

Birmingham Arts Journal

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Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **LAVENDER FIELD, HUNGARY** – Digital Photo, Eniko Szucs
Eniko Szucs holds Masters' Degrees in Photography and Design Management from MOME, the Hungarian Royal Institute of Arts and Crafts. A native of Hungary, she divides her time between Budapest and Flemington, New Jersey. She specializes in landscape and architectural photography. www.enikoszucs.com. photos@enikoszucs.com.

Back Cover: **WINGS OF TRIUMPH** – Bronze Sculpture
15', McWhorter Center, Auburn University, Branko Medenica.
Branko Medenica is an international sculptor whose large scale commissions are part of landscapes in Japan, Europe and the US. He is the author of Old George: The Restoration Process, and Forging Art through Friendship: The Recasting of Vulcan, a DVD. He lives in Birmingham, Alabama, with his wife Debbie. <http://www.ltpro.com/branko/contact.html>. branko7@hotmail.com

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**AT AGE NINETY MY GRANDFATHER
NO LONGER GARDENS**

Irene Latham

No time, he says, as he lifts my grandmother
from her wheelchair to the toilet and back again

spoons rice and cubed jello past unsmiling lips
into her gaping baby-bird mouth

then eases her onto the sofa, careful
to tuck the beaded flannel beneath her chin.

Meanwhile, what was once jubilant rows
of tasseled corn and sturdy pole beans

now snarls like a half-starved dog
whose coat is thick with burrs and tangles,

and as my grandmother's breath shuffles in and out
my grandfather dreams of tomatoes:

fat Beefsteak and juicy Better Boys,
Early Girls blushing pink then flaming red,

remembers summers spent weeding and watering,
how he'd palm the tomatoes, give them the slightest twist,

then sit back on his heels as the fruit burst
like fireworks against the back of his teeth.

.....

Irene Latham, recent Alabama Poet of the Year, is poetry editor of the Birmingham Arts Journal. Her novel for young adults, Leaving Gee's Bend, will be published in 2010. She lives in Shelby County, Alabama, with her husband Paul and three sons. www.irenelatham.com

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THE ILLUSIONIST

Bruce Holland Rogers

When Jerome's father died, his mother started visiting mediums and spiritualists, and Jerome would come along and sit in the room while his father's messages were conveyed to the land of the living. This was the beginning of his interest in crystal balls, velvet cushions, bright scarves, and other accoutrements of magic. Before he was even a teenager, Jerome knew that communication with the dead was a confidence game, one that he would never play.

But he had taught himself card tricks and the art of palming a coin. He entertained his friends by cutting and restoring ropes or making water poured into a cone of paper disappear.

Girls liked the tricks. It didn't hurt that he was handsome, that his long-fingered hands were pleasant to look at, that he knew how to smile for everyone the smile that was meant just for them. He earned his college tuition money by doing magic shows at parties, and then developed a routine of cabinet tricks with his pretty girlfriend. They performed at the local arts center and drew big enough crowds to earn the interest of a booking agent. They did variations of Assistant's Revenge, Mismade Girl, and the Cabinet Escape.

After one show, a man came backstage to say that it wasn't a bad show, but that with a little thought, it could be great. The man was none other than Vaclav Storek, the Storek who turned out to have retired with a few untried ideas.

His suggestions made possible all sorts of novelties, including a variation of the Mismade Girl using an additional pretty assistant. One girl dressed all in green, the other in purple, and when the cabinet sections were moved and the divided girls restored, the assistants both wore a mix of green and purple as if they had been scrambled and reassembled in a new configuration of parts.

Storek taught Jerome the really big tricks, and together they developed illusions that hadn't been imagined yet by anyone else. The act appeared on the late-night television shows, then on hour-long network specials. Jerome always acknowledged Storek's contributions at the end of each show, called him a great teacher and master of masters.

"There is still one secret I haven't shown you yet," Storek would say.

(continued on page 4)



WHISPERS

Roberto Mendez

Digital Painting

18" x 24"

Roberto Mendez is director of Upward Bound at Modesto Junior College in California. He is inspired by the works of Leonardo daVinci and renders the human form in oil on canvas and in digital photos. He holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from California State University, Sacramento, and lives in Stockton. His work can be seen in Brooklyn, NY at Micro Museum Gallery. rlmendez@clearwire.net

The old man died without showing him the final secret. The show went on. Jerome worked his way through a great many beautiful assistants and finally married one. He started a family. His permanent show in Las Vegas and the occasional television special kept the money flowing in. As if by magic, he liked to say.

He had everything. The house, the cars, the wife, the new pretty assistants. Applause from a packed house for five shows a week. Everything.

He drank. He lingered in his dressing room with a bottle longer and longer after each performance. He had built his life on illusion, which meant that he saw through illusions better than most people. Applause no longer fed him.

Money was numbers written on ephemeral paper. His wife was getting older, and even if he divorced her for a younger woman, that wouldn't buy him any more time as a young man. Some nights he would not emerge from his dressing room until everyone else had gone. He would turn on the one spot for the center of the stage, roll the great black and gold cabinet into the light, and open the door to look at the darkness inside. Someday he would enter that darkness. Someday, he would leave everything behind.

One night, Jerome not only drank, but took pills. Not enough to do him harm, he thought, but he staggered on his way to the technician's controls for the lights. He stumbled as he made his way to the stage. His ears buzzed. For a moment, he thought he heard voices, but he was alone.

He rolled the cabinet into its position under the spotlight. He opened the door and peered into the blackness. He got in. He crouched down, then curled himself into the fetal position. In some places, they buried the dead curled up like this. He exhaled and did not inhale immediately, experimenting with what it was like not to breathe. This was the one real thing. Everything pointed to this.

Yes, said the unmistakable voice of Storek in his ear. The last secret.

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Bruce Holland Rogers lives in Eugene, Oregon, and teaches fiction writing in the Whidbey Writers Workshop Master of Fine Arts program of the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts. His stories have won a Pushcart Prize and two World Fantasy Awards. His fiction has been translated into over two dozen languages. More of his stories can be read at www.shortshortshort.com.

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PEDAL CAR AFTERNOON

Jim Reed

The afternoon is blistering hot and the red bugs and flies are having a field day on my bare ankles and arms. But the heat of the day and the radiant heat from the metal of my pedal car aren't noticed at all. That's because I am three years old and I have yet to understand that you're supposed to spend parts of each day commenting on and whining about bugs and heat and humidity.

My mind is too clear, too uncluttered, to worry about such stuff.

What my mind is filled with is the sight of the sidewalk that runs from the front steps of our small asbestos-shingled home to the asphalt pavement in front of it. My pedal car is aimed toward the avenue, but my gaze is to the right, toward 15th Street East and across it to the large high-fenced federal medical and housing complex known as Northington Campus. That's where Daddy works all day, maintaining the buildings and sometimes talking with the German prisoners of war who live there.

I'm waiting for Daddy to limp home from work, just a hundred yards from here, but oh, so far away, since I am not allowed to leave the front yard and even if I could, a hundred-yard trek would feel like crossing a damp Sahara.

The pedal car squeaks as I work it back and forth on the sidewalk, and the rusty steering wheel is hard to turn. No power steering invented yet. My attention span snaps for a moment and I look across the avenue at the field where my neighborhood playmates and I will be playing as we get older. The golden grass is nearly three feet tall and it waves so gracefully in the occasional breeze.

A bi-plane buzzes overhead, and I automatically salute it, a ritual drummed up by my sister and me. The patriotic thing to do during World War Two, while my uncles are overseas fighting, is to recognize the importance of aircraft, using them as a reminder to have fun, but not so much fun as to forget about all those soldiers and sailors and paratroopers and marines and WACS and WAVES and WAFS and Air Corps people and Coast Guardsers who might die at any moment so that I can be safely riding my rusty pedal car each afternoon. Somewhere over yonder, my Uncle Buddy McGee is fighting his way toward Germany. My Uncle Pat McGee is repairing some GI's wound, and the husbands and sons of our neighbors are each doing something to help the war end sooner than never.

A black Model-A Ford automobile, as rusty and hard to steer as my pedal car, turns off 15th Street onto Eastwood Avenue, my avenue, and pulls up to the house next door. Pawpaw Burns gets out of the car and stoops under his enormous pecan tree to pick up a couple of pecans, which he cracks open with one hand--something I won't be able to do for a few more years. Pawpaw regards me while he picks the sweet meat from the bitter shells.

"Whatcha doing, Master Jim?"

I blush, not expecting to be spoken to.

"Nothing," I reply, and I vigorously pedal the car to show Pawpaw how robust and strong I am--deserving to be called Master!

"Well, maybe you'll be doing something later," he jokes, adding, "It's never too late, you know."

Pawpaw knows more about me than even my own family--I can tell that, because he's very old, and very old people are wiser than three-year-old people and grown-up parents. I am embarrassed that he can read my mind, but I am awed by his taking notice of me. I will regret many times not being old enough to sit down with Pawpaw and hear his tales and feel his wisdom, and I will often try to make amends for that loss by spending time with people older than me. It's never too late.

Pawpaw leisurely picks up a few more pecans and goes inside his home to see what Mawmaw is up to.

I look up the avenue again to see if Daddy has appeared yet. I really am looking up the avenue--not down--because it slants upward toward the street. I will use this one-block incline to my advantage as I grow. It will be great for coasting in a wagon. It will assist me when, on a windy day, I don roller skates, grab Mother's old umbrella, and let the wind fill that umbrella and push me downhill for a block that feels like a mile.

"Clunk," goes the manhole cover on the street before our house. It makes that sound every time a car rolls over it, and I will hear that sound mixed with the lonely mellow sound of a train whistle throughout many days and nights on Eastwood Avenue.

Even now, in my book loft 55 miles and 60 years away from Eastwood Avenue, I still hear that train whistle each day. It may even be the same train whistle, because the engines seem to keep on rolling. It is the same railroad track, I do know that. I have no way of knowing that in half a century I will still be living and working by the same tracks that run

by Eastwood, having the same lonesome going-away feeling in my belly that I have now, sitting here in this rusty pedal car.

I gaze at that field again, anxious to go hiding and adventuring among the golden weeds. My brand-new baby brother, Ronny, is abed inside the house, dreaming of warm milk and warm breasts. My older sister, Barbara, is swirling crayons in her Shirley Temple coloring book, her artistic skills even now pushing themselves into full view. Barbara's coloring is full of shadings and interpretations that kids like me can never achieve. It's no fun for me, coloring within the lines, but sister Barbara does it so well, I just know she's going to be a famous artist like my Aunt Mattie Wooten in West Blocton.

I look at my small palms and marvel at the red dust and sweat that have made themselves into clay in the folds and wrinkles and under the fingernails. I wipe them on my short pants so that Barbara or Mother won't make me wash them.

Up the street, I see the figure of Daddy, and I scramble out of the pedal car because it can't go as fast as I can. My father limps from an old coal mining accident. He wears khaki pants and a pith helmet, just like Jungle Jim does in the movie serials. I race up the street and hug his leg, and maybe this is the day he brings me a hand-made gift from one of the young German soldiers. It's a beautiful curved bottle with a painted figure thereon, and we will keep this small treasure in the family from now on, never knowing the name of the prisoner artist, but knowing that it is a special and unearned gift from a stranger in a strange land to a family he will never meet.

Daddy smells familiar and manly, as daddies usually do. A bit of coal dust from the summer-dormant furnaces at Northington settles down and shakes its essence up whenever Daddy and his workers move about. Some sweat--no air conditioning in the hospital or the barracks. Some hair tonic fragrance, but mainly the smell of Daddy. He picks me up high and my cheek rubs against his swarthy, unshaved cheek, and I will forever remember that texture, because there's never been another experience like that. I don't rub cheeks with adult men, so my encounter with Daddy's face is a fresh and uncluttered encounter.

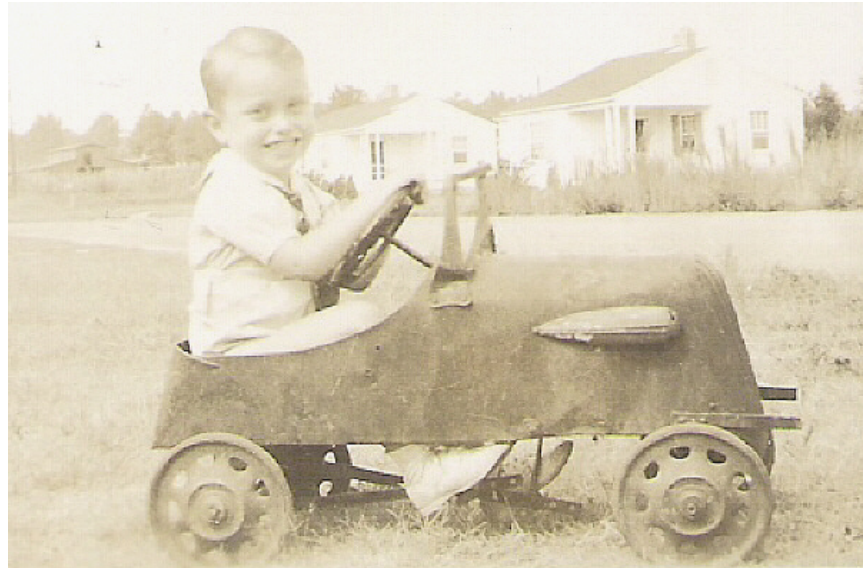
Mother actually starches and presses Daddy's khaki trousers, so that he starts each day fresh and tailored. Daddy walks down the avenue with a small three-year-old dancing around him, and we go inside our cave, smelling cornbread cooking in a greased iron pan, turnip greens bubbling

in their sliced-egg broth, and freshly-fried chicken waiting for kids to fight over drumsticks and pulley bone wishes.

The rock is rolled before the entrance of the cave to keep the sabretoothed tigers at bay, and our little Stone Age family huddles together to await the fireflies, the purple-starred night, and the likes of Fibber McGee and Molly crouching inside our radio set in the living room, getting ready to entertain us before we leap fresh-toothbrushed into our hand-washed bedclothes to sleep the only innocent and pure sleeps of our long lives.

Can I, the grizzled old memory-man, return to those days and wrap myself up in their warm purity, and, once more, feel wanted and loved and cared for and safe?

As Pawpaw Burns would say, still regarding me closely after all this time, "It's never too late."



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Jim Reed writes and remembers in Birmingham, Alabama. www.jimreedbooks.com
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PENDULUM

Leticia Luna

translated by Toshiya Kamei

PENDULO

I close my eyes
and unwind at day's end

A thousand verses spin like stars
in my bedroom
Can my hand
leave my body
and write in the shadows?

Cierro los ojos
con el alivio de terminar un dia

Mil versos giran constelados
en la habitacion
Sera posible que la mano
salga del cuerpo
y en la penumbra escriba?

.....

Leticia Luna was born in Mexico City in 1965. She is the author of Hora lunar (1999), El amante y la espiga (2003), and Los dias heridos (2007).

Translations of her poems have appeared in Common Ground Review, The Dirty Goat, Illuminations, Shearsman, and Visions International.

Toshiya Kamei is the translator of The Curse of Eve and Other Stories by Liliana V. Blum (2008) as well as selected works by Leticia Luna. She lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

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CHAINS

Darla Farner
Mixed Media
41 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 34 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Darla Farner begins her work with watercolor, then adds layers of gouache and acrylics. Her art can be seen at the Columbia River Gallery in Troutdale, Oregon, and the Marriott Hotel in downtown Portland. www.watercolorinmotion.com. d.farner@comcast.net.

THE BROTHERHOOD OF MAN

Foster Dickson

I am from nowhere, a place you know
but I have seen – I am the wax
that trickled and dropped, disowning
its candle, owing everything to fire.
I am death warmed over for
twenty-five to thirty minutes until
my middle is soft but warm. I
have one brother, and his name
is Unfinished Business. He painted
a target on my back, and I dodge
bullets now.

You – you all are grief
and misery, but I adore you
just the same . . . all because
we have agreed to dance in this glory
together.

.....

*Foster Dickson is a writer, editor, teacher, and poet who lives in
Montgomery, Alabama. His new book, an artist's biography titled I Just Make
People Up: Ramblings with Clark Walker, is available from NewSouth Books.*

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**"I just put my feet in the air
and move them around."**

--Fred Astaire

SPRING

Peter Van Belle

He spotted it in the corner of the window. Its wings peeked over the frame, their slow repeated fluttering suggesting exhaustion. He studied the butterfly closely. Between those black and red brown wings, the hairy body looked too large. He realized the wings hadn't grown, but were small and jagged as if corroded. Perhaps it was this weather. Spring just wouldn't come. A stubborn north wind kept everything leafless. It kept the flowers in their buds so dooming this little creature as well.

"Brian, you'll have to help me up."

The nurse didn't come today so he'd agreed to take the day off to help mom.

"Yes, mummy."

He wondered why she'd put on her dress to sit on the bed, perhaps to look her best for him. He took her by the bony shoulders to straighten her, then moved his left hand to support her back. At the touch of the weak flesh bulging around her bra strap his hand pulled back, like a snake that'd just struck and coiled itself for another lunge. This happened without thought and she seemed not to have noticed. Gently he moved her from the bed, remembering all the times, at dances and parties, when his hand felt the strap slightly indenting a girl's tight but soft flesh.

"I want to read now."

"It wasn't necessary to get off the bed for that. You could've asked for the book you wanted."

"Brian dear, you'll have to be patient with me. The bed's only good for sleeping anyway."

He helped her downstairs to the small lounge where they sat down on the settee in front of the television, where his mom and dad used to sit when he was small. The flotsam of three lives, all the memories and feelings, had washed up among the furniture and photo frames. A sports car passed in the street, moving at a leisurely pace but making a noise like a race car. His mom gave a short laugh.

"Silly ass, it's like hearing a chess player groan like a weightlifter."

"I hate them."

"You get used to it. It's nothing new."

"I lived here for twenty-six years and I still hate them."

She took up her book. He knew her eyesight was failing and she'd spend ages on one page. He listened to the sounds, the traffic noise, the planes taking off from the airport behind the tenements. A lock of white hair swung down her forehead. Without taking her eyes off the page, the same page, she carefully tucked it back in.

Suddenly his vision blurred and he started sobbing. In a flash as if to put out a fire, she dropped her book and embraced him. She held his head against her shoulder and rubbed the back of his head and neck. Whenever she did that to him in the past his dad had disapproved. And he himself hated being cuddled as well, and for a moment he tried to pull back, but it worked.

"Now dear, it's all right."

He stopped crying.

A week later Spring arrived. Leaves dusted the trees a bright green and insects appeared. Perhaps the butterfly survived too.

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Peter Van Belle lives and works in Antwerp, Belgium. His poems and short stories have appeared in magazines in Great-Britain, Ireland, the US, Canada and New Zealand, including in Spin (NZ), Orbis (UK) and Zygote (Canada).
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**"We have learned the answers,
all the answers: It is the
question that we do not
know."**

--Archibald Macleish

BEFORE IT COMES TO THAT

Brian George

Marilyn throws her cigarette butt onto the gravel and walks into the school kitchen.

She's on salads today, washing iceberg lettuce, slicing tomatoes and cucumbers, passing the plates to Alison for the ham to be plonked on top. Don't know why we bother, really, she thinks, the kids only ever eat the ham anyway. The rest gets chucked straight in the bin.

Still, it's a job. She repeats this to herself whenever she feels like ripping her apron off and just walking out. It's a job. A job. Jobjobjob.

Alison starts talking out of the side of her mouth without looking up at Marilyn.

"Seeing him again, then, are you?"

"Saturday. Out for a meal in Wetherspoons."

"Nice."

Sudden rush on the salads. The lower school orchestra must have finished their practice.

"So, come on, spill. What's he like... you know? Janice says she heard he's got a cock like a laser gun."

"No idea what she's on about. Must be so long since she had a good seeing to her memory's playing tricks on her."

As she chops the lettuce Marilyn smiles to herself and thinks of Marco, down at the gym, whipping his body into shape. She wipes a pool of tomato pips into the bin, and feels the tautness of his muscles under her fingers, the smooth curve of his spine as she watches him sleeping next to her. She winces at the thought of his balled fist, knowing there'll come a day when this streaming sweetness between them will harden into something else.

The trick is to be out the door and way down the road before it comes to that.

The shutters on the serving hatch slam down. Marilyn clears up, sharpens her knife ready for tomorrow.

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Brian George lives in south Wales, UK. His work has been accepted by a number of print and online journals, including New Welsh Review, Cadenza, Tears in the Fence, Prick of the Spindle, Everyday Fiction and Poetry Wales. His first collection of short fiction, Walking the Labyrinth, was published by Stonebridge Books in 2005. briangeorge711@btinternet.com

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ALLISON

Doraine Bennett

1.

Skin, stretched membrane thin,
refuses an answer. Where
is the bony heel?
Her fingers question,
restless across her belly.

Head pressed to the frozen pane,
she stares into the silent
night, pondering
the child.

2.

Ten fingers and toes,
each tipped by a tiny nail,
she strokes them gently so
they lay curled across her thumb.
Wisps of brown hair stand on end,
lips curved in a half-smile,
lashes and brows rest on closed lids-
perfect, but for breath.

3.

She flinches at the odor of ashes.
From the kitchen counter,
an open cookbook mocks her.
Someone moved the cradle.
She breathes a silent thank you,
a silent curse,
and avoids the yellow blanket.

The impulse to hurl a dish
grows with each plate, saucer, bowl,
until she reaches the cup.

The impact shatters
the fragile thing.
Coffee, half-drunk,
pools on the floor
where she crumples
amid the shards,
pulls the blanket to her crest,
and moans herself a lullaby.

4.

Give the sculptor no tool
to free the stone-bound pieta.

Bind the singer.
Leave him gagged,

engorged in silent song.
Deny the painter his palette.

Cuff his hands while he mourns
the interrupted canvas, and images bleed,

ignored, on the floor.
Then watch him grieve,

like a childless mother
who cups her breasts,

hands taut against fevered glands
that run with milky tears.

5.

Bare wood awaits
a ram, or a heifer.
Maybe a pigeon from the poorest -
those blessed ones who see God.

She is blind,
drawn to a bare altar
by the odor of burning myrrh
with nothing to offer
but questions
and pain.

Take off your shoes.
The ground here is holy.

6.
A high place
demands she climb the face,
risk an uncertain step,
scale the crag,
shout her name to the wind,
reach out her hand,
spread her fingers,
grasp the ribbon of cloud,
claim the mountain.

7.
Wind shimmers through falling leaves.
Oak and aspen raise
silent limbs
toward an indigo sky.
The clouds open.
She stands on tiptoe
and strains to reach the edge of night,
to see beyond the reach of sky
over the rim of here
into after.

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Doraine Bennett loves flowers and words and grandchildren. Her poems have appeared in Innisfree Poetry Journal and Authorme.com. She published four biographies for children in 2008, and her geography books on the Georgia regions will be available this summer from State Standards Publishing. She is the editor of the Infantry Bugler Magazine. Doraine and her husband live in Columbus, Georgia.

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CABIN FEVER

Weshon Hornsby

Oil on Canvas

36"x24"

Weshon Hornsby is a visual artist who loves to paint landscape scenes, animals, still life imagery, cityscapes and portraits. Although his collection is eclectic there is a common thread of brush stroke, bold colors and personal style that makes his work cohesive. His work can be found in private collections, in web galleries, brick and mortar galleries, and in print. He lives in Newark, Delaware.

www.WeshonHornsby.mosaicglobe.com. wephunk1@yahoo.com

A PRETTY LITTLE HOUSE

Rosanne Griffeth

"It's a pretty little house."

"I know, the yard's as neat as a pin. I've never seen it less than perfect. Those Calders are all house-proud that way."

"Did you read about it in the paper?"

"No. Can I use one of your dryer sheets? Damn. Out of quarters. Hey, Roy? Ro-ye!"

"He ain't here. Use some of mine 'til he gets back."

"Thanks."

"He's never here when you need him. I bet he's next door at the Dollar Store chatting up Katey Bateman."

"Not that she'd give him the time of day."

"She gives away more than the time of day when she's a mind to."

"Still--I don't think Roy has a chance with her. So it was in the paper? I missed it."

"Oh yes, in the sheriff's reports. Wendell got called out on it."

"Judy told me about it. Did you know they weren't married? I thought they were married. Judy swears they aren't married."

"They just tell everybody that. What's going on with the kid?"

"Judy said they sent him off for some sort of evaluation. Abused kids or something."

"Well. Good. I was afraid they'd arrested the wrong person. The paper said Kurtis was beating Marley when it happened."

"What did he expect? Hitting that boy's mamma in front of him and all?"

"He's a big ole boy, too. Played junior varsity last year. Paper said Kurtis tried to chase him off with a chair. Knocked him down under the kitchen table."

"That's when the kid pulled the box cutter out. Don't know what he was doing with a box cutter. Kids carry around the damndest things these days."

"Calders are all crazy anyway. That older one had a breakdown in the middle of the Chinese. Did Judy know when Kurtis was getting out of the hospital?"

"He's in there for a while yet. He's got to wear casts on both legs for a long time. They not sure if those big tendons will heal up right."

"Wendell said when he drove up, that boy were just standing in the middle of the driveway covered in blood, just a shakin'. Didn't say nothin'."

"You're right, those Calders are crazy. Wouldn't know it by looking at their house."

"It's a pretty little house. I wouldn't mind having a house like that."

"Your dryer's done."

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Rosanne Griffeth's work has been accepted by Pank, Night Train, Keyhole Magazine, Smokelong Quarterly, The Angler, Insolent Rudder, Thieves Jargon and Six Little Things. She lives on the verge of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and spends her time writing and documenting Appalachian culture. rosiewlf@gmail.com
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"Poetry is not made out of the understanding. The question of common sense is always: 'What is it good for?' a question which would abolish the rose, and be triumphantly answered by the cabbage."

--James Russell Lowell

CHESTNUT

Stephen Woodward

She let the door screech shut behind her and whistled a melody I could only stitch together from another lifetime. When she looked up, her bare feet stopped cold on the wood planks and the color was sucked out from under her dirt-covered face.

"Dad used to sing that to get us asleep," I said, with one heel on the front porch. An old red bicycle rusted against a makeshift railing. Old rags in the shapes of shirts, towels, and pants swooned like tattered kites from a clothesline on the porch. "Remember?"

She looked scared, like an old cat you might find sleeping under a box in an alleyway. The fright melted when she realized who I was and what I meant. She nodded. Yoddle, her graying lab, growled and showed yellow teeth. "Sorry I'm late," I said, smiling. "City gals aren't used to driving." She just stood there, in a torn white tank top and brown cotton pants.

"It's in the past now, Chester," I said, taking my hat off. "Gone." I dropped my suitcases on the ground and ran to embrace her. I whispered close, in her ear, "Gone."

Her body was stiff like a tree trunk. And her eyes seemed to stare out beyond me. I stepped back and examined the girl who was and still is my little sister, Chestnut.

Grandpa gave her that name after she ran off into the woods early Sunday morning, the first day of our summer vacation. We yelled, she didn't come back. We searched, but only found a piece torn from her yellow church dress fluttering on a branch. The police scattered and found her sitting on a rock, deep in the middle of a sun-drenched field, picking chestnut burrs out of a tiny foot. "There you are," she had said, giving us that tooth fairy smile. Now she went by Chester.

"Have trouble finding me?" she said, smirking. Her voice was as creaky as the screen door. A breeze lifted her dirt-yellow hair across her nose. She looked down and covered her face. Tears chipped at the specs of dirt on her cheek and her body collapsed into mine -- the first time I remember touching since the change. She smelled like bark and pine the way girls in Manhattan smelled like Chanel and cigarettes.

"Recluse" was the word Dad had used back in October, seven years ago. He was nursing a cognac and coughing into an unwashed sleeve. "Your sister's a dirty lesbian with no business in this house," he had said, days after Chester had left on a train for our grandparents' farm in Virginia. He adjusted his breathing tube. "She'll find 'nature' and 'herself'

about as soon as she finds a husband to protect her. In this world," and he paused, holding his cough. He pointed a frail, shaking hand out the window to the skyline. "She's going to need it," he said.

The tea pot let out a scream and Yoddle scurried to her bed of towels on the other side of the one-room cabin. Chester sliced some peaches into a ceramic bowl. I stared at her. The muscles on her arms were lean and tough, the scars and scratches covering her body like the webbed tattoos of boys she would bring to our house. Was this her, my sister? Where were her braids, nose ring, or black-rimmed glasses? Maybe, hopefully, she was buried somewhere under this.

"You know why I'm here?" I said, making a self-conscious glance around her house.

She slid the bowl towards me, chewing her peach -- peel, seed and all.

"He's dead. You can come back," I told her. "You can come home." She stood up and wiped peach juice on her pants in a bright, ugly smear.

"I know," she said, chewing her peach, spitting the seed onto the floor.

"So, do it. Start again." I took a sip of the tea and looked out the windows, past the trees, and beyond the dusky mountains. "You can't escape the world, Chester."

The door screeched as she stepped outside to think. The mountains pressed in around her, the trees bent forward, and the peach orchard shrunk back into the ground. In a heartbeat she was before me again, leaning on the table, running a hand through her messy hair. Her once easy smile was spotted with toothless gum and her plump cheeks had receded onto her cheek bones. For a moment, regardless of the words pushing out of her mouth, I could see the wiggle of a young girl trying to dig her way out.

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Stephen Woodward lives and writes in Middlesboro, KY. He also freelances wherever he can and writes a monthly technology column for the Knoxville News Sentinel in Tennessee. He will be pursuing his Master of Fine Arts degree from Spalding University's Low Residency program this year. serenity5306@gmail.com

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DREAM THEORY

Keith Badowski

for Todd Stiles

Superfudge is a book about a boy
who wants to be a bird.
That dream will never come true.

Waterloo ended Napoleon's rule.
Some dreams end in abdication.

Although rumored to be lethal,
the Spartans left on permanent vacation.
Some dreams are never written, dying on the tongue.

Girls and boys are raised up for the presidency,
but who watches those watchmen who let us down?
Too many dreams of justice never reach the psyche.

Tachyons, tachyons, theoretical but never slowing down—
dreams are like that, cold hard proof never found.

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Keith Badowski is current President of the Georgia State Poetry Society and assistant to the pastor at Epworth United Methodist Church in Phenix City, Alabama. His favorite pastime is dramatically reading detective novels to his wife Christi. Keith's poems have appeared in Oxalis, Rambunctious Review and Monkey.

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REDHEAD

Amasa Smith
Pastel on Kraft
36" x 48"

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.
amasa@amasatheartist.com

WAITING FOR MORNING

Jonathan J. Schlosser

The idea of pieces has always been interesting to me. The idea that everything we have can be broken up into smaller bits of itself. It was something that I think I always knew, in the back of my mind, the way you know your mother loves you or that Vietnam is a long damn way away. But it was one of those things that only became true to me later on, when I was in the dark with mortar rounds walking across the earth like giants. I was crying and there was mud in my teeth and my mother was dead.

It was raining, and the rain was just a lot of little pieces of the clouds. That was my first thought as I sat there, waiting to die and wondering if I'd feel it. The rain was pieces and the rocks I was sitting on, the bits of gravel, were just pieces of some bigger rock. How it had gotten broken up, I didn't know. But there were flashes of light coming over the foxhole, pieces of fire, and I knew there were pieces of shrapnel up there as well. Chunks of metal the size of baseballs or silver dollars or fingernails.

I waited for them. It was a stupid thing to do but it was what we were all doing. The night was thick, the kind you couldn't even walk through because the clouds were over the moon. The jungle was rotting around us. That was the biggest thing I took back with me. For most people, it was the faces of men they killed or the memory of the times they were almost those men for other people, but for me it was the jungle, rotting.

Falling, of course, into pieces.

I met a man on the plane, when we were coming over and joking and still thinking it was all a big joke. We laughed and played cards. We talked about firefights, then later found we didn't know anything. We didn't talk about home, because we'd just been there and we'd be back soon enough. I wish we had, now, but we didn't. I've forgotten the man's name, because I have to, but he's dead. Stepped on a landmine just outside of a base called Ripcord, and all they found were little pieces of his boots.

How the boots survived, and not the bulk of him that was higher up, I'll never know.

I thought of all the pieces that night in the foxhole. My mother, dead from cancer. My little brother, on a boat somewhere out there. My father, back in the States and probably reading about the Tigers and drinking. Cassie, who wrote me letters and who I loved more during the war than I ever had back home, when she'd actually been there. Those were the pieces of my life. Those were me, broken up into smaller parts. Scattered parts. Pieces that need to be put back in place, and that was why I was crying.

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Jonathan J. Schlosser has been writing fiction for the past year, in which time he has published twenty-six short stories. He is currently working on a novel, plus an anthology, Candlelight. He lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

www.jonathanjschlosser.com.

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**"Life is the art of drawing
sufficient conclusions from
insufficient premises."**

--Samuel Butler

SUICIDE TALK

Charles Suhor

You said it
like someone checking out
of a slightly unpleasant hotel.
Be civil now, Self;
some folks like it here.

You said it
with a quick leap and curtsy.
Hello, what's this?
Time to snuff it, I guess.

Your voice was on skis.
You took the slopes without a quiver:
too easy. Yet I knew
you never practiced those words,
any more than raindrops practice
racing down a window.

If I were sure
that when you took your life
you did not need my screams
I would sleep at ease with echoes of your words.
(Lock your tomb from the inside.
Lie back, inhale the darkness.
Rest the key on your forehead.)

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Charles Suhor's poems have appeared in Brilliant Corners, College English, Croton Review, New Laurel Review, New Orleans Review, Matrix, and others. Since retiring to Montgomery in 1997, he has written the award-winning Jazz in New Orleans: The Postwar Years (Scarecrow/Rutgers University) and edited his late son's writings, The Book of Rude and Other Outrages: A Queer Self-Portrait (MBF/NewSouth Books). He lives in Montgomery, Alabama.

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TWELVE BLANKETS

Shannon Smith

After the surgeons
fix my brain,
they grow concerned
about my body temperature.
Eighty-six degrees. Strange.
I do not feel cold, only empty.
Nurses bring one blanket after another,
wrap me up tightly. I feel warm
but trapped and weighted.
Swimming with my clothes on.

Two more blankets.
Now I am a fish tangled
in a net. My voice fights
layers of thick cotton,
and when I reach *normal*, I do
not feel normal, just trapped.

Tucked in, but no bedtime story.
I see myself escape from the hospital:
slide in my socks on the shiny floors,
duck into elevators,
wave to other patients.
My blankets in a pile on the floor.

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Shannon Smith holds a Master's of Liberal Arts degree from Winthrop University. She is currently enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing at the Ranier Writing Workshop. Her poetry has appeared in various literary publications, including Poet, International Poetry Review, and New York Quarterly.

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APPLE

Suzanne Coker

The first fruit is long since eaten,
each of its seeds grown into trees

with fruits of their own, each seed
a single space nothing
else can occupy. Trust no longer

enjoyed raw from the hand,
everything must be cooked, then measured.

We peel and peel and cannot find the core;
dig to the heart-winking seeds.

I would bring down this orchard tree by tree
for one taste of what was stolen from me.

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Suzanne Coker is a veteran performance and page poet who currently works the night shift in a pathology lab and maintains her optimism by walking in the woods. Her work has appeared in various anthologies, including Einstein at the Odeon Cafe, Limestone Dust Poetry Anthology and Poems from the Big Table. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama.

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APPLES AND CREAM

Amy Crews
Oil on Canvas
40" x 30"

Amy Crews remembers a neighbor who paid her a nickel for a drawing when she was not much older than four. Winner of many awards, Amy paints in her studio at home in Birmingham, Alabama, where she lives with her husband, Matt, and their two children. www.amycrewsgallery.com. artsycrews@charter.net.

LET IT BE A DANCE

Ester Prudlo

On cold damp mornings as I count arthritic joints
I know that neither burial nor cremation is going to hurt,
That I won't notice it as the heartbreaking undertaker smashes around in
my chest.
Now that the minutes are so long and the years so short,
I hold tight to life, but know as I move closer, I am courting death.

Death's attraction is a slow dance,
Getting to Know You one step at a time, until the body is sure.
No extreme procedures.

With multiple forgettings. The senses fade.
I can't hear you now, but I see more clearly without the cataracts.
Food may be the last of small pleasures. Bring on the hot sauce!

When it's time, let me waltz away in the arms of death,
Breathing slowly and deeply.
No wires, no tubes, no ticking machines.

Let me feel the rhythm until the last beat –
fade into the welcoming dark.

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Ester Hauser Laurence Prudlo is a retired professional counselor. As Ester Hauser Laurence she has three published children's books. Called "Terri" by her friends, Mrs. Prudlo has four grown sons, two step-sons and four grandchildren. She lives in Montgomery with her husband, Tony.

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WORLD OF MY OWN

Brandon Kamins

Last Christmas--or was it my eleventh birthday?--my Uncle Alex got me a planet for a present. I hadn't asked for a planet or even wanted one, but of course I couldn't tell Uncle Alex that. Planets are expensive. This one came in a starter set called "A World of My Own™." I'd never heard of this brand before. But after looking at it through its plastic covering, I got curious...I wanted to open it. But Uncle Alex asked me not to. He told me, warned me, actually, that this particular present wasn't a toy at all. It was a big kid's gift. He told me it takes a lot of responsibility to care for a planet, no matter what its size. I said I was up to it. He said I should read the instruction manual first. I said I would.

It took me three days reading that manual--the thing was hundreds of pages thick! It was very technical, too (like my sixth grade science book). Basically, all it said was that this little planet was a lot like our big planet, only much, much (you get the idea) smaller. There were millions of tiny people on this tiny planet. But of course you couldn't see them with your naked eyes. It'd take a microscope the size of a refrigerator to make them all out. Anyway, they were there, it said. I wasn't so sure. How are you supposed to know something's there if you can't see it?

Description of the planet: the planet itself is about the size of a golf or ping-pong ball, and comes encased in a clear plastic cube, like one of those very valuable autographed baseballs. And it's suspended inside this cube on both ends by a thin plastic wire, so it looks like its just floating.

But you can't even touch it on account of you might--accidentally of course--wipe out an entire country. So what's the gag, you ask? What are you supposed to do with this thing if you can't touch it?

Well, about the only thing you can do is control the weather. You can make it rain or sleet or snow. The kit comes with this weather-making machine that looks a lot like tiny vacuum cleaner. You just snap it in ventilation holes on the top of the cube.

But even that, too, is a huge gyp...there's this weather schedule you have to follow. So, if you did something extreme, like made it rain 40 days

straight, not only would you kill off all the people, but you couldn't get a refund.

This isn't even the worst part about the set. The set unfortunately includes this little, tiny two-way radio over which you can communicate with the leaders of each of the many nations.

These leaders are a bothersome bunch. They have so many problems and they want yours truly to solve them all. They want more food or more raw materials, or they want thermonuclear weapons. I tell them I won't give them thermonuclear weapons. Weapons are sold in separate accessory packs and are very expensive. (That's how they make their money, with the bleeping accessory packs.)

Anyway, they tell me, there is war, there is famine, there are evil despots, and communist regimes. These people have a lot of problems! I mean, really...communism?

I think Uncle Alex made a big mistake getting me this planet. Probably it's meant for older kids, maybe fourteen year olds or older.

I'd be happy with a football.

Anyway, I don't really know what to do with it now. I might put it in the kitchen sink and fill it with water. I'll make the whole planet like the lost city of Atlantis or something. Or maybe just stick it in the freezer and see how long it takes to thaw out, or if anyone would survive.

If my Uncle Alex asks about my planet, I'll just tell him I lost it. I'm really a pretty irresponsible kid and am well known for losing stuff. So I'm pretty sure he'll probably buy it.

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Brandon Kamins is a teacher and writer of short fiction who lives in the small town of Garwood, New Jersey. His stories have appeared in several small literary journals. redmrlove@yahoo.com

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AUGUST 1944

Thomas A. Gordon

You make the French beach unscathed.
Operation Dragoon isn't Overlord,
And that gray, green-shuttered seaside villa
With the tile roof looks promising.
Its barbed wire boundary is navigable,
But the Achtung Minen skull signs give pause.
The other grunts form a silent perimeter
As you climb through a window,
A shell slumbers in the cooling barrel of your M1
And each step in your double-buckle boots
Makes a crackling thud on the marble floor
As you head toward the wires
You've spotted in the front door.
As you cut their connection to a detonator,
Other *S* and *Schu* bombs await,
Poised like spring-loaded crabs.
Your brown eyes have a searcher's gleam
As you poke around the parlor fireplace,
Nudge the doors
To a looted pantry,
Peer around blind curves
On a flight of wooden stairs.
A silence reigns, almost church solemn,
But you aren't thinking of God
Or hearing the ocean haplessly hitting the red rocks outside.
Your tongue touches your lower lip
And you ignore a sudden nose itch
As you unhook the leg of a chair
From a detonator.
You have a cigarette craving
As you unfasten a trip wire,
You don't think of the Arab

Who blew some fingers off his hand
The first day you arrived at the school
Where you learned to disarm mines
Like the one now cupped in your hands.
No time, no reason at all to imagine
40 years later, one of your sons
Coming in the door,
Meeting descendents
Of the villa's original owner
And halting his ascent
On the winding wooden stairway
When one of them says,
Your father walked here.

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Tom Gordon is a state reporter at the Birmingham News. He received his undergraduate degree in political science from the University of Alabama and a Master's Degree in journalism from the University of Missouri. He has reported from Iraq and West Africa, and his poetry has also appeared in Aura. He lives in Birmingham, Alabama.

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**"I will look at any additional
evidence to confirm the
opinion to which I have
already come."**

--Hugh Molson

ON POETRY AND BOOTS THAT DON'T FIT

Wayne Scheer

After the breakup, I visited Gary, my old college roommate turned Vermont farmer.

We took a tour of his property. I was wearing Gary's boots because I didn't want to ruin my Nike's. They were rubbing the hell out of the back of my feet.

"That's what you get for walking in another man's shoes."

I ignored his comment. You encourage him and he'll pun all day.

After a long silence, Gary spoke. "You and Reese were too close.

That's why it didn't work"

"What are you talking about?"

He pointed to a stone wall that ran down the middle of his land.

"Serves no purpose. Probably divided the property years ago. But Lisa and I mend it every spring."

"Why?"

"So she could stand on one side and I could stand on the other when we need to."

"That's a load of crap." His boots made me grumpy. "I always thought Robert Frost mocked that attitude."

"Yeah, but each spring he still mended the wall."

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Wayne Scheer has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Best of the Net. His work has appeared in print and online in a variety of publications including The Christian Science Monitor, Notre Dame Magazine, Birmingham Arts Journal and flashquake. Revealing Moments, a collection of twenty-four flash stories, is available at Thumbscrews Press. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

<http://www.pearnoir.com/thumbscrews.htm>

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ILLUSTRATION

Ed Miller

Once when I was visiting my grandfather in Minnesota, he described a dream to me in which he beheld the fiery edge of the expanding universe, its luminous anatomy spiraling out before him in a breathtaking yet wholly comprehensible and unifying vision.

We shall note here that my grandfather was a dirt farmer of grade-school education. He had cows and a falling-down barn on his property. He had plow horses, Ducey and Sam, and tilled a meager acreage of corn. Still he was fond of science, and ideas, and subscribed to the science fiction magazines of the day, such as *Amazing Stories* and *Galaxy*.

According to my grandfather, in the years following this strange dream he spent every spare moment endeavoring to reclaim and commit to paper what had been revealed to him, even going so far as traveling to St. Paul twice to undergo hypnosis. But these attempts failed.

He could not reconstruct the necessary details of his dream.

As I grew older I gave my grandfather's story some thought, now and then, eventually coming round to the opinion that he'd only dreamed that he'd understood the complexities of the universe's expanding rim, that his transient understanding was itself but a dream within a dream.

Later still, I recounted this story to my new son-in-law, a music teacher.

It was Thanksgiving. Sitting in the living room after dinner, stuffed and drowsy, and after we'd all enjoyed a glass or three of wine, Glenn posited an alternate theory.

He said: You should've told your grandfather this, Bill. You should've said that to understand the advancing frontiers of the universe might require the perspective of a dream; that is, maybe the dream is the language of understanding, the only language of understanding, and so, in this way, the final truth of the universe is constantly revealed and lost.

Even a blind man, he concluded, knows the shape of the world. But can he navigate it? What good is a chart in his hands?

To me, that seemed as satisfactory an answer as any.

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Ed Miller resides in Fresno, California, and works as an immigration officer. His stories have lately appeared in Steam Ticket and Watershed. A volume of poetry, The Whole Enchilada, 2006 Cervena Barva Press, was nominated for a Pushcart. heyitsmillertime@yahoo.com
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NATURE'S PLAYGROUND I

Mary Lynne Robbins

Acrylic on Canvas

16" x 20"

As a self-taught artist, and exhibitor in galleries and juried art shows, Mary Lynne Robbins' art is representational, introspective and spontaneous. Her intuitive style reflects the many interests in her life, of which visual art has now become her main focus. therobbinsnest@centurytel.net

LAST FLAGS ON THE RIVER

Tom Sheehan

Dangers are everywhere about the river: the porous bog whose underworld has softened for centuries, the jungles cat-o-nine tails leap up into. Once, six new houses ago, one new street along the banking, two boys went to sea on a block of ice. They are sailing yet, their last flag a jacket shook out in dusk still hiding in Decembers every year. An old man has strawberries in his backyard. They run rampant part of the year. He planted them the year his sons caught the last lobster the last day of their last storm, and remembers summers and strawberries and salt mix on the high air in the middle of December. A truck driver, dumping snow another December, backed out too far and went to deep. His son stutters when the snow falls. His wife hung a wreath at the town garage. At the all-night diner a waitress remembers how many times she put dark liquid in his coffee. When she hears a thunderous Mack or a Reo or a huge cumbersome White big as those old Walters Sno-Kings used to be, she tastes the hard sense of late whiskeys. He had an honest hunger and an honest thirst, and thick eyebrows, she remembers, thick thick eyebrows.

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Tom Sheehan's latest books are Brief Cases, Short Spans, Press 53 of NC, From the Quickening, Pocol Press of Virginia, and Where the Cowboys Ride Forever (pending). His work has been accepted by Ocean Magazine, Perigee, Rope and Wire Magazine, Qarrtsiluni, Milspeak Memo, Ensorcelled, and Canopic Jar. He has 10 Pushcart nominations, a Noted Story of 2007 nomination, the Georges Simenon Award for fiction, and will be included in the Dzanc Best of the Web Anthology for 2009. Sheehan lives in Saugus, Maine. tomfsheehan@comcast.net

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THE BEST EDIBLE WAX HORSE TEETH EVER

Rosanne Griffeth

Towheaded Katie had curly hair--the sort I wanted. I wasn't sure why Mom let me be friends with her. There wasn't anything specific; I just knew they weren't like us.

On Halloween, we ran into the Mercantile, where Mrs. Rosenstein sat behind the candy counter, her swollen ankles sheathed in elastic support hose that never stayed up. I dragged my Mary Janes through the thin layer of sawdust, scrutinizing the candy selection and the big jars of pink pickled eggs, hogs' feet and dill pickles.

I got an orange pushup and Katie, an ice cream sandwich. We stood on tiptoes to slide open the door of the soda cooler and got cokes, mine--a Ne-hi and Katie's a Crush. Then everything went on the counter next to the quart of Coburg milk and the dozen eggs Mom was buying.

That was when I saw them. The best edible wax horse teeth ever. I convinced Mom, saying it could be part of my costume. Katie picked out a candy necklace and we split a bundle of Pixie Stix. We piled in the back of the station wagon--seats covered with plastic that stuck to our thighs--flashing our orange and purple tongues.

Katie lived in a ramshackle rental house on the marsh with a view of mud crawling with fiddler crabs and waterlogged marshgrass. Her house smelled of toasted pumpkin seeds, mildew, and incense and bong water. Thrift store furniture sagged, covered in India print bedspreads. Katie didn't have a dad, but she had a gang of uncles who drove VW microbuses.

My family--we were Episcopalians.

Her mother met us at the door, hair caught up in a beaded headband, wearing a skirt made from the same fabric she had draped over the furniture. We tore through the house to Katie's bedroom and took a running jump onto her bed, all squeals and giggles. Katie's mom brought a plate of toasted pumpkin seeds.

"So what are you going to be for Halloween?" she asked me with that polite grown-up smile.

"I'm going to be a surfer!"

Katie wore a peach-colored bed sheet, her candy beads and smeared ashes from the hibachi all over herself. My costume was my brother's swim trunks, a tank top, the best wax horse teeth ever, a pair of flippers

and a Styrofoam paddle board with "Hang Ten" on it. Everyone laughed and said, "Aren't you cute," then asked Katie what she was.

"I'm a flaming Buddhist monk!"

Doors slammed right after the candy went in our bags.

Katie and her mom left town a week later. I curled up with Mom on the sofa, while Walter Cronkite droned on and she cleaned my ears with a bobby pin. I looked up and Katie was on TV in the middle of a sea of people. Her flaming Buddhist monk costume stood out and she was perched on the shoulders of her Uncle Mark.

"Damn hippies," my father said.

Katie hadn't eaten all her candy beads.

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See bio on page 20.

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**"It's the good girls who keep
the diaries; the bad girls never
have the time."**

--Tallulah Bankhead

NOT DEAD YET

Janice Wiley-Dorn

She parked me underneath the awning in front of the cold drink machine and locked the wheels of my chair. When she tucked the afghan tighter across my legs I held my breath, but she failed to notice anything different. Leaning in close, she patted my left cheek; the one not rucked downward by the stroke.

"Okay, honey, I'll be right over there." She smirked as she tucked her frizzy hair behind her ears. "Just holler if you need me, and Nurse Penny will come a-running."

Nurse Nitwit. You know I haven't spoken a word in six months. I glared at her with my good eye. Go honey somebody else. My name's Mrs. Miller.

She turned away and waved to one of the kitchen helpers, her so-called special friend Chuck, leaning against an oak tree with a cigarette dangling from his thin lips. Nitwit waddled across the sun-scorched back lawn to him, her thighs straining the seams of her flowery blue pants.

Quite inconveniently, my husband Nathan had passed on two summers ago. Otherwise, he could have abandoned his collection of skewered insects long enough to instruct the Director of Oak Hill Manor on the proper uniform for a nurse.

I lifted my gaze to the skyline, seeking comfort in the familiar outlines of the Appalachians. Mount Cheaha, such a pretty name. Not that I had any Indian blood, my hair stayed that whitish-yellow shade of blonde, common in children, well into my thirties. Now it was chalk white, like the clouds scribbled on the September sky.

I searched the upper branches of the nearest oak for squirrels or birds, straining my good eye. They used to forage on the ground before Nitwit and Chuck drove them away with their harsh voices and disgusting cigarette smoke.

Nitwit squealed and batted her hands in the air. "Oh, no, it's a bee. Quick, get it away from me."

Chuck grabbed her wrists. "Calm down, it's just a fly."

"You sure? I'm--"

"Yeah, yeah." He snorted. "Everybody in the state of Alabama knows you're allergic."

She pooched out her bottom lip. "Don't get mad. Come on, I'll buy you a Coke."

They headed my way but the fly reached me first. I flicked it aside with my good hand. I'd caught all the bait I needed on previous outdoor excursions, by pouring a few drops of Coca-Cola into an empty half-pint milk carton.

Certain tiny creatures love to roam cubbyholes and dark recesses, so I had pushed the carton to the back of my nightstand's drawer. When the insects, mired in syrupy quicksand, finally attracted something dangerous, I snapped the spout shut.

Chuck mashed his cigarette out against the side of the chips and cookies machine and winked at Nitwit. "Gotta take a leak. I'll meetcha inside." She nodded and resumed counting the quarters on her sweaty palm. Chuck breezed past without directing a "Good afternoon," or even a nod towards me.

Nitwit bent to retrieve the drinks, rudely put her rear end practically in my face. When the side pockets on her uniform top gaped open, I got busy. Leaning forward, I eased the semi-collapsed carton from beneath my housecoat, opened the spout and shook the one live inhabitant into its new home.

Brown recluse spider bites sometimes sting but usually go unnoticed until a nasty festering wound appears. I remembered my husband Nathan's voice droning in my ear on a dim yesterday. "Quite painful my dear, but most people survive."

Nitwit glanced at me, as she jerked the back door open. "I'll be just a second." She disappeared down the hallway, hurrying to give Chuck his Coca-Cola.

Nearly an hour passed before she returned, long enough for me to miss my physical therapy session. Again. Long enough for my lips and throat to dry out, and for my adult diaper to reach the opposite condition. Still, I stiffened my spine and sat as erect as possible, even when Nitwit bumped my wheelchair across the back door's threshold.

That evening when the shift changed, Nurse Cindy found me napping in my chair in the hallway outside the dining room. When she stroked my good hand, I woke to the sweetness of her wildflower perfume, but quickly wrinkled my nose against the encroaching odors of Lysol, baby powder and boiled cabbage.

Cindy knelt beside the wheelchair and frowned, her warm brown eyes meeting mine. "Mrs. Miller, have you been out here long?"

I nodded and then winced as the movement needled pains into my lower back.

"I wish they wouldn't do that." She stood and carefully steered my chair down the hallway and into my room. "I'll get you into bed and give you a nice back rub."

Cindy's soft hands brushed against my neck as she untied my bib, streaked green and brown by tonight's pureed vegetables and the inevitable instant mashed potatoes and gravy. She grinned and pulled a fresh nightgown out of my dresser. "Some day soon I can help with your physical therapy."

Cindy had risen to the top of the list for a day-shift transfer nearly a month ago. I yearned to tell her an opening would occur any day now. Her smiles alone seemed powerful enough therapy to make me walk and talk again.

She settled me into bed, flicked off the overhead fluorescents, and then rolled me onto my side, facing the window. "How about I open the curtains for a bit?"

When I nodded, she pulled them wide. The starlight sheened the drab beige walls with silver and decorated the trees outside to match. Cindy gently kneaded my neck and back muscles, liquefying the knots, one by one.

Sleepiness fluttered my eyelids when she kissed my cheek. Surely that violated some regulation, crossed a line caregivers should never approach. My husband Nathan would have filed charges, suing everyone in the building. I'll never tell on her. I reached up and stroked Cindy's silky blonde hair, so like mine years ago. I could hardly wait to see hers gleam in the sunlight, as we walked together toward the oak tree to feed the squirrels. When I relearned how to talk, I knew the first words I'd say.

Please call me Evelyn.

.....

Janice Wiley-Dorn's award-winning prose has appeared in literary periodicals, including The Rambler. She leads two writers' groups and teaches creative writing online. Recently, the Alabama State Council on the Arts made her an adjudicated member of Southern Artistry. She won a 2009 Fiction Grant from the Elizabeth George Foundation. She lives in Pell City, Alabama. www.janicewiley-dorn.com

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JEANNIE

Leslie Paige Nuby

Colored Pencil on Drawing Paper

9" x 12"

Leslie Paige Nuby is a native of Birmingham, Alabama, and resides in the Southside area. Her media include oil, acrylic, & craft paints, colored pencils, Sharpies, and fine point black pens. Her subjects are primarily what others have termed disturbing, intense faces, and unusual cats. lpaign@hotmail.com

THE WORD THAT WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING

Brian George

Tram feels spears of rain on his face. He kneels down, moves his cardboard sign closer to the wall, afraid the ink will run if it gets too wet. He knows what it says on the sign because Tasha read it out as she wrote it for him with her black felt pen. Partially-sighted Vietnamese artist. He'd said it to himself, over and over, the first time he laid it down by his little patch on the high street.

He feels safe here, though there are often gangs of young men who jeer at him. There are also people who are kind, who leave coins, even sometimes folding money, in his small plastic bucket. He likes to hear the noise of crowds surging past. It helps to drown out those other sounds, the awful sounds from the past; the way crackling static on the radio interferes with music, or people saying important things about the world.

Tasha has gone to buy some food in Sainsbury's. Tram is proud that it's his money she has taken, the money people have left in his bucket. He wants to take care of Tasha.

Tram flattens a fresh piece of paper, squats again. He traces an ideogram, practicing his glide, honing his skills for the time he'll draw it all in one sweet movement. But he smudges and sullies, distracted by the memory of smoke across the river, charcoal grey seeping into the blood of sundown.

He remembers that evening, so long ago, dragonfly wings humming in the sunset, while over the purple river a lost banknote flapped.

Money talked, louder than fire, while guns chattered idly. From far over the water he could sense the soldiers advancing. He imagined them moving like robot dancers, hands extended to ward off the sugared fumes of flowers.

He tries to draw those warriors now, giving them bronze armor to encase their limbs. He can hear them again, closer, guns extended like guitars, blamming out one-note riffs of cordite, while the air thickened to purple-black.

Puddles swell around him on the hard city concrete. Images of heroes dissolve in the water, undulating newsreel playing back the past, screwing

up the future. Tram waits, listens, searching for the right words, the perfect image. His nib trembles over paper.

He remembers the flash, the sky turning white, then the blackness, the screaming and the pain behind his eyes so sharp his voice died in his throat. He smells again the stench of the hospital, blood and loud putrefaction tangling with antiseptic. And hears the low moans from people all around him, faces he couldn't see but could imagine all too well.

Tasha has been gone a long time. Maybe there are long queues in the supermarket. He smiles as he anticipates the touch of her soft body next to his, the tickling of her hair on his face. He likes to remember her the way she is on the good days, the days she laughs without stopping.

She was not laughing this morning.

Tram turns again to his paper, feeling the power that had deserted him for so long flow the length of his arm, down through his fingers and onto his pen. In one sweet movement he writes the word that will change everything, give Tasha back her sweet laugh, turn the warriors to helpless, floating petals.

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See bio on page 14.

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**"There's no money in poetry,
but then there's no poetry in
money either."**

--Robert Graves



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