

Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 10 Issue 1



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Front Cover: **Swan Arms**, 26" x 30" *Mixed Media*

Christy Daniel Cross is a self taught artist from Birmingham, Alabama, whose newest pieces are 2-D mixed media. Her work is primarily inspired by nature and life's experiences and struggles.

Back Cover: **TAKE FIVE**, *Digital Photo*

Margaret Hutton took this photo in Cienfuegos, Cuba, while on a mission trip, a partnership between St. John's Episcopal Church in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and Santa Maria Magdalena Episcopal Mission in Favorito, Cuba. Hutton lives in Victor, Idaho, with her husband and two sons. Margaret@stjohnsjackson.org

THE MEANING OF THE MOON

Steven R. Cope

Now we are here
and look off into the cars
and drive up and back down for days and days
and do not lift our eyes.

But now it is night.
We get out and go up and the moon is rising
in the alley. It is off to the left
and I think of a street lamp

somewhat yellow in fog.
I smoke.
The smoke rises and the moon does.
Now it is off to the right

and they are wanting me to go,
thinking, I suppose, that I am crazy.
But I am watching the moon rise
like a hot-air balloon.

I am thinking how its color
is like the belly of a frog:
you cut it open just right,
you lay open the vitals perfectly.

.....

Steven R. Cope's third children's book, Crow 2, with more than 200 children's poems, is now available from Wind Publications, as is his Selected Poems from Broadstone. He is also the author of two collections of short fiction (The Book of Saws and The White Doors), a novel, and a book of 1,001 original (and rather squirrely) proverbs called The Appalachies. He lives (and was born) in Kentucky. www.stevenrcope.com

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STROLLING THE AISLES OF COUNTED SIGHS

Jim Reed

The wizened old rare-book dealer emits an un-self-conscious sigh as he walks his hoarded aisles and straightens up what avid customers have re-arranged in their quest for just the right titles to adopt. He doesn't know his sighs have been noticed by treasure hunters two rows over. Indeed, he is not even aware that he has sighed.

One collector is on hands and knees in front of the poetry section of the store, riffling through assorted titles in search of a book that, to the dealer, is in plain view. The dealer doesn't speak up out of respect for the customer's self-esteem. He figures that, should this woman get frustrated enough, she'll wind up asking for the book, which he will gently fetch from the shelf and offer to her, thus curing her sigh attack.

A man rushes into the shop, proffering a one-dollar bill and asking for parking meter change. He sighs loudly, waiting for a palmful of quarters, which the shopkeeper gladly hands him in hope that he'll return and browse. As the street man rushes out, the dealer suppresses a sigh, knowing from three decades of experience that he'll probably never see this man again, and that the man will never realize he's not even said, "Thank you!"

A young woman sequesters herself in the corner by mail boxes filled with letters and diaries and postcards, reading century-old love letters written by people whose lives are long past living but whose words still ring true and honest. She sighs sweetly, wishing that she could go back in time for just a minute, simply to tell the authors that she, at least, appreciates their desires and longings and wishes both fulfilled and unfulfilled.

Later, a four-year-old tagalong customer sighs loudly as she gazes at the basket of MoonPies and DumDums, her taste buds focusing all attention on the trove. Hearing her sigh, the book dealer gives her one of each goody, making sure she takes the time to select the exactly correct flavor of the lollipop, the exact correct favorite that she just knows is better than all the flavors of the world.

One beyond-middle-age browser hastens to the front of the store, holding aloft the grail he's been looking for since youth, a copy of A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES, "the funniest book ever written," he exclaims, with a sigh of satisfaction.

Later in the day, when all living beings but the book dealer have departed, he listens to what should be the Quiet, but all he can hear are the sighs and whispers of thousands of bookie souls enjoying their peace, cherishing their own printed words and images, and awaiting the next flux of browsers who themselves will be unobtrusively browsed and examined by the books, the books who become observers of the 21st-century world they notice, bemused

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Jim Reed writes and curates in Birmingham, Alabama. www.redclaydiary.com

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"Understanding is the least important thing when it comes to digging jazz...because, like anything else, jazz is a form of entertainment. It is created to be enjoyed, not understood like you read a blueprint."

--Cannonball Adderley

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Jenna Finwall Ryan

Pen and paper hold vigil on my nightstand,
talismans for vowels and consonants.
Words that only come out at night.
Apparitions that sink, shrink,
slink away into the abyss of the morning.
Slip away.

I dangle my legs over the side of my bed,
try to conjure, lure a monster to nibble my ankles.
The same ones my parents banished, vanished
when I was a child.
But he doesn't bite.
Through the curtains, dancing light.

I lie still, pen ready,
poised to glimpse my midnight monster-muse.
Startle, scare, inspire.
Friend or foe. Horror, show.
A creak of the stairs. Monster or mouse?
House. Settling, quiet.

My imagination won't get the best of me.
My mind won't play tricks.
Words echo, collide, boomerang
within a series of labyrinthine walls.
Blank. Blink. Blank.
I'm falling.

Asleep, and the monster appears.
All at once and out of nowhere he looms.
His claws jettison adverbs,
teeth drip with phrases bridging cause and effect.
Climax and denouement.
Once upon a time.

Instead of slaying the beast,
I watch, touch pen to paper.
Up.

Down.
Sideways and dots.
Plotting plots.

“Chase me!” I challenge him.
His shaggy, stubby legs splay,
play into a peaked angle.
A storybook bungalow’s thatched roof.
Living.
Proof.

“Dance!” I command him.
His eyebrows furrow, fold.
Stories, told.
An upside-down stick figure.
Or a bird in flight.
Night.

“Away!” I say,
and he retreats.
As quickly as he appeared.
Into anonymity,
the safety of a shadow.
Borrowed.

I call out, awake.
Recall the creature that was just closing in on me.
Nearly there. Barely gone.
And notice in the dark,
on my paper,
I was able to write:

This.

.....
Jenna Finwall Ryan is a Los Angeles-based television researcher and writer. She holds a Ph.D. in Social Psychology and is penning the upcoming screen adaptation of Bich Minh Nguyen’s award-winning coming-of-age memoir, Stealing Buddha’s Dinner.
jennafinwall@yahoo.com
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ENDINGS

Yvonne Postelle

So still.

The cradle

does not rock,

water does not flow.

Sparrows hide

in shadowed

treetops.

All of nature

is frozen

in a vigil

of endings.

End of a season.

End of a fine mind.

End of a loving man's story.

End of my life

as I have come

to define

life.

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*Yvonne Postelle is the author of After Beauty and the winner of Writers' Digest
20th Annual Self-Published Book Award for Poetry.*

www.yvonnepostelle.com

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VOICE OF THE TIGER

Terry Strickland

Oil on Canvas over Panel

33" x 32"

After graduating from the University of Central Florida with a Bachelors of Fine Arts degree in Graphic Design, Terry Strickland enjoyed a varied art career in the imprinted sportswear, gaming and publishing industries and served as a courtroom sketch artist. Since devoting herself to painting full time in 2005, her work has won numerous awards and is widely published and collected.

www.terrystricklandart.com

SERENDIPITY

Eric Latham

The train is lightless. No one knows what has happened. Everything has stopped working but the train is still speeding down the subway tunnel uncontrollably. My mind is racing to figure out the possible reasons for this sudden electronic extinction. If all electronic devices suddenly died then...E.M.P.

I can't believe it. An electromagnetic pulse from an unknown source has terminated power to the city. I can't stop wondering who or what would cause this. Maybe some kind of military attack.

I hope I'm dreaming.

"Ahhh!!!" someone screams.

Just a half second after I hear the scream, I am shot like a cannon towards the front of the train cabin. I feel like I'm in space for a minute until my mind wakes up to realize that I am at the base of a pile of heavy pieces of metal inside the train. The train's momentum must have driven it into something that caused this explosion of metal and scraps.

I painfully pull myself out from under the debris and pat myself down only to discover minor cuts and bruises.

Now that I'm up and mobile, I start searching for other survivors. The flame from the collision is the only source of light in the subway. My vision is limited but I'm assuming that I am the only survivor because I can't hear anything besides my own footsteps.

Wait, what's that sound? It's faint but I think I hear a woman's voice calling out for help. I look around and get closer to the noise, and then I see a woman's face peeking out of another debris pile on the floor of the train. I reassure her that everything will be fine while I unpack her body from the grasp of the entangled shreds and scraps of metal.

I check her for injuries. "Are you hurt?"

"No. I...I'm just trying to comprehend what just happened... Insanity."

"I hear that."

I don't know what else to say so I just grab her hand and lead her through a hole in the train and onto a subway loading platform. Now that we are out of the train, we can find a way back up to the city.

We are silently wandering in darkness when we turn a corner and see a light. It's the sun's rays beaming through a stairway leading to the city

above. We can't help but pause and stare at the light for a few seconds. I finally start walking again and lead the trembling woman up the stairs. I figure that since we can see clearly with the light now, I should let go of her hand, but she won't loosen her tiny hand's hold on me. I feel like we are from a solar system with two central stars orbiting around each other nervously and anxiously, just trying to get closer but being pulled around in a complex but steady path.

We reach the top of the staircase and look around at the streets for a couple of minutes. It's chaos. Every car in sight is frozen, but every person is scrambling around like a monkey. It's crazy how dependent humans are upon technology. When it's lost, we're lost. I feel as if the woman and I are the only motionless people in existence. She's still holding my hand, and my brain is still stuck on the feeling that her touch inspires.

But now she kisses me on my lips. My mind is lost.

She whispers gently in my ear, "My name is Rose, and that was for getting me out of there."

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Eric Latham is a musician who attends the Alabama School of Fine Arts in Birmingham, Alabama. He lives in Shelby County, Alabama.

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"There are only two ways to live
your life. One is as though nothing is
a miracle. The other is as though
everything is a miracle."

--Albert Einstein

THE OFFICE PARTY

M. David Hornbuckle

(1) IVAN WURKINONDA REILRODE

Ivan is alone, the first to arrive. He turns on the lights and walks over to the punch bowl. Empty. Green and yellow streamers hang like cobwebs from the ceiling. The garbage cans are overstuffed with paper plates and broken styrofoam cups. He bends down to feel the dark stains on the carpet—still wet. Moving closer to the floor, sniffing like a hound, he stretches his tongue out for a sample of the offending liquid. “Piss,” he says to himself. He springs to his feet yelling, “Piss! Piss!” He loosens his tie and takes off his shirt. “Piss!” The tiny gray hairs on his chest stand on end from the sudden chill. He growls. He takes off his shoes and throws them, the left one at the punch bowl and the right one at the fax machine. The machine falls with a clank to the floor and a note flies from it like the last feather of a gunned-down bird.

He puts his shirt back on and walks into the kitchen. Someone is there, waiting in the dark.

(2) ALDA LIVELONG DAY

“No one is bringing any sweets,” Alda laments as she scans the volunteer list. “Everybody is bringing salties. What’s a Christmas party without sweets?” She gazes around in wonderment, ignored. She turns to Kent at the next desk. “Excuse me, Kent.”

He turns around.

“I hate to bother you, but do you think you could bring something sweet to the party instead of this?” She points on the list to an item, Dill Weed Oyster Crackers, next to Kent’s name. “I know your wife makes wonderful chocolate cake and rum balls—you brought them last year. I wondered if you could bring something like that instead, ’cause everybody’s bringing salty things, and nobody’s bringing sweets.”

Kent shrugs. “Well, I’d have to call her and ask, but I hate to do that since she’s moved out of the house and all.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I’ll ask somebody else—don’t you worry about it.”

“Oh, no. Wait. I’ll ask her. Really.”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that, Kent. Just don’t worry about it. I need to ask other people anyway. Dinah, are you off the phone? Good. Now tell me, just what the heck are Creamy Weenies?”

(3) IVAN WURKINONDA REILRODE

Everything he hates. Why he condemned himself to this purgatory, he can’t remember. First time he’s been around average joes since he was in high school—never had to deal with people like this in college. Forgotten how warped their values were—how susceptible to television culture they were. Disgusted, he quietly leaves the party. He can’t even bear to look at them.

As he turns the corner, he passes a newsstand where three men in suits are talking on cellular phones. “Stand firm,” one of the men says into his receiver. “Don’t let them talk you into doing anything you don’t want to do.” Ivan enters a coffee shop on the left side of the road. His head begins to itch.

Something he was supposed to do. People on park benches. A slip of paper in his pocket, which he now decides to read. “S---!” he says, and he turns back toward the office. For a few seconds he runs, then he walks.

(4) JUSDA PASDA TIMAWAY

“Every Friday we have mahi-mahi. Grilled mahi-mahi, baked mahi-mahi, barbequed mahi-mahi, blackened mahi-mahi, broiled mahi-mahi with lemon pepper sauce. Mmmmm.”

(5) KENT YAHIR DEWISSELBLOEN

“Rhiza, this is my roommate, Ben DaCapenschouten.” Rhiza is so butch. She’s his idol. Lord, it’s warm in here, he thinks. “Good to meet you, Ben. My, you both have such unusual last names. How funny that you would end up as roommates. What do you do?”

“I’m in the food distribution business, in management,” Ben tells her, smiling. He points to his necktie, motified with the Taco Heaven emblem.

“That must be interesting,” Rhiza says wryly.

(6) RHIZA NUPP

“I can’t stay too much longer. One of the girls on my soccer team is having a period party tonight.”

Alda says, “Is that similar to a costume party?”

“No.”

(7) EARL E. N. DE MOURNE

Earl finds a slip of paper that has drifted onto his desk. He looks around to see who had left him the leaflet, but he cannot determine the distributor. Shyly, he reads it.

Earl folds the memo and places it in the breast pocket of his corduroy jacket.

(8) KENT YAHIR DACAPENSCHOUTEN

“Earl, do you have a minute?”

“Sure, Kent. What’s up?”

“Well, I need to have my name changed in the computer system. Since Ben and I got, you know, married, I had my last name legally changed to his.”

“Sure, Kent. Just fill out this form, and I’ll take care of it.”

(9) DINAH BLOYER-HORNE

“What are these called again?”

“Creamy Weenies,” Dinah says with a sigh.

“Gee, they’re good,” says Alda. “Before you leave, I’ll have to get the recipe from you.”

“Sure, Alda. No problem. They’re really easy.” Dinah walks toward the kitchen and waits

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M. David Hornbuckle is the author of the novel Zen, Mississippi and the short story collection The Salvation of Billy Wayne Carter (and Other Stories), in which appears The Office Party. His short work has appeared in many literary magazines and anthologies. He is Managing Editor of the Birmingham Free Press and founding editor of Steel Toe Review. He lives in Birmingham, Alabama, where, in his spare time, he teaches English at a local university.

david.hornbuckle@gmail.com

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WHEN I WAS 39 AND YOU WERE 93

Linda Adams

Big and perfectly square
standing two stories high
and facing squarely south
You plain Jane of a house

At first only to paint you up
to fix a screen, to make you
ready for more inhabitants
And then I thought

Built for a bride in 1900
built on the other side of the river
the wrong side of the river
Nothing fancy of a house

I could have you for my own
so I fixed your upper floor
a four square just for me
Walls of wine and simplicity

Your heart of pine
your roof of tin
your eight square rooms
How simple of a house

And in that southeast bedroom
I found my one true love
Another bride for you
When I was 39 and you were 93

In and out your families
Rossers, Vohrees, then
unnamed flocks of migrants
Until I came along

.....

Linda Adams is retired from a multitude of employments but continues to serve as Ellaville, Georgia's chief, and only, sign painter. She has covered all available, accessible, and suitable sides of buildings in Ellaville with historic murals. Serving as a reporter for a weekly regional newspaper, she enjoys trying to write poetry, too.

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GOING BOTTOMLESS

Michael Pollick

I believe all those who call themselves serious coffee drinkers should go bottomless as often as possible. While your neurons try desperately to erase that imagery, allow me to explain. Before this country became one giant parking lot for Starbucks, we had diners, roadside grills, greasy spoons, holes in the wall, mom and pop stands, donut shops, burger joints, and other examples of American gastronomic superiority. All of these establishments had one thing in common--the patented Bottomless Cup of Coffee. For a few measly quarters, one could enjoy an endless supply of industrial strength-motor oil coffee, refilled at critical moments by sympathetic hands.

Going bottomless is not for the faint of heart--it's a lifestyle choice that demands a lot of dedication from its practitioners. If you go bottomless, be prepared to have an opinion on everything, from national politics to what's wrong with these kids today. Bottomless coffee isn't served by 18-year-old college freshmen named Brittany or Kelli--it's flung out by waitresses named Edna or Polly or Eunice. These angels in comfortable shoes have already been there, already done that, and have strapped on the apron to prove it. When you go bottomless long enough, the fourth wall between waitress and customer comes down with a satisfying thud.

The entire Bottomless Cup industry hinges on ritual. The first cup--only a warm-up swing, a little loosening of the pipes. The second cup comes around and suddenly the world is a much nicer place. Now is a great time to fling out the best thought on your mind--just get it on the table and see who runs with it. By the time cup three rolls around, you notice that Edna looks a little tired. The debate over Ginger or Mary Ann is still raging strong, though, so now's not the time to pry. Cup four is usually the deal-breaker, unless you have a hollow leg. Mary Ann is leading by a wide enough margin for you to make a dignified exit. You make your goodbyes, pat Edna platonically on the arm and slip her an extra dollar for her troubles. Another Bottomless day is complete.

Now go out there and grab yourself a bottomless cup o' Joe, for old time's sake. Oh yeah--and tell Edna I sure do miss her cooking.

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Michael Pollick was born in Akron, Ohio, but now calls Decatur, Alabama, home. His work has appeared in The Midwest Poetry Review, MOSAIC, HART-A Tome for the Arts and Miller's Pond. Going Bottomless appears in The (Lost) StoryHouse Coffee Essays. Other titles by Pollick include Collateral Damage Report (Selected Treats) and Growing up Bulldog: The Stowbilly Chronicles.

michaelpollick@hotmail.com

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TWO SENIORS, PLEASE

Larry O. Gay
Digital Photograph

Rickwood Field is America's oldest ballpark. Larry O. Gay photographs iconic structures and landscapes in his native Birmingham, Alabama.

logay@bellsouth.net www.larryogay.com

RECITING "FERN HILL" FOR MY LITTLE BOY

Scott Richburg

Perhaps sensing the dulling of my intellect, the exposed thing left under the onslaught of a deepening winter, I decided to memorize poetry. I had done so two decades earlier, but with time, and chaos, and stress and the accumulating minutiae of daily life, I had forgotten the practice and left it in the past like so many other playthings of the mind. The first poem I wanted to memorize was "Fern Hill."

Interesting choice of a man slipping more beyond his prime with every heartbeat. But then again the perfect choice. For the poem was written by a man not quite squarely in his prime still. Hence, the poem's point: The glory of a lost childhood and youth forever irretrievable but no less beautiful to cling to. Yes, the perfect paean to middle age.

One weekend afternoon of a warm Alabama January, my nearly four-year-old son was enjoying the absence of winter, running and playing and imagining and creating. I was standing around like a statue, a bird perch, an adult thing more capable of becoming fixed and immovable than lithe and frolicking. I was watching him. I was living vicariously some long-lost moment of experience sunk forever in a deep chasm of childhood. I was also mulling over the poem I had worked to remember the night before.

So I began:

*Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
The night above the dingle starry,
Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
Trail with daisies and barley
Down the rivers of the windfall light.*

I won't pretend that I got every word right, or that I never stopped, or mused, or stumbled, or grabbed at lost images. But my voice on the wind, floating among the half-blasted trees, and through my son's play fort, and over the mounds of wet, moldy leaves wasting among my neglect, caught my son's ear.

He stopped playing as the sounds reached him. His eyes flashed with fascination. I'm sure he did not understand much of what the stanza said.

But he was listening. The music had seized his attention. He said, "That's good, Daddy."

So I continued in my same halting way, painting the sky around me with flashes of green and gold, and lamb white, spending precious seconds of my heedless ways reciting a poem in my 42nd year. And I got to the end: *The bittersweet moment so like finding abandoned swing sets, the rust throttling their songs. Time, our blessed mother and destroyer, holding us lovingly while it crushes everything we ever were and hold dear.* Did my son hear the wet thing in my voice?

Green and dying, the aging father recited on a forgettable winter Saturday which easily could slip under the rotting leaves and be lost forever. Green and dying.

And I looked at the little boy staring up at the father becoming more cold ash than *"fire green as grass."* The sun, the wind, the clouds, the sky--they whispered to me the importance of the moment. They taught me the poem's treasures:

How fast the farm flies--that boundless place of our brightest, most golden days--how soon its fields become childless and thus irredeemably nostalgic and wistful.

How blessed, too, the unawareness laid on our nascence, on our childhood in the clutches of so much it does not fathom. That winter's day my son, my little prince of the apple towns waging innocent wars of sweet attrition, wore it like a crown.

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A teacher, Scott Richburg has been writing in one form or another for most of his adult life. His work has won many awards and he has also written newspaper columns. He lives in Wetumpka, Alabama, with his wife, his son, and a persnickety hell hound called Dante. jsr0317@hotmail.com

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WHILE READING

Terry Kay

While reading, I have been –

- A cowboy (and an Indian) with Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour
- A Confederate soldier with Joseph Pennell and Philip Lee Williams
- A pirate with Robert Louis Stevenson
- An orphan with Charles Dickens
- A dust-bowl traveler with John Steinbeck

While reading, I have been –

- A whaler with Herman Melville
- A gold-dreamer with Erskine Caldwell
- A small-town barber with Wendell Berry
- A runaway with Mark Twain
- An old-time gospel god with James Weldon Johnson

While reading, I have been –

- A b-flat coronet player with William Price Fox
- A battler of windmills with Miguel de Cervantes
- An attendant in the House of Gentle Men with Kathy Hepinstall
- A basketball player with Pat Conroy, a fire-fighter with Larry Brown, a defense attorney with John Grisham.

While reading, I have touched the ocean's darkest depths and walked on planets in solar systems beyond our seeing.

I have climbed mountains lost in clouds and walked the different road with Robert Frost and gazed at the little cat feet of fog with Carl Sandburg and danced to the language-music of Byron Herbert Reece and Sidney Lanier and Emily Dickinson.

I have flown with Lindbergh and John Glenn, stood at Gettysburg with Lincoln and in Montgomery with Martin Luther King, Jr.

While reading, I was at Dachau on the Day of Liberation and at Hiroshima on the Day of Death.

While reading, I have sat at the feet of Abraham and Moses and Jesus and Muhammad and Buddha and all the other men of God, and also those who would kill God -- the insane, the madmen, the bigoted, the fanatics.

While reading, I have been boy and man, girl and woman. I have been young and old. I have died and have been re-born.

While reading, I have become people I cannot be, doing things I cannot do. And I do not know of another experience that could have given me such a life.

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Terry Kay is the author of the novels To Dance with the White Dog and The Book of Marie, among others. He began his career in journalism in 1959, at the Decatur-DeKalb News, a weekly newspaper in Decatur (GA) and later worked for The Atlanta Journal as a sportswriter and, for eight years, as one of America's leading film critics. In 2006, he was inducted into the Georgia Writer's Hall of Fame.

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"And if I should live to be the last
leaf upon the tree in the Spring, let
men smile, as I do now, at the old
forsaken bough where I cling."

--Oliver Wendell Holmes

THE OTHER GOLD

T.K. Thorne

Reeves rubbed the stump at the end of his right elbow against the doorframe, scratching the itch on the hand that wasn't there. Before him, February blanched the Alabama countryside with a light dust of rare snow. Beyond the pastures, loblolly pines marbled the memory of green through winter's brown scrub. He stared through the screen door at the sterile, sodden sky. Not that the weather mattered. Gray or blue, the sky only separated one day from the next.

His gaze dropped to the old stone well that had once marked the edge of the vegetable garden. It lay fallow, choked with weeds. Beside the well sat a dirt-stained dog.

As if aware of Reeves' attention, it looked up. Reeves scowled. Dogs knocked over garbage cans and howled at coyotes, or the moon, or whatever set dogs off. He scowled harder.

A feathery tail thumped the ground.

"No scraps here!" he yelled through the screen. "Git!" It didn't move. Well, a blast from the shotgun would make it go. He turned to take down the Remington, but the phone rang, stopping him in the act of reaching over the mantel. He stared at the receiver for a moment, confused. His phone never rang. Who would call him? Carl Adams asking help to round up his fence-crashing bull?

He picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Dad? It's Tom."

Silence. What was he supposed to say to a worthless son who never called?

"Dad, you there?"

"What do you want?"

"Don't be like that, Dad. I've been really busy. Rita had the baby—"

Baby. Grandchild. Questions roiled through his mind: When did she have it? Was it...alright, or like the other one? Like little Sarah?

"There's something I need to talk to you about, Dad."

He didn't trust himself to speak, afraid the anger would gush out.

"I wouldn't bother you with it," Tom continued, "but they say I have to notify you and make sure it's okay."

Reeves waited. His gaze wandered to the open door and the damn dog that still sat in his yard.

“We’ve thought hard about this,” Tom said. “It wasn’t an easy decision, believe me, but Sarah’s so much bigger now, and she doesn’t understand. We’re afraid she might accidentally hurt the baby.”

“What’s the baby’s name, damn it? Girl or boy?”

“Oh.” Tom sounded lost. “Sorry, didn’t we send you a notice or something?” His voice faded. “Rita, didn’t you send Dad something?” A palatable pause. “Sorry. His name is Blake.”

Blake. Grandson. Reeves shook his head. His truck would never make it to Huntsville. The trip to see his first grandchild, Sarah, had just about done it in. And the shock of seeing Sarah, realizing she would be... How did they put it? Limited. That was the word, ‘limited.’ About like calling a cottonmouth snake ‘touchy.’

“Dad, you still there?”

“I’m here.”

“You’ve no idea how expensive it is to get daycare for a child like Sarah. We’ve decided to send her to a place in Montgomery.”

“Montgomery?”

“Yeah. We wanted to put your name down as the nearest relative, Dad, in case of an emergency. They know how to work with children like Sarah. It’ll be best for her, too. We don’t have the time she deserves.” He hesitated. “There’s nothing you have to do. Just let us put your name down.”

Reeves grunted. There was a noise on the other end of the line. Tom clearing his throat maybe. Or his conscience.

Taking his grunt as assent, Tom said hastily, “Thanks, Dad. Well, got to go. Rita’s got her hands full. We’ll see you soon, okay?”

The flat drone of the dial tone filled his ear. He stared out the open door again, oblivious to the chill seeping into the house. Gradually, the smeared dots of the screen faded as his focus shifted beyond it. The dog was there; the well was there; the yard. Why did everything seem so different? He put the phone on its cradle and went out, letting the screen door bang.

The snow was melting in the afternoon sun; the day tottered on the back edge of winter. Around here the weather could turn warm anytime past January. Wouldn’t stay, but he remembered childhood days in February when he wore shorts and dared the icy, heart-squeezing cold of the creek. Ignoring the cold, he lowered himself into the porch rocking chair. Ann never let him paint it. She’d rocked countless hours in this

chair. For the first time, he wondered why he always sat in her chair instead of the matching one that had been his.

The dog in the yard watched him intently, but it hadn't moved.

Ann had loved children. She would've had a dozen of them if she could. The chair creaked. Ann would never have sent her son away, even if he'd been "limited." That wouldn't have mattered to Ann.

The dog stood and approached slowly. Ribs showed, even through the long fur.

Some of the tan color was mud. Might be white underneath. Reeves just looked at it, feeling like an extension of the wooden rocking chair. The dog climbed the steps and curled in a ball at his feet. Ann had liked dogs too. And birds and squirrels—wouldn't let him shoot any squirrels, even when they rattled things loose on the roof and got into the attic.

The rhythm of the creaking chair pulled an old ditty into his mind, one of Ann's favorites:

Make new friends

But keep the old...

The end of the hoe tucked under his good arm, Reeves wiped the sweat that dripped from his forehead despite the March breeze. He surveyed the freshly turned black soil ribbed with red clay, the fruit of years of Ann's homemade mulch and occasional fertilizing contributions from Carl Adams' cows. At the edge of the tilled rectangle, the dog watched him with alert brown eyes. Along with spring, the past six weeks had brought sheen to the black-tan-and-white coat. The row of ribs had vanished. "That'll do it, Dog. We gotta let it sit for a week or so, then it's time to set in the corn. Beans a couple of weeks after."

Dog's tail thumped twice.

Reeves rubbed the gritty stubble on his chin and eyed the horizon. Between the dark pines, watercolor strokes of new growth washed the hardwoods in the fragile color Ann had called 'fairy-green.' He took a deep draught of air. "Seems like spring got here fast this year."

That merited one quick thump before Dog whined and trotted to the edge of the overturned earth, sniffing around as if the ground spoke important words that had to be inhaled to be heard. White paws began to dig.

"Got ya a gopher?"

The paws dug faster, spraying clumps of dirt between the splayed back legs. Then Dog whined and sat, reddish dirt staining his brown nose.

A reflected gleam drew Reeves' eye. He stepped closer and knelt at the sight of a tiny hint of gold. "What's this?" His gloved hand dug around the gold, freeing it from the clay-heavy dirt. A ring, a woman's wedding ring. Ann's. They hadn't been married more than a few months when she lost it. It must have come off while she worked in the garden. She had boo-hoed for two days, but wouldn't let him get her another. Money was too tight. His fingers closed into a fist around the ring. All this time it lay buried in the earth while Ann lived her life, bore a child, sickened and died.

Dog whined again, eyes fixed on him.

"Alright. I know what you're thinking. I won't stall anymore. Just let me clean up some." He pulled off the glove with his teeth and worked the ring onto his little finger with his thumb.

Dog followed him into the house and the bathroom. Reeves glared at him. "You think you got to watch me? Think I'll back out?"

The brown eyes tracked every move.

"I told you I would. I ain't never broke a promise, have I?" With a final grunt, he picked up a razor and turned to the mirror. The face that glared back at him was older than he remembered. Deep lines furrowed skin that looked like a potato left to rot in the sun.

What woman would want a man that looked like this? A dried-up, ornery, bitter old man.

Not Elizabeth Brown, that was for sure.

Elizabeth Brown.

What made her pop into his thoughts? She'd married Ed Johnson who owned the lumber mill where Reeves had worked for thirty-two years, until the accident that had taken his right hand. He hadn't seen Elizabeth since she'd brought a pot of chicken-and-dumplings after Ann's funeral. That was sixteen years ago, but the memory of her death was right behind him every time he turned around, connected to him like his shadow. His eyes watered. "Menthol in the shaving cream," he muttered to Dog.

The old truck sputtered and shook in her obligatory protest before coughing awake with a loud backfire. "Come on, Betty," Reeves coaxed.



ALABAMA SPRING

Kenyon Ross
36" x 18"
Acrylic on Canvas

Kenyon Ross, husband, father, and entrepreneur, lives in Hoover, Alabama, with his wife Ami and their three children. Kenyon is new to painting -- "Alabama Spring" is his fourth piece. "I enjoy the process of creating which, for me, is the birthplace of relaxation." Kenyon is sales and marketing director for StayPoints, a nationwide Guests Reward Program (www.mystaypoints.com); owner of a nationwide holiday entertainment company, The Christmas Carolers (www.thechristmascarolers.com); and market manager for the West Homewood Farmer's Market (www.westhomewood.com) kenyonross@gmail.com

Betty the Balker. She was a '54 Ford he'd bought two decades ago. Now she was an antique, like him, but she was a fighter.

He reached over the steering wheel, grasping the metal pipe he'd had soldered onto the shift and jerked her into gear before she changed her mind.

Dog sat in the middle of the dirt driveway, right in Betty's path. Reeves stomped the brake. Dog tilted his head; a back leg scratched behind his ear, one saucy eye looking up beneath a black swatch.

Hell.

Reeves leaned across the seat, twisting to push open the door. "Well, come on, if you're so set on goin'."

Tail wagging fast as a bee's wing, Dog jumped in, settling on the passenger side, black nose tipped up to see over the dash.

"You act like you're supposed to ride in the seat," Reeves grumbled. "Where'd you come from, anyway?" He squinted. "You a new friend... or an old one?"

Dog's mouth gaped in a panting, enigmatic smile.

They bumped and rattled to the main road. Dog ignored him, focused on the view out the front windshield.

Reeves sniffed loudly. "Reckon it's your business."

Betty's engine smoothed as they left the dirt drive for pitted tar. Greening, dew-spangled pasture stretched on either side of the road. A wobbly-legged calf stared with soft new eyes through the barbed wire fence before ducking back to its mother as they passed.

"A dog bit me when I was a kid."

Dog thumped his tail in acknowledgement of his voice, but kept his rapt gaze forward.

"Guess that's not your fault."

It wasn't until he drove through the empty streets of the closest town that Reeves realized it was Sunday. Nobody dared to show their face before noon lest someone think they weren't in church. "Doesn't make a lick of sense," he said. "Only person that could see a body not in church wouldn't be there hisself." The chuckle at his wit stuck in his throat as the county's brick school appeared. Wind stirred the swing seats in the deserted playground. Elizabeth Brown taught there. The past reached out like a cast fishing line and sank its hook in him. They'd been childhood friends and high school sweethearts. He'd pined bad when Liz married, until he met Ann.

Reeves turned on the radio. "The Governor said today that..."

He switched it off. "No point listening to that mess."

Dog stuck his nose out the open window, letting the wind lift his fur. As they passed a new fast-food joint, he ran his tongue over his lips, glancing at Reeves.

"It ain't lunch time, yet," Reeves grumbled. "You probably got worms, anyway. Ought to take you to the vet to get your shots."

Dog's ears flattened.

Reeves grinned. "Don't like doctors much myself."

The sign read "Institute for the Mentally Retarded." Woods surrounded the single-story brick building. Wild dogwood blossoms threaded the trees like Ann's aged lace tatting. Reeves gave Dog a stern look. "Wait here." Dog ignored him, nosing the wadded burger paper hopefully. Reeves snorted, "Like you might have missed a crumb!"

Inside, the smell of urine and disinfectant assaulted him. Dingy pale green walls merged into white ceiling and floor. A thin, middle-aged woman with a small mole on one nostril peered up at him from a desk, her tight eyes drawn at once to the stump of his arm.

With a visible effort, she wrenched them to his face. "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to see my grandchild, Sarah Reeves."

She looked surprised.

"Reeves? I'd have to check the files to see which... Well, actually, the secretary has the keys to the files with her, and she's out to lunch. Would you like to wait?"

"How long?"

"About thirty minutes or so."

Dog was waiting in the truck, but it was still early, not too warm. "Can I look around meanwhile?"

The woman looked surprised again. "Well, yes. That would be fine. Normally, I'd escort you, but I need to cover the front desk until the secretary gets back." She glanced at a clock on the wall. "Mrs. Potham will be feeding in just a minute." She nodded at a door to his right. "Go on in. Soon as she finishes, she can show you around. I'm Miss Baines, if you need anything."

Reeves hesitated. He had the feeling life was tilting him sideways, fixin' to spill him somewhere he didn't want to be. He pushed open the door anyway. Maybe if he occupied himself, he would get used to the smell.

Rows of steel cribs lined the walls of the long room on the other side of the door. He peered into the first crib. Large, gentle eyes, innocent as a calf's, tracked him from a swollen, misshapen skull as disproportionate to the tiny, atrophied body as a melon to its vine. Was the child paralyzed? Did anyone ever try to move her?

He answered his own question: What was the point? Where was she going?

His feet took him on, but his mind withdrew, shriveled up somewhere where he didn't have to think about what he was seeing. There were others like the first.

Good God, was Sarah one of these? He hadn't seen his grandchild in years.

Thomas said no one wanted to deal with her. Because she was like this crib-child? No, he couldn't believe it. Sarah had only been here a couple of months; years had wizened these pasty limbs. How long had it been since these kids had sun on their skin? Ann always said children were like plants; they needed sunshine to grow.

On an impulse that surprised him, he reached into a metal crib, touching a pale cheek. In response, a slow, open smile bloomed on that pale face. Someone was in there, someone trapped in that twisted body. That made it all worse.

Tap, tap. The sound drew his gaze down. A child of about four sat on the floor a few feet away. How did she get there? Wild, dark eyes flashed up at him through black strings of hair. A chubby fist clenched a doll's leg. The girl banged the bald, one-legged doll against the tile floor.

Reeves squatted on his heels. Normally kids focused on his stump, but this child stared through him, her dark eyes unfocused. He stood and took a tentative step toward her. She backed quickly. With a shrug he turned away.

Thud, thud. The sound had a different tone. Despite a strange feeling that he shouldn't, he looked again.

She slapped the doll against her forehead, opening her mouth to release a cry like a winging crow's, plaintive and raucous at the same time, but no expression altered her face; it was empty...like her black crow

eyes. Only the arm and doll moved with dull, mechanical repetition—thud, thud—against her head.

What was wrong with her?

A fat woman with at least three chins pushed a cart tray through metal doors at the end of the room. She eyed the child. “That one don’t want nobody touching her.” She pursed thick lips. “Only let us get one shoe on this morning, and that was a fight.” She shook her head and then shrugged. “Feeding time.” The announcement seemed more for him than the immobile children in the metal cages. She slapped a large spoon into the bowl on the tray and ladled thick, colorless gruel into the mouths. Most of the food ran over their cheeks. She gave each three large spoonfuls, regardless of whether they’d swallowed the first. Only when she was finished with all of them, did she brusquely wipe off the excess, a procedure as efficient as any the mill ever had.

Reeves tagged behind her as she moved down the rows. The girl with the doll shadowed him, a few steps behind.

A scream distracted the fat woman. She left the room in a sluggish jog. Reeves followed through a few confusing turns and doors, losing the girl-with-the-doll. A young woman in a white smock and slacks met them in front of a room. “It’s Karen again,” she informed the fat lady. “She’s stuck Robert with a safety pin.”

Reeves followed as they proceeded down the hall. When they stopped, Mrs. Potham filled the doorway, but over her shoulder, Reeves saw into a small room with two beds and a faded plaid couch. A boy squatted in the corner, nursing his arm and glaring at a stocky, square-faced girl who knelt on the couch, absorbed in smearing feces onto the wall behind it.

Reeves shut his eyes. Sarah could not possibly be in this place.

He backed up, looking for the passageway that would lead him out.

Miss Baines appeared, papers in her hand. “I’ll take you to Sarah, now, if you like.”

In automatic obedience, he followed her rigid back. They passed a room where several children of various ages sat in chairs or stools or lay curled on their sides on the floor. One, a girl with a prominent forehead and rich, walnut skin, rocked in a large chair, singing the same tune over and over in a soft, off-key voice. He knew it:

Make new friends

But keep the old;

One is silver
And the other gold.
Ann's song.

Another turn, then a room with a large picture window, a playroom filled with toys. A dark-haired child stood beside the window, staring out, her back to them. The bald, one-legged doll hung by its foot from her hand, its faded head cocked against the floor. Reeves missed a breath.

Miss Baines gave Reeves her trout smile. "I'll leave you two alone."
Other toys lay scattered about the floor.
"Sarah?"

She came to his side without looking at him and grabbed his hand, pulling him into the room. Then she released him and ran to the window, pressing her whole body against the glass, straining, as if she could will her way through. The hand without the doll clenched into a fist and pounded the pane.

Reeves took a step backward.
The fist kept pounding.
Another step.

Without a conscious decision, he threaded his way back through the corridors, past the rows of steel cribs. Miss Baines' head jerked as he went out the front door almost at a run, giving her no chance to speak. He was suddenly in the truck without remembering crossing the parking lot. His hand was shaking. He ran it over his mouth and almost gagged. It stank of urine and antiseptic.

Dog's wag of welcome stilled.
"What can I do?" Reeve's voice cracked.
Dog looked at him with worried eyes.

"I can't... What can I do?" He closed his eyes to shut out the picture of Sarah pounding her little fist against the window. It didn't help. She was still there. She wanted outside. Outside the prison of the Institute? Or outside the prison inside Sarah?

Damn them. Damn the government for letting a place like this exist. Damn Thomas for abandoning his own child here. Damn me, he realized. Thomas wasn't the only coward.

Where had grandfather been the past four years?
Dog gave an anxious whine.

Reeves looked at the stark building fronted with neat rows of azaleas and said aloud,

“The truck was just an excuse. For God’s sake, I could have taken a bus.”

Why? Why hadn’t he? He hit the steering wheel with his stump. Foolish old man. Frightened old man. Afraid to push unwanted into his son’s life; afraid to face a little girl who wasn’t normal. What could he do now? His thumb twisted the small gold ring on his little finger.

He wished Ann was here. Ann would...

The rest of the thought tumbled out silently, but there was no doubt about the words. Ann would not leave that child in such a place.

Dog barked at him. One short whuff. Reeves looked over, startled. “You’re right.”

He took a deep breath. “You’re both right.”

He sat Sarah in the truck between himself and Dog. She had stiffened, rigid as a stick as soon as he picked her up. Dog licked her vacant, blank face with unreserved joy.

Miss Baines emerged from the Institute at an awkward trot, her hands flailing the air.

“You can’t!” she gasped. “This is not procedure. We have custody!”

“She’s my grandchild,” Reeves growled. “I wouldn’t leave my dog in your Institute.”

He glanced across the seat. “No offense,” and slapped the gearshift into reverse, hoping Betty was still warm enough from the trip not to stall on him.

Reeves’ chair halted in mid-rock when Elizabeth Brown pulled into his drive. The hazy, summer morning sunlight made a nest in her graying hair. His mouth went dry.

“Haven’t seen you in a while, Liz.”

Her clear blue eyes smiled without her mouth. “I came for my casserole pot.”

He stood. Behind him, the rocking chair moved gently. He knew which pot it was—the white one with little blue flowers and a chip off the rim, the one she’d brought with the chicken-and-dumplings when Ann passed. “You just now missing it? After sixteen years?”

“Well...” Her gaze strayed to the yard where Sarah sat in the jewel-green grass, examining the rock Dog had brought her. Rows of corn towered behind her. “I heard last spring you had a dog. That was a surprise, remembering how you felt about dogs. Then they said you'd had a child up here for two months. I had to come see for myself.”

He wasn't sure what to say.

She climbed the wooden steps, joining him on the porch without an invitation.

“Sit back down, Reeves.” She settled in the other rocking chair.

He sat. His chest was tight. Elizabeth Brown.

She started the chair in a quiet, steady rock.

“How's Ed?” he asked.

“He died of cancer a few years back.”

“I'm sorry, Liz. I didn't know.” They were both alone now.

“You still school teaching?” he asked after a long silence, searching for something else to make conversation about.

She laughed. “You are out of touch with the world. I've been retired for two years.”

“Oh.”

They watched Sarah and Dog for a while. Elizabeth broke the silence. “I heard a social worker came out and tried to take her back to Montgomery.”

“Did. Changed her mind when Dog growled at her. Dog don't take much to strangers.”

This time Elizabeth's mouth smiled with her eyes. “I expect there might be a little more to it?”

Reeves shrugged. “She threatened some. Said she was going to get a court order and the Sheriff, but it didn't amount to anything. My son, Sarah's father, called her. That was the end of it.”

Elizabeth nodded and matched her rock to his. “I remember Thomas. Rotten in literature, but he liked math. What did he have to say about it?”

“He was upset at first, but he calmed down when I pointed out he'd save a lot of money if Sarah stayed with me.” He scratched his chin, wishing he'd shaved. “And I told him he could keep the government's check for her. He's got a new baby to worry about,” he added, surprised at his lack of rancor.

Sarah stood abruptly and climbed the steps. She ignored Elizabeth, but Reeves knew that didn't mean the child wasn't aware of her. Sarah

held out a mottled rock for his inspection. He took it, making his movements slow, rolling the stone in his hand. She climbed into his lap, pressing her head against his chest, her face turned toward Elizabeth.

He kept his arms away, letting her do the touching.

Reeves glanced at Elizabeth. Most people would have a wary, anxious look at Sarah's strangeness. Elizabeth's was frank appraisal mixed with tenderness.

Dog had followed Sarah, like he always did. He went to Elizabeth and gave her a good sniff before sliding his head into her lap. She scratched gently behind his ear. Her other hand lay on the armrest nearest Reeves. Veins ridged the skin. Two brown spots dotted either side of the largest vein. A tiny scar tracked over the knuckle of her forefinger.

He remembered how she had gotten it. They'd been playing on the creek bank and she fell.

Doc had stitched it in his living room, and she had stood bravely, trying not to cry, but one tear had leaked out, leaving a trail down her dirty cheek.

Reeves hesitated, then laid the rock on the seat and let his hand settle on hers. He cleared his throat and made himself meet her eyes. "Liz, I've gotten kind of attached to that pot. I hate to give it up."

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T.K. Thorne resides in Springville, Alabama. The Other Gold is based on the author's experience visiting a state institution such as the one in the story. The incident left her haunted and triggered her interest in autism, which carried over to her award-winning first novel, Noah's Wife. More about T.K. Thorne's writing and upcoming works at www.tkthorne.com.

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MONT SAINTE VICTOIRE

Melanie Morris
Acrylic on Canvas
20" x 24"

Melanie Morris is an award-winning artist whose work has been shown in galleries and juried shows across the southeast. She applies layers of exquisite color with a palette knife to create her dreamlike paintings. Melanie's colorful landscapes have been said to "evoke a range of emotion from the viewer, from quiet contemplation to bubbling-over joy." www.melaniemorrisart.com

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Joanne Ramey Cage

Madness or allergies? It should have been
investigated. I would have tried;
and I would have fed you sweet potatoes,
corn, and tender cabbages,
no lowing beef or crying lamb,
no bleeding beets or haunted cress
to wake the spectres in your brain;
I would have given you one strawberry
and, as you ate it, watched to see
if your great eyes began to spin
and see the fin beneath the waves.
I would have raised you on some hilltop
out of sight or sound of the sea,
on field peas and fresh onions,
sourwood honey and sassafras tea,
baked your bread in the old range oven
and smeared it thick with apple butter.
apples never hurt anyone.

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Joanne Ramey Cage grew up in Leeds, Alabama. She attended the University of Alabama, then the University of Alabama at Birmingham, majored in English with minors in French and history. She wrote her first poem at age 7 or 8, and her most recent one about a hundred years later. She is the author of one chapbook, published by Rowan Wood Press, Leeds, in 2001.

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CROW AND PIE

George Sawaya

She was sad and stayed at home.
He never understood

the crows who broke their necks
against her windows

until one day he swore he'd found
a way in

all the others must have
missed.

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*George Sawaya is a Birmingham, Alabama, resident, student, poet, and librarian. He recently received his Master's degree in English with a focus on Creative Writing from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He is currently at work on his first poetry collection. **Argus68@gmail.com***

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“Where lucidity reigns, a scale of
values becomes unnecessary.”

--Albert Camus

A MOVIE STAR THRILL IN THE THIRTIES

Eileen Henderson

I was sixteen years old and in the twelfth grade when I saw in the newspaper at school that Nelson Eddy was to appear in Birmingham. I yearned to go with all my heart but I lived in the red clay hills of Tuscaloosa County. What chance did I have? An amazing thing happened. The Frisco Railroad called my father to work third trick at Freight Yard Junction that night. He said he'd take me! I had forty-nine cents from typing for my teacher's husband. Daddy gave me a penny to make enough for a gallery ticket. In my diary I wrote: "March 3, 1938, I spent most of the few minutes after I found I could go collecting my overcoat, our lunch, a scarf, and everything else I thought I'd need. All the way to Birmingham I was haunted by the dread there would be no gallery tickets left. The old lizzie crawled along so slowly and every car that zoomed past I'd say to myself, 'They're sho' going.'

At last I got my first look at Birmingham. Daddy showed me Vulcan way, way across on the mountain. At the Tutwiler Hotel I was so busy looking around I didn't notice where we were going. The little look-see I had was interesting! The man at the desk said the box office had been moved to the auditorium at five that afternoon. He told us how to get there and sent us out a side door he said so we wouldn't lose our bearings but maybe he wanted us to disappear quick as we certainly didn't fit in that glamorous setting.

When we had come in the front, the revolving door had been moving so I thought it went automatically. When I stepped into the door on the way out I started moving but it stood still. I got a crack on my noggin that made me understand I was supposed to push, and I did. We had to walk back to the car (two or three blocks) and try to find the municipal auditorium. We got caught in two or three traffic jams and finally stopped at a gas station to ask directions. He said we'd passed it. We tried to turn around and go back. Several cars got crossed and it seemed ages until we arrived at the place. I was a knot of anxiety but Daddy never once lost patience.

There were crowds all out in front. Another age passed before we found a parking place and then Pop had to drive in several times before he had the lizzie fixed right. We walked three blocks back to the auditorium and went inside. I looked around at all those young men in tuxedos and

the women in evening gowns. We finally found a line in front of the ticket window. After standing there for fifteen minutes inching up to the window the woman said, "Gallery tickets outside around the corner." When we got around there we had to stand in another line but I finally clutched the green ticket in my hand. Pop left and I scooted up about fifteen flights of stairs, presented my ticket at the door, and began searching for a seat. I had begun to think I wouldn't find one but in the very last row there were several. All the while before it started I watched the young ladies below (miles below!) flirting around (also old ladies) in their long slinky evening gowns.

The main lights went off and the spotlight focused on the piano. Everybody started clapping and in a few minutes N. Eddy himself strode out on the stage. I was very disappointed because I couldn't distinguish a single feature of his face. I could tell he was blond and could see his figure distinctly but not his face. Most of his selections were operatic. I enjoyed "The Blind Plowman" and as an encore, "Sweetheart, Will You Remember." I liked that one best of all. He sang it last and as we left everybody was humming it. I also remember one about a king wearing purple tights (ha, ha, ha, ha, ha) and one Monsieur Eddy said was about a French soldier who returned home to find that his sweetheart had married another man and he was 'quite put out about it.' When it was over (it seemed mighty short for fifty cents) I strolled into the bottom part and looked around. I found a program on the floor and tucking it under my arm I dashed up the street keeping an eye out for Pop. He was standing on the corner and we went to the lizzie. In a few minutes I got my first look at Freight Yard Junction. It was a little, long, grey building, inside two inches thick in dust. The second trick operator said MacBride, the agent, swept it once a month and poured water on it to keep the dust from choking him.

Soon after we got there I went out to the car and crawled under the overcoats on the back seat. About eleven I went back in the office and stayed until one or two o'clock. Then I went out and slept until I nearly froze and went back in. I listened to the dispatcher's phone and slept a while on the table, until the telegraph instruments woke me, and I crawled back in the car again. The car was parked between two railroad tracks and if there was not a train going by on one, rooting, tooting, bong-bong, spew-spew, racket-racket, there was a train on the other. And when they were not there, the planing mill next door was letting off steam. At

six o'clock I ate a dried beef and lettuce sandwich—mmmmmmmmgood.
Agent MacBride came in at 7:30 and we left about an hour later.

Now over seventy-five years afterward I realize how much more I got
out of my fifty cents than just a movie star.

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*Aileen Henderson grew up in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama. During WWII she served in the Women's Army Corps. Later she attended Judson College and graduated from the University of Alabama with Bachelor of Science and Master of Arts degrees." She taught school in Alabama, Texas, and Minnesota. She is listed in the Encyclopedia of Alabama. **Aileenkhenderson@aol.com***

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“You are capable of more than you
know. Choose a goal that seems right
for you and strive to be the best,
however hard the path. Aim high.
Behave honorably. Prepare to be
alone at times, and to endure failure.
Persist! The world needs all you can
give.”

--Edward O. Wilson

AFFAIRS

Troy Ramsay

Monday. Iron clothes. Coffee. Traffic.
Stop and Go. Office.
Late.

Tuesday. Maintain. Nail Down.
Okay. Rehash. Renew
Count-down to.

Wednesday. Forge. Simulate.
Mid-week drink
Drag. Get no place fast.

Thursday. Falter. Stick Around
Vacillate. Wait for.

Friday. Crawl. Coffee.
Clubs and pubs, tug
Stay up.

Saturday. Coins of
Sunlight in the face
Of last night. Shedding.
Replace. Deadweight.

Sunday. Consign to oblivion.
Recall. Books. Coffee (the right kind).
Learn. Elixir of the mind.
Injection of Perfection.
Lazy film night
Sleep comes
As long as you don't think of -

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Troy Ramsay was born in 1989, and raised in Birmingham, Alabama. He graduated with a Bachelors of Arts degree from the University of Alabama at Birmingham in 2012. He is now a member of the real world. tramsay@uab.edu

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THE JANITOR

Danny P. Barbare

Swinging

A

Mop

Looking

Down

As

The

Tile

Reflects

If

I'm

A

Square

I

Can

Only

Rise

Up

Grip

The

Wooden

Handle

Of

My

World.

.....

Danny P. Barbare lives in Greenville, South Carolina. He works as a janitor at a local YMCA. He loves long walks and visiting the lowlands of South Carolina and the Blue Ridge of North Carolina.



HAND

Lone Citrin
Mixed Media
12" x 12"

Lone Citrin is an avant garde artist whose artistic expression takes fantastic shape in diverse oil and watercolor paintings, bronze sculptures, found object collages and mixed media assemblages. Her contemporary paintings and sculptures range from abstract to realistic to impressionistic - all visionary interpretations from her imaginative soul. www.artbyione.com

ROOTS OF WINGS

Georgette Perry

To allay your fear of it
your lover says, "It's like before..."
But what was that? You try
to look back, recreating eons,
a breath indrawn from endless space,
gathering yourself from winds that scatter stars.

Later, in a parking lot,
hurrying somewhere, mind on other things,
you glance up into cauldron sky.
Near sundown. Storm's been building,
brooding somewhere all day. Now there's
first thunder, a tremor at sound's threshold.
Not human prayer or answer. Even the trace
of rainbow eastward against cloud-black
can't sum up this – the lift of
swirling fury so beautiful you're free,
muscles in your shoulders
tightening like the roots of wings.
Fallen from heaven – Yes.

.....

Georgette Perry's poems have appeared in many magazines, with recent work in Avocet and Iodine. Her poems are also included in the anthologies Ordinary and Sacred as Blood, Whatever Remembers Us, and Don't Leave Hungry: 50 Years of Southern Poetry Review.

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PRICE OF AMUSEMENT (CHRISTMAS EVE 1984)

Joseph H. McClure, Jr.

Christmas Eve had been cold, dark, foggy and drizzly the entire day; much like every day of the previous two weeks. Since it seldom snows in Alabama (never during Christmas), this was December's normal weather. As nasty and depressing as it sounds, these climatic conditions had the opposite effect on me. It felt like Christmas and my spirits were soaring. It had been a prosperous year, I had thoroughly enjoyed the holidays thus far and was looking forward to Christmas Day and an entire week of vacation at home with my family. I had completed my shopping days ago with the exception of a few gifts I save for this day just to be able to watch the last minute shoppers and the frantic culmination of the season. The quest for my final present took me to Dixie Toy and Cycle Shop, a unique little store surrounded by boarded-up buildings in a rather seedy part of downtown Birmingham. Making my last purchase at closing, I left the shop filled with a warm glow, but a little saddened still that this part of my holiday was over.

Strolling toward my car in the adjacent parking lot, I heard a high-pitched, crackling, raspy voice which sounded like a cross between Gabby Hayes and Walter Brennan. "HEY..... YOU!COM'ERE, MAN! Com'ere."

I turned to look over my shoulder and could just make out a frail, hunched-over, elderly, black man shuffling slowly toward me dressed in baggy pants, a dilapidated over-size trench coat and an old floppy felt hat. In the dim gleam of the misty streetlights, I could see his left hand waving over his head and a long skinny finger on his right hand beckoning me to him. "WAIT UP! I NEEDS TO SPEAK TO YA," I heard him command.

Seeing the haunting figure wobbling through the fog toward me, my first inclination was to run to my car. I began to move away but as the distance between us closed, the misty light of the parking lot revealed not an assailant but a harmless old beggar. I would have been very cold-hearted indeed to look upon such a pitiful specimen of the human race in his wretched condition and not feel compassion, especially on Christmas Eve. I reached for my wallet, delighted to make one more charitable contribution to such a worthy recipient.

As he got closer, I thought I heard him begin to speak, "I bets ya ten dollars I cin jumps up and turns a flip."

"What?" I asked questioning my hearing.

Now standing directly in front of me, he cocked his head to the side and cut his eyes up to meet mine. "I said I bets ten bucks I cin jumps up and turns a complete flip in de air and lands on my feets," he squawked again in his strong southern dialect.

I carefully studied the old wrinkled face and hands to determined that I was not actually conversing with a young con-artist in makeup. There was no mistake; this person was as ancient as the dirt on his clothes. Feeling friendly but cautious and fully expecting a flim-flam, I decided not only to take him up on his bet but to raise the stakes. " Hell, old man, you can hardly walk," I goaded. "I bet you twenty dollars you can't turn a flip right here, right now." It was worth the extra ten to see if I could catch the slight-of-hand I was sure he was about to perform.

A huge grin spread across his face revealing a surprising number of pearly white teeth as he said, "Show me dem bucks." The twinkle in his eye told me again that I was about to be had. I pulled a twenty dollar bill from my wallet which he immediately grabbed and folded down to the size of a matchbook. He bent slowly forward and tucked it just under the toe of my left shoe. "That must have been the switch," I thought.

The old gentleman removed his hat, brushed it off and handed it to me. "Hold dis, son," he said and turned away from me, then took two big steps. He stopped and bent slowly forward until his hands, which dangled loosely, almost touched the pavement. Suddenly, he emitted a deep groan, his arms and head came flying back toward me and he sprang into the air. With his trench coat flying out in all directions and the grace of a looping paper airplane, his legs sailed over his head and his feet landed in exactly the prints his soggy shoes had left a split second before.

I stood there with my mouth open but speechless. This antiquated fellow had just completed the most flawless backwards flip I had ever witnessed. It was a thing of beauty. His raspy laughter rang through the dark vacant streets as he then executed a perfect back-bend, reached over his head with his right hand and plucked the twenty from under the toe of my shoe. As his laughter echoed off the city buildings and he waddled down the street, I had the feeling that for such unexpected entertainment, he had been the one short changed.

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Joey McClure spends his days saving and renovating Birmingham's historic buildings. Free time is spent playing with his train display and photographing the world. He also tells about old times in Coosa County, Alabama. You may visit his train display and photography at 208 North 20th Street in Downtown Birmingham. joey@jmcre.net

FLAMINGO RODEO

Patricia J. Weaver

My stomach rolled. I wasn't sure if it was from the smell of hot grease and funnel cakes or the horror of watching the heel of my new designer boot sinking into the mud.

Josie, my friend, rolled her eyes, then in her best you should listen to me voice said, "See, Carrie, I told you four inch heels and rodeos don't mix."

I glared at her. "Explain to me again why I agreed to come with you today."

"Gorgeous guys in tight jeans."

I looked around the rodeo grounds. "Yeah, so where are they?"

"You have to dig deep for diamonds." Josie glanced over at the concession stand. "I'm going to get a drink. You want something?"

I pointed at my foot. "A little help would be nice."

"I'm not getting my boots muddy. Just pull it out." Josie turned and walked away.

I wiggled my toes and the boot sunk deeper. I pulled and squealed when my foot came out of the boot.

Balancing on one foot I reached down to get the boot. A shadow inched into my peripheral vision and I followed it to a pair of scuffed cowboy boots, then up faded jeans. I stopped at the biggest silver belt buckle I've ever seen. That's when I lost my balance and tumbled backward. Before I hit the ground, strong arms circled my waist and pulled me against a rock-solid chest.

"Easy now. Looks like you've thrown a shoe."

"Excuse me?"

My cheek brushed a strong square chin and my heart skipped a beat. Tilting my face up I met the rim of a Stetson that hid the man's eyes.

My knight grinned and nodded toward the boot.

"Oh, yeah." I felt dizzy.

"Hold on, I'll get you to solid ground."

He reached down and pulled the boot from the mud. He lifted me into his arms, carried me to the bleachers, and set me on the bottom seat. Electricity ran up my leg when he gently took my socked foot and slipped on my boot.

"Thanks," I said, feeling my cheeks flush.

"My pleasure, ma'am."

We stared at each other and everything around us faded. I was fascinated by the small scar on his cheek, how his hair curled around his hat and the hint of dimples.

"Excuse me." Josie's voice shattered the moment.

The man stepped back. "Ladies." He tipped his hat and walked away.

"Who was that?" Josie asked, and handed me a drink cup.

"I think he's a diamond," I whispered.

"His name is Diamond? Cool!"

"What?" I looked at Josie. "I don't know his name." When I looked back, his broad shoulders had disappeared into the crowd.

"But you said ..."

The PA system crackled, "It's rodeo time!" the announcer's voice boomed.

Josie settled in her seat to watch and I drifted into a daydream about knights with silver belt buckles.

A sharp punch on my shoulder snapped me out of it.

"Ouch!"

"The bull riding is about to start. I didn't want you to snooze through it." Josie pointed at my drink. "Drink, caffeine might wake you up."

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to introduce the clowns that will be protecting the riders," the announcer said. "The one in the barrel with the checkered shirt is Crazy Pete and the pretty one in pink is Flamingo Joe. A clown dressed in pink biking shorts, pink tennis shoes and a pink shirt with yellow polka-dots bowed to the cheering crowd.

A loud bang from the chutes made me jump. A bull banged the gate as a man eased onto its muscular back.

I grabbed Josie's arm. "Is that man crazy?"

"All bull riders are crazy."

The gate opened and the bull bolted out slinging his head and bucking. I watched the rider fly like a rag doll to the ground. A flash of pink raced by the bull and smacked its nose to get its attention. The bull charged across the arena after his attacker. The clown reached the fence in front of us. He jumped over, bolted up the steps and hopped into my lap. The crowd roared with laughter.

"Hello, again," the clown whispered in my ear.

My heart skipped a beat. I turned and stared at kissable lips outlined with pink clown paint.

"You!"

"Yes, ma'am, it's your savior. I fight boot eating mud holes to save beautiful women."

Blue eyes scanned my face. "Do you think I might need to save you from hunger after the rodeo?"

I couldn't get my mouth to work so I nodded.

He grinned and whispered, "I'll be back."

He jumped the fence and trotted back to the other clown.

Josie sighed. "Why do you always get the gorgeous men in tight jeans?"

"He's wearing biking shorts." I smiled. "But they're definitely tight!"

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Patricia J. Weaver lives in Florence, Alabama, with her husband of 44 years, 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. **dawgprint1@comcast.net**

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"Your intellect may be confused, but
your emotions never lie to you."

--Roger Ebert



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