across my shoulder blades, accidental or not. I turn to see him. I hadn’t noticed the cluster of freckles on his nose, the way his mouth purses. He has bow-like, full lips, lips a fashion model would kill for. Bee-stung. He stubs his clove into the grass, points to the far left of the stage. Men and women sway in the plum shade, under the wavering leaves, sandaled and barefoot men and women arms encircling waists, shoulder blades. I watch them move. They move. I feel the deeper lines resonate in the lining of my stomach.

“Sure,” I say. “Why not?”

He stands, holds out his hand to me, lifts me from the grass. His friend doesn’t watch us at all. I don’t care. There is little I do care about. We sway, sway, sway.

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Nathan Leslie is author of six books of short fiction and one poetry collection. His work has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and he was series editor for two The Best of the Web anthologies. He is fiction editor for Newport Review. www.nathanleslie.com.

SNOW FELL ON ALABAMA

Patricia J. Weaver

On New Year's Eve 1963, I stood at the picture window, my eleven-year-old heart pounding, and watched snow float silently to the ground. My brother and I whispered about all the things we were going to do come morning. Things we had only read about or our northern-bred mother had told us about. Sledding, snow angels and snowball fights were first on our list.

The next morning, we woke up to the amazing sight of 18 inches of snow covering the ground. I squealed with delight at the new adventure before me but my parents looked out the window frowning. On this day, Daddy accidentally invented the most memorable event of my childhood. He stood on the back porch looking at his cows standing belly deep in snow and wondered how to get ten bales of hay to the pasture to feed them.

"Get your boots on kids, I have an idea," he said.

We put on our warmest jackets, gloves and hats. Daddy was the only one with rubber boots, so mother duct taped plastic over my tennis shoes and my brother's leather. Daddy had no problem walking in the snow, with his long legs he took giant steps, but it was a struggle for us.

"Daddy," I said. "Take smaller steps so we can walk."

Laughing, Daddy picked up my brother and told me to climb on his back. He carried us to the tractor shed. First, he cranked the old Farmall tractor and let it idle to warm up. Then he took a wrench from the tool box and removed the hood of his old truck. He grabbed two chains from the bed of the truck and attached the hood to the back of the tractor. After testing his makeshift sled in the yard, he put us on the hood and drove to the barn. After the hay was loaded, he climbed on the tractor and called, "Hang on!"

I felt like I was on a roller coaster as the tractor inched out to where the cows were standing. A two-week old calf couldn't walk in the snow and had to hop like a rabbit. I thought it was funny to watch, but Daddy didn't see the calf's problem as humorous.

"That little guy will freeze in this stuff," he said and stumbled through the knee-deep snow to catch it. He gently picked up the scared calf and laid it in the sled to take back to the barn. My brother and I had to hold it, which was not an easy task. It butted me in the stomach and kicked my

brother twice. The old mama cow followed bellowing her displeasure all the way to the barn. After the cow and calf were settled in a dry stall, Daddy stomped toward the house. Before he went far, we circled him begging for a ride.

“One trip around the pasture but that’s all,” he said.

That was the greatest sled ride I ever had. Of course it was the only sled ride I ever had.

After the ride, Daddy went into the house for a cup of coffee. We made snow angels and tried to build a snowman. After several attempts and failures, we headed to the house for instructions from our mother. She told us it was too cold for her to go outside and reminded us to take off our home-made snow boots before we came inside. We decided to stay out and play a little longer.

My brother started a snowball fight and our yard became a battle zone. Even though he was the youngest, my brother was a better shot. I got tired of him hitting me with snowballs and pushed him in the deep ditch by the road. I rolled on the ground laughing until I realized that he was completely covered with snow. He wasn’t hurt but I couldn’t get him out. I went to get my parents. As they fussed over my brother, I slipped away to the safe haven of my grandmother’s house.

I walked the short distance to her house in the tire ruts on the road. Just as I opened the back door to go into the kitchen, Granny appeared. She swooped down on me like a hawk. She had a broom in one hand and a towel in the other. She swatted and wacked me with the broom and when that didn’t work, she told me to take off my wet, snow covered clothes.

“And don’t even think about coming inside with those muddy shoes.”

I looked at her bewildered. Aliens had invaded her body. My Granny would never ban me from her house just because of a little snow and mud.

After removing my outer clothes, I meekly sat at the kitchen table eating biscuits, fried potatoes and country ham. Granny wrapped me in a quilt and fussed about me getting so cold. She wouldn’t let me walk back home. Daddy came on the tractor to get me.

When we got home Daddy told me to get in the house and get out of my wet clothes. “Your mother has a hot bath ready for you and then you need to take a nap.”

I tried to explain that I hadn’t taken a nap since I was six but he was in no mood to listen.

He said, “Do as I say.”

I walked into the kitchen, leaving a trail of muddy water behind me. Mother scooted me off to the bathroom. I asked where my brother was and that made her remember that it had been me that pushed him in the ditch. She lectured me on the dangers of horse play and said that I better hope he didn't get pneumonia.

Later I snuggled down in my warm bed and thought about how cranky all the grown-ups had been. That's when I came to the conclusion that, Adults don't like snow.

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Patricia J. Weaver lives in Florence, Alabama, with her husband, her dog, horses and a flock of chickens. Her passions are her grandchildren and telling stories. Mrs. Weaver has won numerous writing contests and has been widely published.
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“Do not be critics, you people. I beg you. I was a critic, and I wish I could take it all back because it came from a smelly and ignorant place in me, and spoke with a voice that was all rage and envy. Do not dismiss a book until you have written one, and do not dismiss a movie until you have made one, and do not dismiss a person until you have met them.”

--David Eggers



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