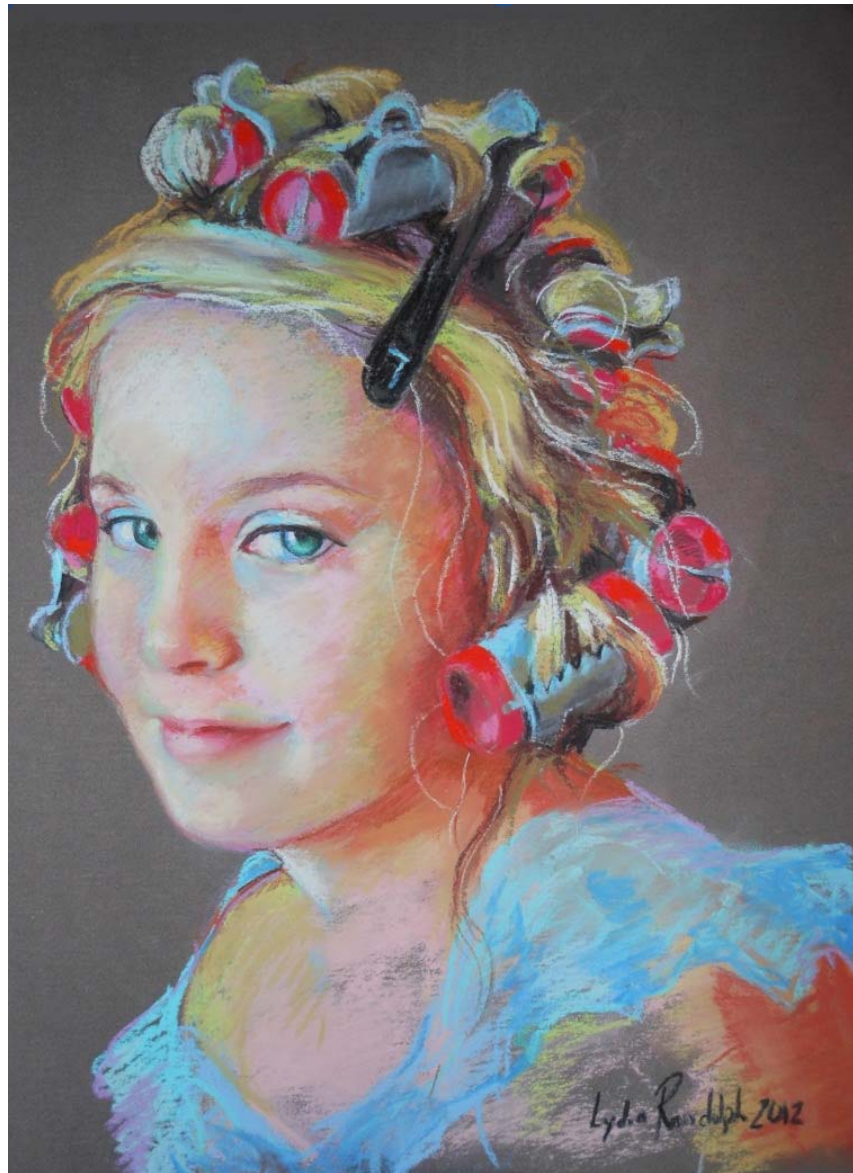


Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 10 Issue 2



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Front Cover: **MONA MELLIE**, 9" x 12", Pastel on Sanded Wallis Paper

Lydia Randolph, a member of the Alabama Pastel Society, is a full-time artist and musician from North Alabama, where she lives, plays and works. This painting originated from a photo made of daughter Mellie getting ready for her prom because of the amused and mischievous look on her face; like the original Mona Lisa she seemed to have secrets. layaga@bellsouth.net

Back Cover: **BENEATH STILL WATERS**, Acrylic on Canvas, 24" x 30"

Denis Gaston, painter and writer, is a University of Florida graduate and has lived and worked in Dunedin and Clearwater, Florida since 1984. In 1989, he won the State of Florida Individual Artist Fellowship. www.denisgaston.com

VICTORY GARDEN

G.H. Sherrer

Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?
I sprang from seeds, fair and foul, flung into late autumn's cold;
Came from stubbed toes, skinned elbows, hand-me-downs and warm
sandy lanes;
From "Do a job right the first time," briar pricks and berry stains.
I came from firm resolve, juvenile taunts, and leaning on the Everlasting
Arms;
From ingenuity, winged dreams clipped short, reaching for too-high stars.
I came from cutting words and dry wit, exuberance stifled;
From sturdy shoes, stout hearts, strict bedtime and rose-colored flannel.
I came from roads less travelled, from a pack breaking away;
From starry skies, streetcar rides, leafy walks and library days;
From sunny clover beds, blossom crowns, seeing clouds as elephants.
I came from wildflowers, windowsill herbs, hand-tossed dough and hot
biscuits;
From hope, growing in grace, trying a new door with one lock.
I was conceived to sounds of Glenn Miller, Swing's beat, the Lindy Hop,
Hands clapping, feet tapping, a soldier returning from war,
Confetti flying, for a peace treaty rejoicing, a teeming crowd's glad roar.
With life's thunder came rain showers, and I thrived in sunshine and joy.
I sprang from patriots, pacifists, and parsons... Nobility,
Sifted like wheat, pressed on a grinding wheel.
I grow in the Greatest Love.

.....
*G.H. (Gladys Hodge) Sherrer writes from Chelsea, Alabama, is a columnist,
journalist, and a published novelist. Her novel, The Keeper Chronicles, is two
books inspired by a hymn-singing black man's compassion for poor white children.
Sherrer's work-in-progress is a Civil War saga.*
.....

BAGGAGE CLAIM

Robert Saul — 2012 HACKNEY AWARD WINNER

"You'll be careful and lay off the junk food." It wasn't what she said, it was when she said it—at a moment Herb considered exceptionally transcendent. His hand had found itself in a position where he'd hoped to render Julie speechless with pleasure. "And make sure you call me when you know your return flight is on time." He'd refused to move his hand or nod his head, but a moment later, he decided to bring the whole affair to an early climax.

This morning, replaying the moment while standing on the kitchen's cold linoleum with his feet half inside his slippers, his feelings are hurt. His untied bathrobe parts as he leans over to check the coffee maker's progress. His paunch pushes through the robe's parted curtain and he shivers. The caffeine deprivation makes his head ache. He's been up for an hour printing his boarding pass and repacking his toiletries. He's got his roller-board packed and he's ready to leave for the airport soon.

The coffee finishes brewing with a sputter. He pulls out the carafe and the last few brown drops fall and dance on the hot plate. He pours the coffee on to the cream in the bottom of a white mug. He likes the way the liquids mix. He likes the coffee color.

The first sip, at last, is rich and complex like a French Cabernet. He leaves last night behind as Costa Rica's green mountain terraces come in to view. He can taste the minerals in the rich volcanic soil. He can smell the fresh, cool morning air spilling into the valley. He can hear the birds call. He can imagine that, as the day warms, the mist will rise, gently brushing against the red-speckled coffee trees, their branches extended, crucified on wooden stakes.

...

The slouch-inducing concavity of the window seat in row 31 exaggerates Herb Anderson's paunch. He cinches the seatbelt tighter and leans toward the window. His hip bone presses against the armrest as the jet banks left, doubling back toward the city to head west. Chelsea's serpentine backstreets, Back Bay's symmetric grid, and the Esplanade's feathered edge slide underneath him. Out beyond Route 495 and Worcester, subdivisions curl in upon themselves, and baseball diamonds lie scattered like ginkgo leaves in the valleys between the November-colored hills.

Further west, the country below looks open, empty, lonely. The plane keeps climbing. A long ridge, the residual berm of some ancient uplift, passes underneath, and a long, open valley stretching north to south, certainly civilized with checkerboard fields, divided by highways, clustered crossroads, and a sudden packing of large high rises. The University, of course—the flight path brings him back over his home. His golfing foursome is a threesome today, and he’s missing his son’s soccer game. Julie complains about his travel schedule, but if he hadn’t taken the new job as Midwest Regional Sales Manager, the gap between what they wanted and what they could afford would have remained too wide.

Tonight, he’ll stay in a Holiday Inn Express wedged in between a Target and Best Buy along one of the tentacles stretching out from Houston’s glowing core. In the morning, he’ll have breakfast with Mr. James. They’ll meet in the Holiday Inn Express lobby and eat powdered eggs and bacon. Herb will watch the thin black hairs swept across Mr. James’ shiny—domed forehead creep down toward his untended eyebrows. Together, they’ll sip weak coffee and over-sweetened orange juice as Mr. James tells Herb that he’s going to cancel the service contract. They both know he can get the same accounting services for half the price from a centralized server in Hyderabad.

Herb licks oil off the inside of his foil peanut package before he stuffs it into his plastic cup. Herb’s doctor is concerned about Herb’s blood pressure and his steadily increasing cholesterol level. Herb is not the kind of person who lies to his doctor, but he finds it difficult to explain to Dr. Chen why he eats eggs and sometimes bacon for breakfast, or why ingesting a nightly pint of Ben and Jerry’s Rocky Road Ice Cream is an absolute necessity. Only business travelers, who’ve earned Hertz Gold cards and Marriott Platinum Memberships with two-day trips to Omaha, Milwaukee, or Houston, understand the need for ice cream or a double scotch at the end of a long day. Only a traveling man understands how badly a traveling man needs rewards.

Herb pushes his head back against the headrest and reclines his seat carefully so he doesn’t disturb the person behind him. With images of freshly cut grass, falling putts, and late afternoon sunshine on a leaf-strewn patio, he coaxes himself into a shallow slumber.

...

He jerks awake looking right at her. Had she been there before? She sits in the aisle seat reading a book. He takes stock of her in his peripheral vision. She’s young, brownish skin, and black hair. An aroma radiates

across the middle seat. Cinnamon? Earth? She wears a vest woven from a natural fiber—maybe alpaca. She crosses her legs at the ankles. She wears glitter-encrusted, emerald platform shoes and spandex black pants revealing a modest band of ankle skin. Under the seat in front of her, her satchel is woven cotton, striped bright red and yellow.

When he dares to glance over, he sees she's reading a thick, hardcover *Don Quixote*. She has clear eyes and unblemished cheeks. Even with her head bent toward Cervantes, the underside of her neck is unwrinkled. She has the complexion of a person who sleeps soundly, unbothered by the anxieties of children and marriage. She does not own a television or a car. She lingers in the aisle at Whole Foods reading labels. She has sophisticated left-wing opinions and male lovers with facial hair who play music. Herb Anderson knew women who knew women like her in college, but Herb Anderson knows he's never known anyone like her.

She glances over at him. He keeps his eyes on the book. "Do you know this book?" she asks, tilting toward him. The natural fiber vest opens and exposes the plain above the semi-circled rim of her white cotton shirt. The skin is lightly freckled across the rise of her collar bones—the accent Spanish, the question and the leaning gesture, friendly, guileless. Herb Anderson instinctively presses back toward the window. A pleasant flush rises from underneath his golf shirt.

"Yes. I studied Cervantes in college." She waits. Her eyebrows rise. Herb looks down at her breasts with no intent to look at her breasts, and embarrassed, looks quickly back to the floor and her emerald shoes. "And you? Are you enjoying the book?" Herb Anderson hears blood pumping loudly behind his ears. His mouth is dry.

Her index finger remains between the pages somewhere near the middle where Sancho tries unsuccessfully to turn the expedition back toward home. "Yes, it's an interesting story." Her expression turns serious. "Tilting at windmills? Imaginary enemies? The desire to make up a life to substitute for the life you have?"

Herb feels his lower spine press painfully against the arm rest between his back and the window. He glances at his own reading material—a loose sheaf of white papers bent flaccidly in the seat pocket below his tray table. He was a European literature major, but he's having trouble recalling any detail about the novel. Fragments of Dos Equis beer commercials keep interrupting his attempts to resurrect the narrative. He shrugs and slaps at the papers in front of him. "It sounds like I might revisit

the old tome. I haven't opened a classic in twenty years." She smiles, small wrinkles spreading away from the corners of her eyes. He makes a half-hearted effort to retreat graciously. "I should let you go back to your reading."

"No, it's okay. It's a long flight and I'm glad Mr. Cervantes isn't the only man to keep me company." Her smile comes quickly now. Her teeth are straight and white but not so white that they appear unnatural. Her eyebrows are full but tweezed. She wears no makeup and her fingernails are unpainted.

As Herb Anderson examines her, his jaw goes slack and his mouth opens just enough for him to sigh inaudibly. "Are you traveling to or from?" He points to the front of the plane toward Houston, and then back toward Boston.

"To," she says and points toward Houston with a playful flick—her thumb and index finger taking the shape of a capital L. "For a conference. And you?"

"To, too. Uh, also. A meeting, not a conference." He's suddenly competing with Miguel Cervantes. He's nervous, and hesitant to engage. The sheaf of papers with the latest IRS tax rulings and the new Sarbanes-Oxley interpretations must be read, sorted, abstracted, and interpreted for clients. He glances at the papers bending flaccidly in front of him.

"You have work to do," she says.

"It can wait. It's a long flight." He flaps his hand toward the sheaf.

"I'm Maria, by the way." She extends her fabulous hand. Herb thinks he might kiss it, but he shakes it awkwardly reaching across his body with his left hand—his right fist pinned behind him attempting to support his weakened spine.

"Herb here, very nice to meet you, Maria," he hesitates, then tips his forehead toward her feet. "Maria? Hmmm, how would your priest feel about those shoes?" Herb Anderson has never spoken a sentence as flirtatious, presumptive, or insinuating as this one. Never, but when she laughs with a quick, dignified, "ha," he glimpses a parallel universe—a brighter dimension where an infrared spectral segment pulses with human connective energy he's never accessed before.

"Priests don't know they exist." She lifts her feet, extends her ankles, points her toes, and gazes admiringly at her sparkling green shoes. "And I have no idea what God thinks so I'll take my chances."

A cache of magic molecules stored somewhere near the base of Herb's neck releases. His blood stream carries these narcotics to the visual

cortex where his imagination begins to fabricate a new Herb—thinner with longer hair, faded blue jeans, a leather vest, and a well-trimmed goatee. He crosses his legs at the knee and leans toward Maria. “I dress like this for business,” he says confidentially using the back of his hand to motion toward his golf shirt and grey slacks.

“Me too,” she says. “They make us wear these shoes.” They laugh together.

New Herb and Maria tend a small herd of yaks on the high desert plain just outside Taos. “Have you been to Houston before? It’s an interesting city.”

New Herb is confident, worldly, tan and muscular—his tawny biceps sweat as he works under the desert sun digging post holes for the fence that will keep the yaks from wandering.

“No, my first time. This conference was in Madrid last year.”

Most evenings, Maria paints watercolor sunsets. She dyes her bright clothing in a white porcelain basin using natural pigments from plants grown in her organic garden.

When he’s not tending the yaks, Herb works as a welding artist, sculpting beautiful abstractions from rusted strips of recycled steel. “The city is a bit of surprise. Flat, hot, humid and...” Herb hopes she’s packed blue jeans. They can catch a direct flight to Santa Fe when they land in Houston.

“Just what I’d expect!” She laughs again. Her expression becomes playful, childlike. “I don’t expect to like Texas.”

“Why? The heat and humidity?” He trails off.

“No. The weather will suit me. The people, the politics, death penalty, Republicans, not so much.”

“Oh.” Would they argue? Would they run out of things to talk about on the farm? Would her beauty fade and the nights grow cold and lonely? Herb can hear the west wind blowing hard across the open plain. “What is your conference about?”

“Pre-Inquisition Spanish History. I’m presenting a paper on trends toward modern deconstructionist interpretations of Spanish Renaissance texts.” She looks right at Herb who removes the fist from his spine and curves over. His forehead tilts closer to his upright and locked tray table. When he doesn’t respond she adds, “Makes Don Quixote seem pretty interesting?”

“You’re a professor?” The yaks run wild. The bank forecloses on the small pasture and the welding equipment is sold at auction.

“Just a junior professor. I hear about tenure next month.” Her nose angles up. The garden goes to seed and suns set unpainted. “Oh, you must be anxious.” New Herb’s would-be metal sculptures lie in scattered pieces, un-welded, rusting in the desert sand.

“I was lucky enough to publish a book. That usually goes a long way in the tenure-granting process so I’m hopeful.” She will not catch the late flight to Santa Fe. Herb will not pour his New Herb-ness into her beautiful, exotic vessel.

“What about you? What is this job that makes you travel so much?” Herb slumps further forward. His lower back aches. The magic chemicals have returned to their hidden storage.

“I’m a sales manager for an accounting company that provides services to small businesses,” he says firmly. “I’m married with three children.” Now he’s done what a good man should do—what a good man should have done at the beginning.

“Hmmm. I know nothing about accounting. Do you like it?” Maria continues to have a conversation with a nice stranger she met on a plane.

“I enjoy having an expertise.” He pauses, momentarily happy with the sincerity of his statement.

“Expertise gives one confidence,” she says with a positive nod of the head.

Maria’s not flirting. She’s being polite, gracious. “Of course, with numbers, creativity is constrained, yes?” Her brow knits again.

“I’m creative within constraints,” Herb says flatly and tries to straighten up, but he slides back down in the slippery seat. “I should let you go back to your reading.” He’s sure that the emotional locus of his sudden disappointment resides somewhere in the hardcover book that lies upon Maria’s lap.

“That’s a very interesting answer, Herb.” She bends toward him, her eyebrows knitted, nearly touching.

“Really?” His forehead almost presses on the surface of the unfolded tray table.

“Creativity within constraints.” She tries to rescue the conversation.

“I guess. The truth is sometimes the constraints get the better of me.” Herb looks toward the window.



HONKY TONK BLUES

Ben South

3.5 feet x 4.5 feet

Mixed Media on Artist Canvas with Quilt Pieces

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

“I’m sorry. Most people turn off when they hear the word deconstruction. I don’t blame them. We speak our own language. You do it too, yes?” Her tone becomes clipped, precise, a bit defensive. Herb imagines she has a temper.

“We talk to each other but also to the government and shareholders. It’s a little more complicated.” He looks at his lap. Any vestiges of his old New Herb-ness are gone.

Maria must be glad to find her finger where she left it. She cracks the book open. “Yes, complicated.” She waits but there is no reply. “Enjoy the rest of the flight,” she says softly and returns to her reading.

...

The wheels hit the runway hard. Fog has rolled in off the Gulf, and the airport lights don’t appear until the airplane is nearly on the ground. “Welcome to Houston,” Herb says to himself. Maria’s still reading but Herb notices she’s crying. He swallows hard. “Is everything okay?” She brushes her eyes and looks ahead. Herb finally remembers the outlines of the plot. “Is it the way the book ends?” She laughs and a bubble of spit fills her mouth momentarily. It pops when her “ha” blows against it. She snuffles and looks over. “I’m barely halfway.” She hefts the thick book and lets it fall heavily back down into her lap. Herb is relieved she’ll still talk to him. He’d taken an hour to prepare a statement, and he’s been waiting another hour to deliver it. “I wanted to thank you for the company. It’s not every day that I meet a young woman who’s as interesting as you are.” His voice is hoarse, the tone more pitiful than it sounded in his head. “Obviously, I meet young women all the time, they’re just not that interesting,” he jokes. She reaches over and touches his forearm without looking. She purses her lips and draws in a deep breath gathering strength. She laughs or chokes, he cannot tell. “Thanks. You are a nice man, and I don’t meet nice men very often.”

“It was my pleasure.” He pauses, “to be nice. It was my pleasure to be nice.”

They both sit silently. She wipes her nose again. Her face is blotchy and there is a small white string of snot in the nostril nearest to him. She’s still pretty—just not perfect.

The plane arrives at the gate and the passengers stand and remove baggage from the overhead bins. Maria unclips her seat belt, but before

she rises, Herb unbuckles and turns to face her. “When you get to the end of the book, try to remember that it was probably pretty hard to be an aging man as the age of chivalry was coming to an end.”

She wipes one last tear and puts the tissue in her pocket. “Don is a noble character. Chivalrous certainly, but misdirected.” She sounds tired, almost despairing. “He’s not as delusional as he appears.” Herb straightens his spine. “He’s not a buffoon, but it’s easy to see him that way. His intentions are good.” He says this less aggressively than he feels it.

Maria bends over, grabs her bag, stands up, and slings the red and yellow satchel over her shoulder. She stretches her lithe body upward to open the overhead bin exposing her stomach just above the hips. “We both know that in the end, he gets what he deserves. Men usually do, especially those who,” she pauses, and then says wearily, “fabricate their own idea of chivalry.” She pulls down a worn leather-bound brief case and places it in the seat below her. She removes something from the brief case, and then continues to fuss in the overhead bin. Herb is surprised when she grabs his black roller-board and heaves it on the seat between them.

“Thank you. How’d you know it was mine?”

She smiles down at him for the last time, but does not offer a reply. Her eyes are clear now and the string of nostril snot is gone. “Good luck with everything, Herb.” She looks away, and then back at him with a serious expression. “Try not to let the constraints get the better of you.”

“I’ll do my best.”

The aisle fills quickly and she’s pinned amidst the passengers. They all wait silently staring toward the front of the plane where distant bodies rise and shuffle toward the exit. Outside the gate, Herb Anderson loses sight of Maria just beyond McDonald’s; her quick short steps, upright posture, and girlish physique, weaving among the slow-moving travel zombies until she disappears down the escalator underneath “Ground Transportation, Taxis, Rental Cars.”

...

Outside, in the misty Houston evening, the Yellow Hertz shuttle arrives just as Herb steps onto the second median strip. His shirt is already damp, and by the time he sits down in the bright, air-conditioned bus, he feels lucky—the plane arrived on time—logistics running according to plan, and he’ll be home tomorrow.

The wipers on the blue Corolla keep the windshield clear, and he finds the hotel without a single U-turn. The room smells new, the aroma of drywall and paint still hanging in the air. Herb lays out his suit, sets the coffee maker, throws four of the six pillows on the floor and untucks the comforter. He lays out his toothpaste and floss. He leaves his room, and tiptoes over the fractured remnants of a Houston sidewalk to the 7-11 two blocks away. When he returns, he takes off his loafers, adjusts the two remaining pillows, finds the clicker on the night—table, and leans heavily against the headboard. With a towel upon his lap, and a plastic 7-11 spoon in his hand, he surgically picks away at the frozen chocolate cylinder.

Gradually, the heat from his palm melts the frost and milky liquid drips onto the towel—the ice cream yields, and for a few minutes, Herb Anderson believes that the modern travel experience is not so bad.

At ten o'clock sharp, he turns off the television, brushes his teeth, sets his alarm for 6:10 am, and turns out the light. Before he sleeps, he thinks about Maria and Don Quixote. "Gets what he deserves," seems unfair. She's wrong about Don, and that makes Herb happy—happy enough to drift off to sleep.

...

The next morning, his roller-board packed, his teeth brushed, his suit on, and his boarding pass for his return flight home tucked into his suit coat pocket, he scans the room for any items he's left behind. He purposely leaves his spare change on the desk, and places the ice cream carton into the plastic garbage basket right side up.

Awkwardly, he closes the bathroom door and tries to open the hallway door, pulling his suitcase behind him. The heavy door slams shut and the roller-board tips over and smacks onto the hallway carpet. A yellow and red ribbon dangles from the suitcase handle.

"Ha," he says softly and reaches down to touch the ribbon. He smiles and laughs out loud. He tilts his luggage upright. He straightens up, pulls in his paunch, and throws back his shoulders. "Sancho, today we will do great deeds." As he strides down the hallway, his baggage tagging along behind him, he takes out his Blackberry and calls his wife. "Hi, honey. I know it's early. I just wanted you to know I love you. Tell the kids I'll see them tonight. The flight is on time." Before she can answer, he's on the elevator and the call goes dead.

The elevator stops and opens into the lobby. Herb spots Larry James immediately. He's sitting near the buffet hunched over a plate of food. Herb pulls his bag over to the table, and sits down across from him. "Larry, prepare to have your mind changed."

Larry James looks up, his mouth half full of egg and toast. He swallows and coughs and a small bit of wet toast shoots onto the table surface between them. Herb waits, his posture upright, his paunch flattened. "Excuse me. You caught me by surprise." Larry clears his throat and takes a sip of orange juice. The dark wisp of flattened hair is thinner, less affected by the pull of gravity toward his eyebrows which have grown wilder. "Herb, my mind's already changed." Larry James' Texas twang lingers on "miinnnd," and "chaannnged."

"You came all the way down here to see me. Nobody from Asia Minor, or wherever India is, is ever going to do that." Larry wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "We'd like to renew this contract. You guys are more expensive, but I'm hoping if we renew for five years, instead of three, you guys can give us a better price."

Herb's expression goes deadpan. He flattens his lips and presses them outward before he speaks. "Larry, I think we can be creative. We'll have to deal within some issues back at headquarters, but we can get this relationship to a place where we're both happy. At least that's how I see it."

Larry James smiles exposing his large buck teeth. "Thanks, Herb. You're a good man." He puts his hand out and Herb shakes it.

"I do my best." Herb stands up and walks toward the buffet. He notices the cantaloupe and pineapple look fresh. Decades ago, he'd decided he didn't like yogurt, but as he grabs a small container of blueberry Yoplait, Herb thinks it might be time to reconsider.

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*Robert Saul lives with his wife, Katie, in Amherst, Massachusetts. He has a degree in English from Amherst College, works as a manager of institutional forestry and farmland investments, and travels a lot. He writes on airplanes and in hotel rooms. His son Jack, age 22, is his editor. **bobsaul1@gmail.com***

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THE BEST THEY KNOW HOW

Sylvia Williams Dodgen – 2012 HACKNEY AWARD WINNER

It was late afternoon when I spotted the only available parking place at the public beach access and had to brake suddenly for two small boys who were jumping on and off the parking curb into the slot at which the car was aimed. The mother of the boys had the front passenger door ajar and appeared to be rubbing sunscreen on her arms. The boys were dressed in swimming trunks; one of them had a plastic ring around his middle, which slid down around his legs when he jumped. I pulled in cautiously, smiling at the mother who waved her arms at the boys, gesturing them back toward the sand dunes in front of the parking area. Stopping as quickly as possible, I killed the engine, so as not to scare the boys. The mother got out of her vehicle and went to the hatchback, revealing a man on the driver's side staring above the dunes at the ocean in the distance. Eyes narrowed and focus intense, he gripped the steering wheel, bunching his forearm muscles. When I stepped out of my car, I greeted the young woman at the back of their car as she slathered sunscreen on the boys' arms. I smiled but wondered why she was concerned with sunburn at four o'clock in the afternoon, particularly since the family was black and would not sunburn easily. Glancing at my pale, freckled skin, I did not think I needed suntan lotion this late in the day. One of the boys called, "Daddy, you come get some suntan too." Taking my beach chair from the trunk of the car, I said to the young mother, "Your boys look like they're having a good time." "Yes, ma'am," she said in deference to my advanced age, I supposed. It struck me that the family was dawdling in the parking lot, possibly waiting for someone. Then I overheard the father speak to the mother, "Gracie, I still think they'd have just as good a time at the arcade."

"No, Dex, we're not going back to the arcade this afternoon; we're at the beach. We agreed, remember. I don't want them to grow up afraid. You never know; they may want to join the Coast Guard when they're older."

I walked toward the boardwalk and down to the shore, setting my chair next to the water; then standing at the edge, I allowed the salty foam to soak my feet. Gulls and brown pelicans hunted for fish in the green water over the sandbar. I stood for several minutes observing their flights.

Coincidentally, I happened to turn and see the young woman to whom I had spoken earlier approaching with her husband and sons down the boardwalk steps to the beach. They set up chairs and an umbrella near the dunes about as far from the shore as they could. The beach was not

crowded; they could have sat nearer the shore; there were plenty of spots. I wondered why they stayed so far back.

Every so often from the water's edge, I would glance surreptitiously over my shoulder to view the young family sitting beneath the umbrella. The boys played in the sand at their parents' feet as the mother and father studied the horizon. The sun began to lower, outlining seaside condominiums in an orange sheen. I wondered if the parents could swim and if I should offer to hold the boys' hands at the edge of the water one at a time. It seemed sad that the boys were not getting to see periwinkles dig into soft, wet sand, or find a seashell tumbling where waves break, or feel the foamy froth of salt water on their skin.

As I watched the family in the deepening rays of the late afternoon, I thought of a high school football player, star of the team more than thirty years ago, who drowned at a popular riverside hangout where teens gathered after games on Friday nights. On a late November night, while he and others congregated in a pickup truck drinking beer, someone knocked the truck out of gear and it rolled off the river bank. Everyone survived except the star player. He was a senior who would have been entering college the next fall, the first in his family to attend, recruited by Florida to play football. He was the only black in the truck, and unlike the white students he had never learned to swim.

I recalled the haunted faces of his mother and father in the months after his death. They had not taught their athletic son to swim because they had never learned themselves, never having had the opportunity, growing up in a small rural town near the Georgia line prior to integration of recreational facilities in the 1960's. I remembered the boy's mother who cooked at a local diner, unable to control her tears when her son was mentioned. "If only I had realized," she cried, "I should have taught him to swim, but I was always afraid of water. They said he struggled with the boys, who tried to pull him out. He grabbed them around their necks. He must have been so scared." I remembered how difficult it was to listen to this mother and try to console her. The picture she painted of her son's final efforts fighting for life made me shudder as I recalled it all these years later.

Lost in thought, I had not noticed when the young family with the two boys had moved closer to the shore. They had settled in the sand only a few feet from the waves of the Gulf of Mexico placidly rolling in and out. The oldest boy kept walking to the edge of the water, but each time the mother called him back.

After about ten minutes, she removed her bathing suit cover—up and walked with the boy to the shoreline. He screeched when the waves washed over his feet; the mother jumped the lapping waves and firmly held his hand. I glanced at the father still seated on his folding chair in the sand. With his hand shielding his eyes he watched his wife and son and smiled. Then he rose and took the younger boy by the hand to the shore. The family lined up against the slipping waves, holding hands. Each time a wave rolled in the boys squealed and jumped, like their mother. Caught off guard by a higher than average wave, the youngest boy was splashed in the face and tried to run back. The father held his hand in a tight grip and walked him to a towel under the umbrella and wiped his face. Laughing, he grabbed his son and began whirling him above his head. Before I left the beach, as the sun was setting, I observed the family lined up, holding hands in three or four inches of water.

I could hear the boys laughing and screeching as I trudged up the sandy path to the parking lot. I breathed raggedly as I recalled my earliest swimming outing filed away in the deepest recesses of my consciousness. Like a pot coming to boil, the memories roiled. I recalled my older brother jumping off a diving board, dog—paddling to a ladder, and running around, wet trunks clinging to his legs, to dive again. He was young, probably five or six—years—old. Given my brother's age, I must have been two or three. Standing on the side of the concrete pool, my youthful, exuberant father laughed and clapped in encouragement, urging my brother on. I recalled that my mother later related to me how my father had learned to swim with his father in a black sink hole at the end of a day after the plowing was done. My mind flashed to my father beside the pool. With fearless abandon he had picked me up and tossed me in, saying, "This is how you learn to swim." I remembered how bewildered I was as I sank, looking through water to the blue sky above until my mother grabbed my head and lifted me, as I gasped for breath.

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*Sylvia Williams Dodgen, an Alabama native, received undergraduate and post—graduate degrees from the University of Alabama. She is retired and writes in Orange Beach, Alabama. Her stories have been published in the Birmingham Arts Journal and The Storyteller, among others. **dodgen.jean@yahoo.com***

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FACE JUG

Dick Aunspaugh

6" Ceramic Wood Fired to Cone 10

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

TUTWILER HOTEL

Errol Miller

Souls

of ol' Southern Boys, the
fester magnificent, hang from
Granny's clothesline

Barns burn, this is virgin territory,
narrow alleys, dirt roads,
red clay

& the cars were all straight six
with tomato juice, wheezing up Shades
Mountain, on to Casa Grande St.

4—in—the—floor, one
of them was me, right after sunset, as
I recall, been to the Tutwiler
for Christmas

& 40 years later
there is still an enormous space
waiting to be filled in

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*Errol Miller, an Alabama native from West Monroe, Louisiana, has published in
aura, Southern Humanities Review, Poem, Birmingham Poetry Review,
American Poetry Review, Chattahoochee Review and others. He was a
featured writer in the 2000 Poet's Market.*

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TRIP TO PRATTVILLE

Merry Lewis — 2012 HACKNEY AWARD WINNER

Crimson clover swayed beside the highway where trees sported new spring green and the lace of blooming dogwood. As I drove, I glanced at Mama's face as she took in every detail.

"I've never seen a spring so pretty...and look, the hills are starting to have that roll to them. I can always tell when I'm getting close to home!"

Her visit was a triumph over a long winter of chemotherapy, pain, and bouts of despair. We exited the expressway at Prattville, the little town where she had been born and raised, stopped to pick up Miss Julia, her friend from kindergarten days, and went for lunch to a small café in the old part of town.

The main street was lined with Victorian—front buildings, built alongside the rushing Autauga Creek. All was presided over by the huge hillside facade of Henry Pratt's 1848 cotton gin factory.

"You know, they call this 'Old Prattville,' now. I don't understand when it got to be that instead of just Prattville. They didn't ask me—just changed it. I don't know when I got to be 'Old Julia' either." She chuckled.

The two friends ordered their meals, settled at the table to talk, and in southern accents rarely heard anymore, traveled back 75 years, completely forgetting me.

I thought of my carpool driving days as the 'invisible' driver for a station wagon full of kids who chatted and gossiped, oblivious of my view into their world.

"Julia, remember the Halloween party at your beautiful, grand house? You know, your house was one of the few places Mother would let me visit. I don't know what I'd have done for fun without you."

"Oh yes, Papa opened up the second floor and we bobbed for apples in the upstairs hall and had a spook house in the library. Your mother knew that Papa was strict—especially after Mama left, he always knew what was going on. He sure thought the world of your daddy. He always said Mr. Edward was the finest lawyer in Autauga County and it just goes to show that a crippled man can do anything he wants as long as he's smart and works hard. You know your daddy took Papa's land dispute with the Booths—you remember them over on Calhoun Street, the Republicans—all the way to the Supreme Court and won!"

The waitress interrupted with the choice of three pies—peach, blueberry, apple—or banana pudding.

“That reminds me, Daddy did a lot of legal work for the farmers in the county, and most of them paid him in goods. We’d wake up some mornings and there’d be a bunch of greens or a watermelon on the front porch. One morning somebody left a little suckling pig all cleaned, trussed and ready for the oven. My brother Mac discovered it first and set it in my high chair, tied a bib around its neck, and pushed it up to the table. Mother came in from the kitchen, saw that pig, and dropped the bowl of grits on the dining room floor.”

Miss Julia laughed and shook her head.

“I have a picture of our group at Bridge Creek. I’ll give you a copy.”

“Now those were some good times! That creek was cold even on the hottest day, and the mud was so thick and red. Remember when Lucille McGowan left her shoes on the bank and they dried and stuck—just like red concrete!”

“Lord yes, and the time Ned Bozell came up to swim, but didn’t have a bathing suit. He borrowed Mac’s old one, but the moths had got to it—course they always made a hole in the worst places—and Bessie Grant’s little sister, you know she was one you could always count on to say whatever was in her head, yelled, “You better keep that away from the snapping turtle!” Ned had to put on Emmy Turner’s skirt!”

The little café was empty except for our small group. We gathered purses and canes and took Miss Julia home.

Small tufts of clouds glowed orange and lavender in the late afternoon light. Mama’s head bobbed against the seat back as she dozed. She held a black and white photo of a group of teenagers in funny old bathing suits posing in an Isadora Duncan tableau. My mother stood at the side with long skinny legs and a solemn expression, Miss Julia was in the middle, laughing. The only survivors, the only witnesses to a world that faded as fast as the day.

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Merry Lewis earned her undergraduate degree in English and History from Huntingdon College and a Master of Education degree at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She is retired, lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and has completed her first novel. She won first prize for Juvenile Fiction at the Alabama Writers Conclave, 2011. merrygen@bellsouth.net

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THAT ONE LUMINOUS CHANNEL

Karen Bowden – 2012 HACKNEY AWARD WINNER

“Your region becomes embedded in you.” —Anne Sexton

She means growing up near the sea
or a cornfield, the breaking waves
becoming as much your rhythm
as the rise and fall of your mother’s
breath, the scent of ripe corn
as much the taste on your tongue
as your father’s tobacco.

But if you stay no place long enough
to become its child, no place
long enough for the sea to stretch your vision,
for corn silk to wrap your bones,
then only what is similar from place
to place can embed itself,
and your region is metaphor.

Everywhere you know the storm
gathering, the descending
pressure startling the hairs
on your arms, widening your eyes
for the first flash, furrowing
your ears for thunder’s seed. You can
taste metal on the back of your tongue

barely sweetened by the smell of rain.
Over the whole earth, lightning bursts
100 times each second, and you want
a few seconds of one thin ribbon
sending out waves of rarefaction,
compression, illuminated thunder; you
want one thunderbolt, one long moment

in the third eye of Shiva the destroyer, and
in the next moment the thunder seed
growing in the beat of your heart, the in and out
of your breath, the dilating and contracting
of your irises while you count the seconds
from the next flash to the next thunder
and closer and closer it comes.

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*Karen Bowden lives in Phoenix, Arizona. Scottsdale Center for the Arts twice
commissioned her to write and perform poems. Two anthologies and The
MacGuffin, Poet Lore, and Hayden's Ferry Review, among others, have
published her poems. "That One Luminous Channel" won the 2012 Hackney
Literary First Place Award for poetry.*

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"Painting is easy to do when you
don't know how, but very difficult
when you do."

--Edgar Degas

BORN BENEATH THE PAPER MILL MIST, LIVING UNDER THE TRUING IRON MAN

Jim Reed

“Wah-CHOO!”

Early memories of my father always include the sounds of his four-second morning sneeze fit.

“Wah-CHOO!” again, and then it was all over.

Who knows where my father’s sneezes came from—there are suspects all around, but like all environmental irritants, it takes generations for subversive researchers to dig out the truth.

Could it be lung remnants of unregulated coal dust he breathed, working in the 1920’s coal mines of West Alabama? Could it be the rotten-egg-smelling mist that lay heavy on the morning air of Tuscaloosa back then, generated by the Paper Mill that dominated the town? Could it be some sort of undiagnosed allergy that today might be muted or mutated through mysterious prescriptions? Maybe it was just hereditary, since I now have his same sneezes.

By moving from coal-mining country and paper mill stench in Tuscaloosa to densely-particulated air in Birmingham, back in 1969, did I manage to ameliorate my throat-clearing sneezing habits of old? Nope. Still do it, still don’t know the real cause, still muddle on through.

As I make these notes that you are now reading, I can see Vulcan the Iron Man through the window, a 55-foot-tall cast-iron statue of the Roman god of fire and armor—an unlikely overseer of Birmingham. He looks out over a vast valley where the particulates settle and are inhaled each day.

If you ever get to visit Alabama, don’t miss Vulcan. He’s what we have to show off—the world’s largest cast—iron statue. St. Louis has The Arch, Paris has The Tower, we have Vulcan.

Anyhow, one of the things I like about this enormous hulk is that, while macho and tough and stocky of build, he has a finer, more gentle side. For one thing, he is holding aloft a metal spear he is fabricating, gazing up the shaft to see if it’s straight and true, obviously taking great pride in his work above the hot anvil at his feet. The other nice thing about him is he’s thinking of his secret love across the valley, a 23-foot-tall gold statue of the beautiful (and nude) Miss Electra, symbol of the harnessing of electricity to make things work better.

There you have the romance and beauty of pollution. The unrequited affair of Vulcan and Electra, their pride in rising above the heavy, dusty mists, their stoic stances representing the spirit of all of us who are powerless to change the course of industry and nature, their very symbolism keeps us going.

No matter how tough things get, there's always some hope that us little folk can keep our heads up, our pride intact, our babies nurtured, our kindnesses perpetuated, our love affairs familial and romantic and sustainable...

And each time someone nearby goes "Wah-CHOO!" it's nice to reflect on what that strange noise means, it's nice to raise a truing spear or a bolt of energizing lightning to the sky and give a silent salute to the meek—the meek, who will not inherit the earth but who can at least now and then contest the Will

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

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"Ignorance is a perfectly reasonable position to take in a conversation. I don't know everything you do. If I did, why would I bother talking to you?"

--Craig Ferguson



ROSARY TREE

Pam Short

7" x 12"

Oil on Canvas

Pam Short is an artist and photographer who lives in Birmingham, Alabama. This painting, finished while she was an art student at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, is an homage to a Catholic friend who loved Rosaries and chairs.

JAMES ALBERT

Bob Hodges

James stood at the end of the checkout counter, rocking from foot to foot and watching Susan swiping items past the thing that beeped when she did it. He had tried it with his hand once, when there were no people in line, and he could not get the thing to beep. At first he felt the thing did not beep for him because she had a magic thing in her hand, but then Susan got a break and took him into the break room and hugged him and showed him the bar code on a package.

"This is what beeps, James Albert," she said.

When the break was over, Susan swiped her hand across the thing and showed him it did not beep for her hand either. She was so pretty, to him, though some of the other bag boys did not like her, and it made him angry that they did not. Susan did not seem to get upset when they got angry at her for talking with the people in line too much, and James thought that was why she was so pretty. She was so much different than his sister, who got angry with him all the time for being too slow when he tried to talk to her.

Some of the people in line had learned his name from his name tag and would chat with him on the way out of the store to their cars. Some of them frowned at him and did not speak all the way to their cars. At first he thought the ones who frowned did not like the way he bagged their groceries, but after a few weeks, he decided that the people who frowned all the time, and they were the same ones, had left home in a bad mood because of something they did not like at home. He felt that way himself, at times, when his mom snapped at him while driving him to work at the store. But he had learned that some people frowned every time he saw them in the checkout line, and he felt sure they were not being snapped at every time they left home.

When he first was hired, he was taken to the store by Mr. Edwards, the man who taught some of his classes. That first day the store manager had assigned him to Susan and they spent the first week together for James to learn how to bag things. Not to put the things in hard cans or boxes in the same bag with the bread and the eggs and the other soft things that could get mashed. Then in their next week together, he learned to say, loudly and with a smile, just as soon as the person in the line swiped his

plastic card in the thing next to the beeper, "Paper or plastic?" And he learned then to bag with the paper or the plastic bags. Susan helped him learn all that and she gave him hugs when he got it right. When he got some of it wrong, she did not snap at him like his mom or his sister, but just smiled and said, "No, James Albert, let's try it again."

His mom told him Susan was the same age as James, but Susan knew stuff and talked about stuff with the other bag boys that James could not understand. Sometimes in the break room before the work day started, James would watch Susan do her homework in something she called algebra. There was a board in the break room and you could write on it with a marker. Susan would write x and y and other stuff while talking to herself. James could not understand why the x 's and the y 's meant anything other than what they meant when he saw them in the funny papers. To James, x meant the end of box or the end of Sox in Red Sox, and y meant the start and the end of yay! Like when the Red Sox hit a home run.

Susan said the x and the y mean some number. James knew numbers and he could count to a hundred, but he did not understand why the x meant one number one time and the y mean one number one time, but the next time when Susan made them on the board they meant a different number. When Susan finished her home work in the break room, she would give James the marker and James would draw a smiley face after her x 's and y 's.

Each week after he started James would learn something new. He knew that he could not always work at Susan's checkout place. If she had nobody waiting at her place, James knew to go help one of the other checkout people. He had also learned to listen for the speaker in the store when it was crowded, because sometimes Mr. Battle, the manager, would call for other people to come help the bag boys.

Susan was the only one in the store who called him by his first and middle names; he had told her his first week there how proud he was of having Albert as one of his names, after his dad, Albert Morris. His dad always called him by both names.

He could barely remember his dad. He mainly remembered his dad from the times his dad took him fishing and took him for rides. He was six, he thought, when the fishing and the rides stopped and his sister told him their dad was dead and to stop blubbering because the fishing and the rides had stopped.

"Just shut up about it, James!" his sister had screamed at him, and he had learned to shut up and go to his room and stand at his window and look down at the car in the driveway he and his dad used to take rides in. Or he would take the framed photograph of his dad down from his chest of drawers and polish it. On those times, when he had to shut up about his dad, he felt he would not cry if he could just look for a few minutes at his dad's face or at the car his dad had driven with James in the front seat with him. It was a special feeling for him, to imagine himself riding in the front seat with his dad and just the two of them, and leaving his mom and his sister at home. If his dad were taking him to the lake to fish, James had his own cane pole with a red and white float. His mom never went fishing with him and his sister never did. Neither of them had a pole of their own, and his dad had written "James" on his float, and he had taught James how to hook the minnow in the tail so it would keep swimming and stay alive longer.

On the times when the fish were not biting and the minnow on his hook had stopped swimming, his dad would always have him pull his line out of the water and change minnows. James always felt sad about the dead minnow he removed from the hook and when he attempted to put the dead minnow back in the bucket, his dad stopped him and told him to just throw it away.

"It's no good any more, James Albert. When the minnow stops swimming, the fish don't want to eat it any more. See here?" His dad would hold up the dead minnow before James in the palm of his hand to show him, and then flip it out into the water. James wondered if the minnows still swimming in the bucket were brothers or sisters who would miss the dead one. Sometimes when he and his dad got home from fishing, James would think about the dead minnows that sank to the bottom and whatever would happen to them.

James had learned the names of some of the people who would come to the checkout counter, just from listening to Susan greet them. On his way to their cars with them, he enjoyed pushing the cart while following them, especially those who would ask him questions about how he was doing in school or how his mom and his sister were or when his birthday was. Sometimes they would ask him if he remembered their names, and if he did not remember, he would always smile at them and promise to remember the next time. Susan had taught him to smile on the cart trips

to the parking lot, even to smile at the frowning ones. It became a kind of game between Susan and him, whether he could get the frowning ones to smile back.

"It's kind of like the sun breaking through a cloud, James Albert. Maybe every once in a while you can get inside their cloud and make it skeedaddle."

James always laughed when she said "skeedaddle," and now every time she said it, he would clap his hands and whisk them aside, like he was sweeping the clouds away. Every once in a while a frowner would smile back at him, and when that happened, he thought, "I just borrowed that from Susan to give to you."

On Valentine's Day the people who worked at the store wore red heart stickers on the bibs of their aprons and gave little Valentine gifts to each other. James' mom got him some of those little pink and white sugar hearts with sayings on them and he gave a package of them to Susan with "Be My Valentine" on them. At the end of the work day she reached into her purse in the break room and pulled out an envelope that had "To James Albert" on it. Then she hugged him and left.

He rode home with his mom without opening the envelope and his mom made him promise to tell her what was inside. When he opened it in his room, he could not read some of the words, so he got his mom to read it to him.

"James Albert, if you will always be my valentine, I will tell you a secret when we come back to work. Next week will be my last week at the store. I will miss you so very much, and I want you to promise to keep smiling through any clouds you find and never forget me. XOXO Susan"

James put the card on his desk beside the picture of his dad. He started feeling sad and then opened Susan's card and read it again and then sat and smiled at it. He polished his dad's picture and then went to bed for the night with the card under his pillow.

The next week at the store he kept asking Susan what her secret was, and she told him she would tell him on her last day. Her last day came and after they had hung up their aprons in the break room, she gave him a long hug and sat him down in front of her.

"James Albert, give me your hand."

He held out his hand and she placed it on her tummy and put her hands over his.

"Did your mom ever tell you where you came from when you were born?" she asked, looking into his eyes.

"No," he said, "Not ever."

"Do you promise to tell your mom we had this talk?"

He nodded yes.

"Please ask your mom to explain it to you. Here is my secret. Here under your hand and inside my tummy is a little baby boy. In a few months, he will be born and I will bring him to see you here. His daddy and I have to decide what name to give him, but you could be thinking of some names and we will think about those. Okay?"

"Okay." He forced a smile and pulled his hand back.

"I brought you a going away present," he said, "But now you can give it to your baby boy. It can be the baby boy's being born present."

He reached into the pocket of his apron and pulled out an envelope with her name on it.

"You and the baby boy can have this for when there are sad days, but it only works if you hold it and smile."

Susan left him in the break room. James Albert stood and looked at where her work apron hung. Then he went outside the store and stood, smiling, as he watched her walk to her car. She looked back at him and waved. He swished his hands to the side and shouted, "Skeedaddle!" He saw her pause, looking back and laughing, until his mom drove between them.

Susan sat in her car and watched James Albert get in his mom's car and ride away.

She opened the envelope and there was a red and white fishing float with "James" printed on it.

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Bob Hodges is a native of Scottsboro, Alabama, who now resides in Hampton Cove. He holds a bachelor's degree and law degree from the University of Alabama. A retired judge, his passion is writing, which he studied at the University of Alabama at Huntsville. oedipus04@hotmail.com

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THE GOSPEL OF VAN GOGH

Natalie Cochran-Murray

I dip my brush in language, breathe life
into empty space. Hovering over vast emptiness,
I say: let there be light. Oil my mouth,
brushstrokes my voice, I paint polychromatic
portraits on wide cerebral canvas.
I am painting a sermon.

Sometimes I paint outside lines,
subjects growing beneath my hands.
I smear stain on emptiness, costume beauty
in toxic cadmium yellow, ultramarine, vermillion.
I trim the night in inky black sunflowers
that wave in varicolored darkness.
Prussian blue paintings prophesy, proselytize,
speak speechless sermons that paint God vast.
I am painting a sermon.

I make the invisible visible as I spin
sermons with hands that grip brushes
like wands, poised to speak unspoken spells
to skies that crawl with curlicue currents,
cypresses and starry nights that wind like rings
on an aged tree, each ring proclaiming a story,
dendrochronologic testimonies of life, storms, growth.
Swirls round like tree trunks lined with surges
of circulations that coil like rings on the fig tree
that did not produce good fruit. The one that didn't live
up to its potential before God said, "cut it down."
He stopped the hard-to-date helix that whorled,
convoluted, overlapping, bedizened with garish strokes.

He stopped that story but I am painting its sermon.
I continue to breathe life into the abstract,
coloring the landscape with language.
My work is not to paint what is seen but what is believed.
Paint as faith—the substance of things hoped for,
the evidence of things unseen. I paint the invisible thick,
impasto strokes to make you believe in broken
yoke sky. I paint the blurred face of an angry God,
colorless and flat, haunting beneath canvas.
I am painting a sermon.

Hunched over pulpit palettes, I hang red ocher suns
in russet-orange skies, shaded behind stark silhouettes
of cypress that stand solid, robust, bigger than the mind.
Miles of narrative resides beneath the thin skin of paper,
raw sienna truths that teem through unseen word highways.
The pigmented persuasion of unlikely parishioners pronounce
faith through the underlying tenor of imagery.
I am painting a sermon.

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*Natalie Cochran—Murray is a nonfiction essayist, poet, and composition instructor
at the University of South Alabama. Her poetry has appeared in several print and
online publications, including Deep South Magazine, Eunoia Review, and
Oracle Fine Arts Review.*
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SPRING BREAK

Beau Gustafson
Digital Photograph

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

HAZARDOUS MATERIAL A Firefighter Mystery Novel

Kurt Kamm – 2012 HACKNEY AWARD WINNER

In this excerpt, Bucky Dawson, a HazMat firefighter for Los Angeles County Fire Department, is responding, with his team, to a 2:00 a.m. call from the Sheriff's Department, which is about to raid a meth lab in the Mojave Desert.

The diesel gave off a deep-throated rumble and created a vibration that climbed Bucky's spine. The jump seats were hard, with upright back supports and he felt a faint pain in his lower back. He had taken a Percocet before he went to sleep several hours earlier. Now he wanted another, but would wait until they returned to the station. The agonizing sting from his pinched nerve had subsided to an occasional twinge almost two months ago, but he still took the painkillers.

Bucky knew it was time to quit, but the Percs made everything a little better—he felt more energetic, happier, and best of all, the nightmares didn't come as often.

Just before the Kern County line, Task Force 129 turned off onto La Tijera Road, a strip of cratered old blacktop that ran for a couple of miles before it turned into dirt. A deputy wearing a reflective SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT vest stood by the door of his black and white at the end of the pavement. As they approached, he waved them over with a high-powered halogen flashlight and spoke into the radio on his shoulder. The two engines stopped behind the HazMat Squad and the firefighters climbed out to hear what the deputy had to say.

"We've got a major meth lab out there," the deputy told them. "Mexican nationals in a doublewide. They're probably armed. We've got an entry team going in as soon as you get into position."

"Where's 'out there'?" Bucky asked.

"East-Jesus," the officer said. "About twelve miles southwest. Dirt road all the way."

"Why are we doing this now?" Baxter asked.

"We got the tip around midnight," the deputy said. "We've been waiting for weeks for this. It's a big takedown. We're going in non-code, no lights, and no sirens. You follow me. We have to hurry, but keep your RPMs down. We can't have a lot of noise."

"F—g A," AJ said. "We'll be so quiet you can hear a lizard fart."

Bucky doubted that two 21-ton fire engines and an 18-ton HazMat Squad the size of a tour bus could be quiet at any speed.

"As soon as you get there," the deputy said, "our team will take out their cameras, lights and motion detectors. Once we do that, we have to make an immediate entry, before they realize what's going on."

"Can you describe the layout?" Farrell asked.

"You'll be downwind," the deputy said. "Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Downwind?" Farrell said. "You're kidding. We're not coming in downwind of a meth lab."

"We can't help it," the deputy said. "The road runs on the south side of the trailer. There's no way you can drive across the sand to the other side. There's a stand of Joshua trees, about 250 yards from the trailer. You'll be behind that." He handed Farrell two King radios. "Monitor the tactical blue channel, but do not, repeat, do not break radio silence."

"Are we going in?" Bucky asked. "Or just standing around?"

"You're on standby," the deputy said. "We have a forensics van. They should be able to handle the lab. OK? C'mon, we've gotta roll."

Bucky knew what "standby" meant. It meant their entire team had to set up as though it were a full—blown hazardous materials incident and then just wait, do nothing, and finally pack up and return to the station. He had already been through the meth lab drill in the middle of the night a few times. Long before Bucky joined the fire department, Lancaster had become the U.S. capital for methamphetamine production. The remote areas of the vast Mojave Desert were perfect for the Mexican gangs and the bikers who moved in to set up big, dangerous drug labs. Skinheads and outlaw bikers, using the "Nazi" manufacturing method, fought for dominance with the illegals using the "Mexican National" method. They set booby traps to protect their own operations and blew up each other's labs. Sometimes the chemical vapors from the cooking ignited, creating powerful explosions that added to the mayhem. There were countless stories from old-timers in the fire department about drug raids. In the beginning, law enforcement relied on County Fire to deal with the toxic liquids and fumes and the first HazMat teams suffered burns from corrosive chemicals, inhalation injuries from toxic vapors and one firefighter died in an explosion.

Things were different now. The narcs had their own multi-agency response team called IMPACT, experienced hazardous materials handlers trained by the Department of Justice to work a meth-lab crime scene. Law

enforcement no longer wanted firefighters stomping around destroying evidence, but occasionally they still called out a HazMat team in the middle of the night and when the tone sounded, the response team rolled out, set up and did nothing for several hours while the Narcotics Squad took down bikers, Mexicans, or paranoid speed freaks. "Why call us at all?" Bucky once asked his lifelong friend, Miguel "Mike" Ortiz, a detective on the North County Narcotics Squad. "You won't let us near the scene anyway. Why not use IMPACT?"

Mike, a tough little guy who looked like he lifted weights all day, said, "It's all about timing. Sometimes we have to move fast and there's no time to get a warrant and mobilize IMPACT. The first thing defense attorneys do is try to get the evidence thrown out by proving that an illegal search occurred. We have to show it's a volatile situation—you know, imminent danger to life and property, escape of suspects, that kind of stuff. We have to establish the need for an immediate response, which is called 'exigent circumstances.' We bring you out and that indicates we think there's imminent danger and no time to get a warrant."

Bucky looked into the darkness of the desert as the Box bounced along over the dirt road. The stars sparkled and a half moon hung in the sky. When they approached the stand of Joshua trees, he made out two sheriff's vans that belonged to the assault team and the assessment team—a criminalist and scientific support personnel. He reached into his pack for the night vision glasses he had purchased on eBay. This was a perfect time to try them out.

The HazMat vehicles stopped next to the sheriff's vans and Bucky was the first one out of the Box. He was surprised because there was no telltale odor in the air. He expected a thick, sweet stench drifting downwind from the meth lab. Instead, his exceptional, almost preternatural sense of smell picked up only faint alcohol vapors.

Farrell joined him in the dark. "Smell anything, Buck?" he asked.

"Not much," Bucky said. "Alcohol fumes." He checked the scene with his night vision glasses and saw the doublewide outlined in glowing green. The windows were masked from the inside, but light poured out from a few spots left uncovered. More illumination leaked from under the front door and through a few small holes in the side of the trailer.

Bucky's entry partner, Jason, joined him outside, rolled up a door on the side of the Box and pulled out the large drawer containing their SCBA air tanks and masks. The men from the engines joined them and slid out

other drawers that contained protective suits, measuring devices and decontamination equipment. They began to bump test—warm up—the meters they would use to test the air if they had to make entry. AJ pointed the temperature gun at the trailer, but was too far away to get a reading. Bucky let his night vision glasses hang around his neck and helped begin the setup. Bucky knew the routine: At a cost of thousands of dollars, the nine men from the HazMat task force would spend the rest of the night staging in the desert. They assumed nothing and followed a strict safety procedure. Two HazMat entry men, one of whom was Bucky, and a backup team, would be in full protective gear, ready to move forward if needed. They would test for toxic vapors as they proceeded, and if they got unusual meter readings, would stop or pull back until they determined what they were dealing with. Decontamination equipment would be set up to wash them off when they returned. The tech ref—the technical reference man—would remain in the Box and boot up the electronic gear. He would connect to various databases and to the weather bureau, analyze the readouts sent by the entry team's meters, track airborne contaminants and report the findings.

Bucky left his turnout coat unbuttoned. Tonight, the early morning September temperature was warmer than usual, hovering in the upper fifties. He slung his breathing apparatus onto his back and let the mask hang at his side. He leaned against the side of the Squad and focused his night glasses again on the doublewide. They were the old first-generation binoculars, but they still provided adequate light intensification and a decent image. Bucky followed two green bodies, men from the sheriff's assault team, crawling on the ground around the trailer. He thought they might be cutting wires or disarming booby traps.

Three other figures edged forward. Two carried assault rifles and one held the ram that would pulverize the thin metal trailer door on the first impact. Bucky couldn't determine whether his friend Mike, from the sheriff's department, was part of the group.

Bucky was still looking through his night vision glasses when the door to the trailer suddenly opened, flooding the sand with a bright rectangle of light. The assault team pulled back and melted into the darkness. A thin woman wearing a white T-shirt and jeans came to the doorway with a cigarette between her lips. She stood for a moment, twisted her hair around her index finger and then pulled a lighter from her pocket. As she struck a flame, it illuminated part of her face and Bucky was astounded. It looked like it was his sister Brandy standing in the doorway of the trailer.

He couldn't be certain, but his sister had the distinctive habit of twisting her hair around her finger—something she had done since she was a child. Bucky played with the focus on his glasses and tried to get a better look at her face. The sound of the explosion hit his eardrums a split second after the flash of light from the 2,000-degree ignition. The woman's body disappeared in an expanding ball of orange fire and the doublewide disintegrated in the blast that blew the roof off and the walls outward. The powerful odor of combustion was the last thing to reach Bucky's senses as burning pieces of debris fell to the ground.

Bucky heard the frantic chatter from the sheriff's assault team coming from the radios. He and the other men from HazMat Task Force 129 watched the light from the explosion subside as flames consumed the remains of what had been a clandestine methamphetamine laboratory.

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*Malibu resident Kurt Kamm has used his contact with CalFire, Los Angeles County Fire Department, Ventura County Fire Department and the ATF, as well as his experience in several wildfires, to write fact—based firefighter mystery novels. He has an avid fan base among first responders and is a graduate of Brown University and Columbia Law School. **www.kurtkamm.com***
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"A reader is unlikely to be pleased
unless the author has first pleased
himself."

--Brian Aldiss

LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL

Sue Scalf – 2012 HACKNEY AWARDWINNER

Stop! Stop! Let me out!
And my husband stopped the car
so I could walk into Michigan woods
on fire with fall. I stood there ankle-deep
and heard the silence. No birds.
Nothing at all, except an acorn
shuffling down, and far in the top
of trees, the wind.

Years later,
Stop! Stop! Let me out!
I see the angel.
And he stopped the car
so I could follow the sign
to Wolfe's angel pointing homeward.

Defiant and true, most of it,
but not the purchase of the statue
credited to a lady of the night.
I thought of Wolfe's father
who sold the statue to a minister for his wife,
how he carved names into all those tombstones, all those years,
and of his son spilling page after page
of tangled truth and lies.

Now I say to time, to my patient husband,
gone from me these many years, Let me out!
Let me stand among the leaves and look with the angel.
Homeward, let me look and stand in the quiet, in the silence.

Let me hold this glorious world, point upwards toward the sky.
Oh let me look at this sweet earth, hear the very planets spin.
Hold it all and know it all for all it is. Our life together.
Yet, nothing on this earth—time, rivers, rocks, words and memory—
nothing is ever enough, never enough to last.

.....

Sue Scalf has loved Thomas Wolfe's "Look Homeward, Angel" since she was seventeen. "I twice visited his home and gravesite in Asheville, North Carolina." She has written nine books of poetry and has published poems in Scotland, Japan and New Zealand. She has lived in Alabama almost all her life.

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"To arouse envy is probably among
the purest of human satisfactions."
--H.G. Wells



RED

Jill Billions

12" x 12"

Acrylic on Canvas

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

VOWS

Katie Darby Mullins

As if I could explain how
sweat sheened on his chest
reminds me of moonlight
skimming the river, of how
he must have looked
twelve years ago. As if

I could say how lost I am
when he's gone that
I sleep with my body
curled on his side of the bed
like an apostrophe, replacing
what's missing.

My silent whispers between
his spoken prayers—God
please protect him, even
from my selfishness—burn up
to the ceiling, where they float
like rain-full clouds

that remind me of my wedding
dress, and that day, yet to come,
and my voice, that like a firefly
will snuff out when I try to say
anything about how he is the river.
Anything but "I do."

.....

Katie Darby Mullins is completing a Master of Fine Arts degree at Spalding University and teaching at the University of Evansville. In addition to editing a recent rock 'n' roll crossover edition of Measure, she's been published or has work forthcoming in journals like Harpur Palate, Broad River Review, The Evansville Review, and more.

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THE RAJ IS DEAD

Peter Delevett – 2012 HACKNEY AWARD WINNER

3 a.m., New Delhi. The Marina Hotel. I had booked this place from Bangkok, handing up a ridiculous sum to the lady who ran the long-distance phone booth in the backpackers' quarter; I figured it was worth it to avoid late-night haggling for a room. Now it's looking like a stroke of genius; Connaught Place, the ring of cheap hotels where this place sits, is nothing like insomniac Banglamphoo. There's not a light on anywhere; I would have been screwed if I'd shown up planning to hunt for a place to flop.

Airport security in New Delhi is incredible; the only place I've ever seen where they x-ray your baggage as you're getting off the plane. With only three days on my transit visa, I checked most of my bags and gear in the left luggage 'room,' a seedy-looking shack in the airport parking lot. The guys there eyed my things with a gleam. Bleary-eyed, I looked at a sign that read 'International Flight Booking' and was absolutely convinced it said "International Book Flushing." A terrible form of censorship.

Then a suicide taxi ride to Connaught Place, the early morning streets rolled up but unexpectedly clean. Outside my window, not even a dog.

In the morning, kids run up and down alleys that look like the Arab quarter in "Casablanca." I'm taking a picture of a long stucco gallery when one little boy plants himself right in the picture, hands on hips, a world-beater smile. I grin and snap his photo, and he's immediately on me for 10 rupees, a model's fee. The neighborhood desperately poor, like so much of the country.

In most Asian guest houses the westerners seem like they're trying hard to ignore each other, but in India there's a kind of banding-together, a sharing of war stories and horror stories. Never take your eyes off your bags while you're on the trains, they tell me; sometimes a scammer will toss your things out the window as you chug along, his friends trailing the train to pick them up. One Englishwoman, sharing a sleeper with the nicest-looking family, asked them to keep an eye on her pack while she ran to the loo. Came back and the family still sitting there, all smiles, and her pack disappeared.

I flag down a Sikh driving a three-wheeled, tuk-tuk-like contraption, strike a deal with him to tool me around the old town. His religion teaches kindness to strangers, and the quality of his suit tells me he's better off than many in Delhi, all of which makes him less inclined to rip me off. I hope.

He carts me to the Red Fort, built by the Moghuls, the mile-long sandstone walls once ornate with inlaid jewels and silver, but much of the loot since carried off by invaders, coup regimes, mutineers. The shadows grow as I leave, but my driver wants to make a detour before home. Wary, I accept, and he stops at a friend's antique store; "Only to look, only to look," he assures me.

In resignation I browse through stacks of things I can't afford, Jain sculptures, renderings of Shiva, carpets piled like badly shuffled cards. Then something stops me: a sheaf of pages from an illuminated manuscript, scenes from mythology or history. Vivid purples and gold leaf, the corners eaten by worms and age. I stop to consider one page, a ghopi kneeling before a holy man, fine fruit trees in the distance. The shopkeepers are quick, "How much? How much?" I knock them down a bit, still pay more than I'd wanted, but leave the store feeling I've snared a treasure.

The picture goes into my pack, which I'm leaving with my hotel-keeper while I head south to Agra and the Taj Mahal. A short walk the next day to the train station, through streets crammed with begging humanity. The smell of everything. A kid attaches himself to me, offering to be my guide. "You go to Agra? I come from there, I show you." No thanks, I tell him, but he tags along anyway.

"Listen, you can come to Agra if you want to, but I'm not paying you anything. Got it? No baksheesh." The kid smiles and shrugs.

On the train, wind rushes through the cars, cooling people and tempers. The land folds out in dusty fields. The kid and I talk about growing up in such a place. Deepavali and the holy river Ganges, fakirs and wandering sadhus. Buddhism and Hinduism born here, a hundred other faiths, a thousand gods. The boy invites me to his uncle's house in Agra, and I'm delighted by the thought of sharing tea in a family's home.

"What time do the trains head back to Delhi?" I ask him when we rattle into the station, and he answers, "All night." I want to head straight to the Taj, but the boy pulls my arm. "Too hot now," he tells me. "Very

crowded. You come with me to my uncle's, then you will have plenty of time for the Taj." I'm reluctant, but he insists.

He takes me to a fine house not far from the train station. A woman in sari and pallu comes to the door, looks me over with disinterest while the kid jabbars. She lets us in and disappears. The kid tramps into a formal sitting room, no Delhi-style poverty here, and we plunge into soft couches.

The kid seems bored, sitting silently, and the Agra heat begins to stifle the aircon. After half an hour I'm getting bored myself, not wanting to waste my day here. "Is your uncle coming soon?" I ask. The kid just shrugs again, which annoys me until I finally realize it's the equivalent of a nod in my country.

After 45 minutes I'm on my feet, the kid up in a flash and wheedling, tugging on my shirt. "The Taj is hot, crowded," he reminds me. "There is plenty of time. Wait for my uncle." Struggling with myself, I tell him I'll wait 15 more minutes. Close to 30 go by, my anger rising by the moment, until suddenly a door swings open and the uncle arrives. He's a slick-looking man in a white silk shirt, and he smiles graciously, calls for more tea. The boy happily skips away.

"So," his uncle begins the small talk. "What do you think of India?" Truthfully, I tell him, I've been here less than 48 hours. It's a bit overwhelming. He laughs at this. Asks about my plans, where I'm headed after India, and when I tell him Paris, he brightens. "What will you be doing there?" he asks, and I admit I'm not quite sure—teaching, I suppose, looking for work—I've been backpacking for almost a year, since graduation. "So you may need some money to tide you over," he suggests. Maybe, I agree warily.

"I have a proposition for you," the man begins, and I hold my breath. "I have a friend in Paris, a jeweler. From time to time I send him jewels from India, precious stones which he sets and sells. But with these laws, the customs duties, they are very expensive. Yes?" I'm still waiting, silent. "I sometimes ask friends who are traveling to...deliver a package for me. Just a small bag of gemstones, nothing illegal. All I ask is that they deliver it to my friend. For that, they receive \$5,000."

That's not small money to me; I've done worse things for less. Still, I picture the airport's cavity—exploring security detail. "No thank you," I tell him. The man persists. "It is very simple, I promise you. You take a little bag. You meet my friend and deliver it to him, very simple. There is

nothing wrong about it. And as security, you leave with me an imprint of your credit card. You have a credit card, yes? You leave me the imprint, and when you deliver the jewels I tear it up. Just in case, you understand."

Now I'm really tempted; in jail for smuggling, and this guy cleans out my savings. "No thanks," I say again, rising. It takes another 20 minutes to get out the door, the uncle trying every form of persuasion, but at last he gives up and calls for the boy. The nephew sullenly reappears, leads me out of the house with resentful glares. "Thanks for the tea," I tell him coldly.

The kid disappears halfway to the Taj, leaving it to me to find it there. It's funny to see, for the first time, a thing you've seen photographed again and again; a strange sense of déjà vu, sometimes underwhelming, but there's nothing underwhelming about the Taj Mahal. The bulk of white granite seems to glow. I wander through this ultimate love-poem to a Shah's wife, precious stones set into the walls in floral patterns, imagine the immensity of the builder's task.

Later I lounge by the reflecting pool, just gazing at the place. The entire country boggles the senses, palaces and temples cut from the dust of myth.

When things get too dark to see, I amble back toward the train station and breezily ask about the next train. "Midnight," the ticket wallah pronounces, and my mellow comes crashing down. "I was told the trains run all night," I stammer. The wallah simply grimaces.

Five hours to kill...and worse, I'll have barely any time in New Delhi to collect my things and boot for the airport. Dazed, I drift around the neighborhood. Pass a gift—shop window crammed full of the illuminated manuscript pages I'd thought so rare and precious yesterday; here they're a fraction of what I'd paid. Rooked once again, feeling sheepish and depressed.

But later, a miracle: I stumble across a wedding party, the groom masked and decked out in gold turban, sitting on a white mule led by family. The men surrounding him pound tambourines and leap with joy; it's the finest thing I've seen in India, at least that wasn't made of stone, and makes this enforced sojourn worthwhile. Or almost.

Back at the station just before midnight, I stop into a transit lounge and find a scene straight out of Dante, bodies twisted on the floor like bomb victims, people trying to sleep wherever they can grab the

space. Right before the train is set to come, a loudspeaker announces a delay for another hour. I try curling up on a bench and succeed only in putting my legs to sleep.

Another hour, another delay. "Two o'clock," the wallah says dismissively. "Do you think it will really come then?" I ask, and he looks at me as if to say, "This is India."

I realize that if the train doesn't come at two, I'll miss my flight...and overrun my three-day visa. Feeling like a man about to commit suicide, I walk to a long line of taxis in front of the station. "How much to New Delhi," I ask reluctantly, and the man smiles like Ganesha himself has appeared in a shower of gold. He runs to find a friend to drive, insists I hire both of them, the first man as a "translator" though he doesn't say a word the entire five-hour, dead-night run. I doze on the dirty back seat as my money clicks away.

We hit the city at dawn, and I instruct the driver to take me to my guest house. The translator turns suspiciously; "You said New Delhi airport." I have to get my luggage, I explain, and the shyster clucks. "This will add to the fare."

The airport at last; I stagger exhausted from the back seat, the co-pilot jumping up to grin at me expectantly.

"I suppose you want baksheesh," I say, and I'm too battered to argue. Picking up my things from the left-luggage shed, I find the pockets I couldn't lock shut have been rifled, my shaving mirror gone.

After all of that, the flight's delayed, of course. I go looking for breakfast at the deserted airport café. Music on the speakers, tabla and the drone of tampura, someone plucking out a sitar raga, and above the musicians the deep—felt wail of a man's voice. The song runs free for ten minutes, fifteen, with brief solos from a bowed sarangi, a woman's nasal falsetto making an occasional cameo. And the man continues his chant, voice trilling in his throat, sounding as though the world's at end, and the tala beats on mysteriously.

"What's he saying?" I ask when the waiter comes to fill my tea. His answer simple and resonant: "He is singing about God."

Winging toward Europe an hour later, Asia streaming further away with every second. Over the left wing, a flotilla of puffy clouds like fierce little tugboats; and later still, sunlight off lakes below, the water the blackest shade of blue, wind-stippled.

The waiter's words linger with me, leave me feeling somehow changed, like the afterglow of a dream or vision. I drift back to the midnight wedding party, to the fantastic foreignness of those hundred faiths, those thousand gods. The worst of human nature may be on display in the slums of Delhi, as in the ghettos of Paris and New York.

Yet human hands, inspired, also built the Taj Mahal. And human hearts craft poems of love and songs of faith.

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Peter Delevett is a journalist and award-winning travel writer in Silicon Valley.

His 14-month, 14-country backpacking trek after graduating Yale formed the basis for a forthcoming travel memoir "Walking on the Moon." By day, he covers startups for the San Jose Mercury News; follow him on Twitter @mercwiretap.

www.moontripping.com

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"What is happiness? It's a moment
before you need more happiness."

--Don Draper



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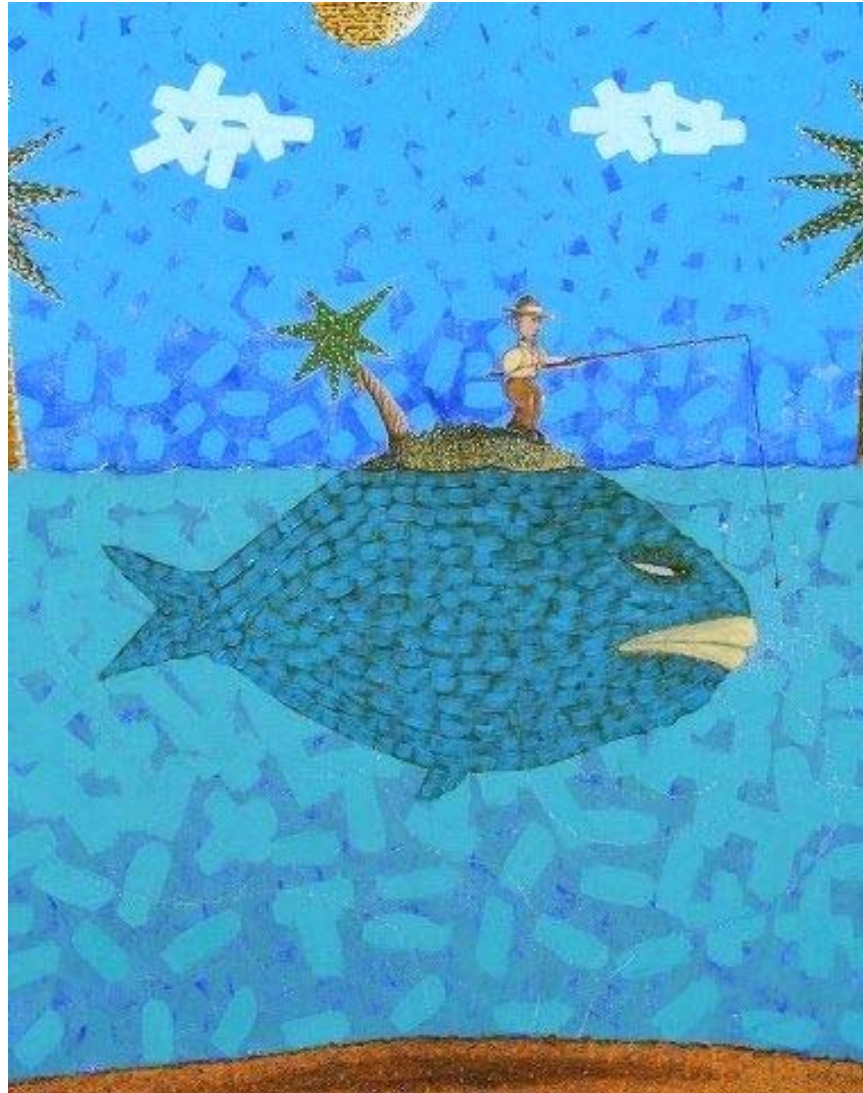
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