

# Birmingham Arts Journal

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		Page
Safe In Her Alabaster Chambers	Danielle Jones-Pruett	1
Kikuyu Mama	Penny Arnold	2
Look At Me	Thomas A. Mesereau, Jr.	3
Why I Don't Like Hats	Frieda Stevenson	9
Lunch With Lady Astor	John M. Packard	11
Purple Bell Flower	Penny Arnold	14
Seasons	Davide Trame	15
Sales Advice	Arden Moser	16
Bill	Rachel Plummer	17
A Summer's Tan	Jim Herod	18
Photograph Of A Footwashing In Kentucky	Rita Quillen	21
Late Night Guitar	Tom Sheehan	22
In A Nutshell	Kristine Ong Muslim	23
Black Sand Beach, Hawaii	Sharon Laning	24-25
Good Grief	Bill Goodson	26
Meanderer	D. S. Pearson	32
Blowing Up English Class	Jim Merlini	33
Hidden Swamp	Liz Masoner	35
The Dream Of Flight In A Drowned World	Amanda Moore	36
Cutthroat	Reilly Maginn	37
Remind Me	Dennis Formento	40
First Grade, First Day	Don Stewart	42
The Funeral	T.J. McIntyre	44
Window Treats	Mary Lynne Robbins	47
Phone Hell #4	Jim Reed	48

**Front Cover:** Joe DeCamillis' art reflects his travels to art shows throughout the U.S. and abroad. His small mixed-media and found-object images are collected by individuals, corporations and museums and featured in magazines such as *New American Painting*, *Birmingham Home and Gardens*, *Altered Object* and others. He lives in Birmingham, Alabama, with his wife, Ali, an art therapist. [www.joedecamillis.com](http://www.joedecamillis.com)

**Back Cover:** Indiana native and current Birmingham, Alabama, resident, Dan Deem is a self-taught photographer whose roots lie in photojournalism. His work has been displayed in such venues as *The Saturday Evening Post*, NBC's *Today Show*, the Jimmy Carter Library in Atlanta, Georgia, and previous issues of *Birmingham Arts Journal*. Deem's work is well represented in many private collections throughout the U.S. and may be seen locally at Lyda Rose Gallery in Homewood. His work was selected for the Birmingham Art Association Juried Show in April, 2006. [www.ddeemphotoart.com](http://www.ddeemphotoart.com)

## SAFE IN HER ALABASTER CHAMBERS

Danielle Jones-Pruett

Safe in her alabaster chambers  
Emily sculpted dolls of bone  
Their eyes plucked straight from daydreams  
Their hearts made simply stone

At fireside she paraded them,  
With her family all around  
She recited lines, her memories,  
Borne each night without a sound

But as her back began to bend,  
When the fingers ached from use,  
As season after season  
Passed outside her room

She began to let a voice in,  
Her verses danced in time,  
All her songs became dirges:  
You could sense Him in the rhyme;

It was in preparation, an anxious readiness,  
For she knew Death  
Was far too stern  
To allow reclusiveness.

.....  
*Danielle Jones-Pruett is a senior at Jacksonville State University, where she is pursuing a B.A. in both psychology and English. While she has co-authored papers for scholarly journals, including the Journal of Classical Sociology, her true love is poetry. She lives in Weaver, Alabama, with her insanelly supportive husband and their two sons.*  
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## KIKUYU MAMA

Penny Arnold  
Stained Glass Mosaic

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*Birmingham-born artist Penny Arnold creates stained glass mosaics in her home studio near Pell City, AL, where she lives with her husband, composer Monroe Golden, and son, Jenner. Her work reflects the diverse cultures in which she has lived. See more mosaics and stained glass at [www.goldenpennystudio.com](http://www.goldenpennystudio.com).*  
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## LOOK AT ME

Thomas A. Mesereau, Jr.

High-profile cases are won in the courtroom, not the media. Our colleagues who contend that public relations and media contacts win or lose cases are deluding themselves and others. The proof rests in the repeated media failure to accurately predict trial results.

Overwhelmingly, the media predicted that O.J. Simpson, Robert Blake and Michael Jackson would be convicted. They were acquitted. The vast majority of media pundits thought the Scott Peterson jury would hang or acquit. He got the death penalty. Media spin is no measure of courtroom success.

Human beings are masters at justifying what they want. Lawyers who crave the limelight would like the world to think they are wizards of courtroom excellence because of their comfort before the camera. If I were in trouble, they're the ones I would be most suspicious of.

I learned certain lessons about high-profile cases many years before the O.J. Simpson case. In my peripatetic readings, I came across fascinating texts about the trial of Jack Ruby and Melvin Belli's colorful defense. These lessons are worth relating.

Ruby had murdered President Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, before 80 million television viewers in 1964. After being retained, San Francisco-based Belli showed up in Dallas with his own documentary film crew and photographers. During his representation of Ruby, he was negotiating for his autobiography. Meanwhile, the trial judge was negotiating with a publisher, which resulted in a reversal of Ruby's conviction and death verdict.

Ruby's siblings also were negotiating book deals. Reportedly, after Ruby was convicted and sentenced to death, Belli and other trial counsel were photographed with Ruby in his cell before their attempt

to sell the photograph to Life Magazine. Meanwhile, Belli's chief expert witness, a noted psychiatrist, complained that a photographer was present during his first meeting with Belli and Ruby.

As early as the 1960s, a media-driven culture that glorifies celebrity had infected the highest-profile case in American history. People, and lawyers, were intoxicated by cameras. Spin became identified with top-flight criminal defense, and Belli was assumed to be the right lawyer to handle a media-inspired effort. Disaster.

This verdict was not preordained. Originally, Ruby hired a local capital defender named Tom Howard. Howard was a low-profile, no-frills lawyer who had defended 25 capital cases. No client had been sentenced to death. He saw no reason to dispute the shooting or to plead not guilty by reason of insanity. Dallas juries detested this defense.

Howard believed that this was an easier case for avoiding the death penalty than most. The victim was a monster who had killed a beloved president and seriously wounded the Texas governor. His client had a history of proven emotional instability and visible impulsiveness. Ruby's mother and siblings had been placed in mental institutions.

There was compelling evidence that Ruby had not planned the killing and had a reputation for charitable deeds throughout the community. He was a nightclub owner who routinely carried lots of pocket cash and a handgun. Howard planned to admit the shooting and present evidence of serious mental disability without pleading not guilty by reason of insanity. He would use local experts and present evidence of good character. On the stand, Ruby would tearfully admit the shooting, explain how he "lost it" and apologize. Under Texas law, even if Ruby received life in prison, he likely would be out in seven years. If convicted of murder with malice, he would receive a sentence of zero to five years.

The flamboyant, self-promoting Belli was a legend and pioneer in the development of tort law. He loved the limelight and had represented actors Errol Flynn and Mae West, as well as Lenny Bruce and The Rolling Stones. Writer Alex Haley claimed Belli once paged himself at a Paris airport for publicity. Belli wore specially tailored, Western-cut suits lined in red silk with high slash pockets on his trousers and London-made, calf-high black boots. He often wore a black Homburg hat and carried a garish red felt briefcase. When he won a civil verdict, he would hoist a Jolly Roger flag on his office roof and shoot a loud cannon. He liked to publicize his pet parrot, who he claimed drank bourbon.

Belli went for an outright acquittal by reason of insanity. He brought in expert witnesses from outside Texas to claim that his client suffered organic brain damage resulting in psychomotor epilepsy. He claimed that Ruby blanked out during the shooting, which was the product of a convulsive impulse. Belli hoped this high-profile trial would forge new ground in medical-legal issues.

The call for celebrity is an invitation to narcissism. Cameras are the conduit. Narcissism is an extreme preoccupation with one's self and different from a healthy trial lawyer's ego. A trial lawyer's ego connotes confidence, authenticity, command, compassion and selflessness—all in the pursuit of protecting the client. Some of the greatest trial lawyers are humble. But narcissists, try as they may, cannot convincingly pretend to have these good qualities. Narcissists make poor trial lawyers and always misinterpret how others perceive them. Cameras, like alcoholism and drug addiction, can turn seasoned trial lawyers into pathetic caricatures of themselves.

The challenge of a high-profile lawyer is to remain focused on the client's interests. A trial lawyer must resist all temptation to view the celebrity client as only a springboard for profit. But modern-day culture continually tempts lawyers to do the opposite. If one carefully observes certain high-profile cases, one periodically sees a subtle,

gradual and then obvious deterioration of lawyers' value systems when confronted with the spotlight. As Jennifer Keller, formerly head of the Orange County (California) Bar Association, attests, celebrities can encourage this behavior by suggesting that their fees be reduced or eliminated because of the value of lawyer publicity.

Narcissistic, camera-drunk celebrity lawyers have trouble with low-key resolution of client problems. For example, a favorable plea bargain may require the lawyer to forgo a spectacular, media-covered trial. Or the best defense may necessitate serious, focused, low-profile lawyers. Howard believed that Ruby's defense counsel had to be low-key, respectful and unostentatious to succeed in a Dallas community, recently traumatized by televised murders of the president and his assassin.

I faced this problem in the Michael Jackson case. Before being retained, I perceived the public relations atmosphere around Jackson to be out of control and nightmarish. Jackson was facing trial in a conservative, blue-collar community of very decent, civic and independent-minded people. The racial composition was mostly white, with a smaller Latino population. Anything which disconnected Jackson from the jury pool had to be destructive.

Before I arrived, everything about the Jackson defense appeared fantastic and gargantuan. At his initial arraignment, Michael had been late and had danced for his fans on an SUV; a highly publicized party was then held at Neverland for the media. One evening, I turned on the news in Los Angeles to see a round-table of Michael's legal and financial advisers being filmed in a posh suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel. The local reporter referred to this group as Michael Jackson's "Dream Team." Jackson's Nation of Islam security detail was receiving prominent coverage, and his interview with counsel on "60 Minutes" appeared to be a disaster. Lawyers were arriving for court by private airplane.



One of the best things I ever did was hang around bars and restaurants in Santa Maria before trial. Clad in blue jeans and my black leather jacket, I discovered that Michael Jackson was well-liked by many people in Santa Maria and was appreciated for choosing northern Santa Barbara County as his residence. He had been kind to local neighbors, local patrons of the arts and the neighboring Air Force base. Of course, the media were reporting that he couldn't get a fair trial. Nonsense!

Along with the proper trial strategy and preparation, everything had to be toned down. I opposed courtroom cameras and supported the gag order and court-sealing of salacious pleadings. Hardworking jurors, who are being paid a pittance to sit on juries, don't appreciate defense lawyers who appear to be having fun in a serious case. I also removed the visible Nation of Islam security team, who I feared might alienate local residents.

In the Jackson circus, most of the media were trying to spin a conviction because it would mean months of future air time and endless stories about Michael's rise and fall. This case was never going to be won with them.

Entertainer clients understandably believe that media success is synonymous with courtroom dexterity. They perceive the courtroom through a Hollywood lens that is not realistic. I welcomed the gag order partly because it provided me more time to prepare. It gave me the freedom to focus on the courtroom and an excuse for not responding to the television circus.

My team and I lived in condominiums far from the media-saturated hotels, and I was in bed at 7:30 to 8 each evening, with a rising time of 3 a.m. Not only did this fit my preferred trial schedule, it insulated me from any unwarranted media intrusion. I eliminated racial issues from our defense and sought to remove controversial, provocative individuals.

The promise of fame or fortune from a high-profile case creates problems. The media try to seduce attorneys into thinking they are allies, provided their desire for inside information is satisfied. But these cases are never won or lost in the media, only in the courtroom. The most important audience is 13 people: the judge and jurors.

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*Thomas A. Mesereau Jr. specializes in criminal defense and civil trials. A frequent visitor to Birmingham, he works in Los Angeles, California. This article, originally published in the Los Angeles Daily Journal, is used with Mesereau's permission.*  
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“It is one of our jobs, as journalists, to be hated. But it is not enough to be merely be hated. It is also important to be hated for the right reasons.”

--Gerald Hannon

## WHY I DON'T LIKE HATS

Frieda Stevenson

The first hat I can remember wearing was a red velveteen bonnet with fur trim. It felt tight and uncomfortable but Momma insisted that I wear it one cold day, when we went to gather black walnuts. I left the hat under the tree. Momma was displeased with me when she found it days later after the rain had ruined it.

When I was five or six, Daddy bought me a sun hat made of straw that I liked because it was decorated with painted flowers. Momma insisted that we children wear hats at all times in the summer. "Don't go out in the hot BROILING sun without your hat," she'd warn us.

One day I left my new hat in the pasture where we kept the pigs. Later I thought of my hat and dashed out to get it. Alas, too late. The pigs had rooted it to shreds. When Daddy went back to buy another, all the flowered ones were sold out. So I had to wear a plain straw hat.

In the fourth grade, I had several berets which I wore on cold days. A big boy named Malcolm McAnally like to snatch my berets and wear them while grinning like an ape to make everyone on the school bus laugh. One time he had every one of my hats. Momma said I had to get them back. It was humiliating having to beg Malcolm for my hats. Finally, he gave them to me.

When I was 15, I saw a hat in McNeil's store that I fell in love with. It was a brown felt hat with a full veil that could be worn tossed back over the brim. It looked like hats Hedy Lamarr wore in the movies. It was perfect with my kelly green wool dress.

The first time I wore the hat was to the country singing one Saturday night. Wearing the veil over my face gave me a feeling I'd never had before. I could look at people. They could not see that I was

looking at them. I felt grown-up and self-confident, maybe a little mysterious.

Several boys seemed to be affected by my appearance. At intermission, a little boy came over. He said his big brother wanted a date with me. I told him the answer was “No.” I decided that looking mysterious and alluring here was good practice for other occasions when I might find more attractive prospects.

The next day was Sunday. I wore my new outfit to church. Again, I felt the effect the veil had on the boys. Even Dewey Speegle, a boy a few years older than I, was staring at me. Dewey liked to tease me at school. I’d get real angry with him, but he was so witty that he could make me laugh even when he was putting me down.

The next morning as soon as everyone had boarded the bus, Dewey said in a loud voice, “Frieda had on a new hat yesterday. It had something like a piece of screen wire hanging down in front of her face. I guess it was to keep the flies and mosquitoes away.”

How humiliating it was to discover that all the while I had supposed myself to be alluring and mysterious, I’d simply appeared ridiculous.

I never wore that hat again. I’ve never like to wear hats. Perhaps my early experiences had a lasting effect.

.....  
*Frieda Stevenson was a magician, clown, balloon sculptor and storyteller. Her stories were always true. She died in 2006 at the age of 83. A longtime resident of Southside Birmingham, Alabama, Frieda was born and raised in Morgan County, Alabama.*  
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## LUNCH WITH LADY ASTOR

John M. Packard

When my Godfather, Dr. J. Woods Price, heard that I had arranged to spend part of Easter vacation in England, he mailed me a letter of introduction to his cousin, Nancy Langhorne Astor. The four Langhorne sisters were great beauties in Virginia; an older sister married a Mr. Gibson and was made famous as the “Gibson Girl.” I don’t remember what happened to the other sisters, but Nancy moved to England and later married Waldorf Astor, publisher of The Observer. After his father’s death, Mr. Astor became the 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount Astor. Lady Astor became active in politics and was the first woman to be elected and take her seat in Parliament. Uncle Woods thought that paying my respects to such well-known persons would add to my education and be one of the highlights of my year abroad – and indeed it was!

I mailed Uncle Woods’ letter well in advance to the Astor’s London address (4 St. James Square) explaining that I expected to be in London on May 9th and asking if I might stop by to pay my respects. A note from her secretary arrived soon after stating that the Astors would be in their country home, Cliveden, on that date and would be delighted to have me for lunch, along with all the Rhodes Scholars in England at the time. She carefully explained the train I should take in order to reach Cliveden by lunchtime and that a car would meet me at the station.

I took the train from Blandford to London on the appointed day, but for some forgotten reason missed the train to Cliveden. In those days one never made long-distance phone calls but telegraphed instead. So I telegraphed my apologies and gave the new arrival time. A chauffeur dressed in a purple uniform with black stripes down the pant legs met me at the station and showed me to a purple-and-black-striped Bentley. On the way he explained that Cliveden was one of the larger country homes in England, with 40 gardeners and about the

same number of servants in the house. It had been converted to an Army hospital in WWI, with Sir William Osler as chief of medicine. More recently Ann and I have seen it on the British version of “Antique Roadshow.” Eventually we turned in through the gate and proceeded up the mile-long, tree-lined, winding drive to the front door, where two Rolls Royces, two Humbers, and other cars were parked.

A forbidding-looking butler in a morning coat met me at the door and took my second-hand reversible raincoat with some disdain. (I had bought the coat from a Taft classmate for \$10.00.) The butler led me through a large foyer filled with statuary and into a large dining room, where he announced “Mr. Pack-ard” to the four people seated at the small round table in the center of the room. Before I could ask where the Rhodes Scholars were, Lady Astor explained that they had gone ahead and started lunch, and that I should sit down, eat, and catch up before talking. She then introduced me to her husband, sitting across from her, to her niece, whose name I forget, and to Lord Lothian, who was appointed Ambassador to the United States the following year. (He committed suicide the year after that.) Heady company for a seventeen year old!

Lord Astor, after greeting me, continued dictating to his secretary, seated on his right. Lady Astor resumed writing a speech for Parliament, using a table beside her containing a dictionary, a Thesaurus, and a Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations*, and occasionally trying a sentence or two out loud. Lord Lothian and the niece continued their conversation about free love. I was all eyes and ears!

There was plenty of time to read the hand-written menu at my place (in French), to notice the four footmen, dressed in – you guessed it – purple and black-striped knee britches, who were serving the food, and the dozens of purple and gold side-chairs around the walls. The butler would occasionally enter and read a telegram from

the Duke and Duchess of So-and-So, who regretted some invitation, or from Lord and Lady Somebody Else, who accepted.

When I finally caught up with the others, Lady Astor asked about my school and what I had done during Easter vacation. When I eventually mentioned Uncle Woods, she snapped her fingers and said, “Now I know who you are – you’re Cousin Woods Price’s favorite Godson!” It was most embarrassing; my letter had been sent so far in advance of my visit that no one had remembered who I was!

But worse was yet to come. At the end of the meal Lady Astor had me stand up, raise my right hand, and swear that no drop of alcohol would ever touch my lips. I did raise my right hand, but also crossed the fingers on my left hand behind my back to negate the promise. (I broke the promise within eight hours.)

After lunch the niece showed me two of the secret passages in the great house and took me out the back and down a grassy slope to a great oak at the edge of the river Thames, where Sir Edgar Elgar is said to have written “Hail, Brittanica.” The 60 Rhodes scholars had arrived by bus by this time and were out on the back terrace. The Life photographer with the group went to find Lord Astor and found him out front chipping golf balls. The butler found my disreputable reversible, and the uniformed chauffeur drove me back to the station. What a luncheon it had been!

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*“Lunch with Lady Astor” is an anecdote from John M. Packard’s memoir-in-progress, A Most Memorable Year. The year was 1938, near the end of his 11-month exchange fellowship to St. Columba’s College Near Dublin, Ireland. Dr. Packard makes his home in Birmingham, Alabama, after a distinguished career in medicine. jmpackard@juno.com*  
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## **PURPLE BELL FLOWER**

Penny Arnold  
Stained Glass Mosaic

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*See page 2 for bio.*  
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## SEASONS

Davide Trame

The buzzard appeared, sudden and silent  
out of the deep green of beeches and chestnut-trees  
and the emerald of a hedge of spiky brambles.  
We felt gripped by the shadow of the wings,  
the lush closeness of buzzing leaves  
and the flashes in our horses' eyes, scared pools  
haunted by anything that glides.  
The buzzard -you said- with in your voice a blue shiver,  
takes the season's colour, and we took in wings  
pregnant with the hues of bloom,  
the earth's heat shot against the July sky,  
wings tanned with sap not less dark than blood.

Now it's January and I've just glimpsed  
a flash of pale brown and grey gliding,  
wings with gargoyles like faded print  
and curls like dry brambles,  
it has at once reached the horizon  
out of my impassive train window,  
I see the shape of a curved beak among the thin lines  
of poplars pointing on high.

And think of that summer, its thick hot world  
standing against this nakedness, these frosty clods.  
Earth all the same rich with its bare map,  
its plain, displayed skin as will be my own  
with its place in this vast scheme  
and the utter evidence of bones.

.....

*David Trame is an Italian teacher of English, born and living in Venice-Italy, writing poems exclusively in English since 1993. His poems have been published in three hundred literary magazines in U.K, U.S. and elsewhere. His poetry collection, RE-EMERGING was published as an on-line book by [www.gattopublishing.com](http://www.gattopublishing.com) in 2006.*

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## SALES ADVICE

Arden Moser

*Arden Moser managed a television station in Tuscaloosa in the mid-1960s. This was his advice to a beautiful and provocatively-dressed young saleswoman who worked for him.*

In addition to running a live children's show in the afternoons, "Miss Merry Time" was trying to do sales. Came to me one day in tears. She could not understand why, after several weeks, she could not sell anything on her show. I told her the truth, "Wear a Mother Hubbard neckline," instead of the low V-cuts she usually wore.

Came in the next day with a high neck blouse and two or three sales. Problem was, the male clients wouldn't buy because (1) they weren't listening to her, they were too busy looking, and (2) they thought if they bought a commercial that she wouldn't come back.

.....  
*Arden Moser is a teller of tales and a jazz musician in Atlanta, Georgia.*  
*ardenmoser@bellsouth.net*  
.....

“A word is the taste our tongue has of  
eternity; that’s why I speak.”

--Rosario Castellanos

## BILL

Rachel Plummer

I want to tell a story about Bill  
And Norah, how they met and courted back  
When life was like that. Norah liked to dance  
And Bill could tango like a matador.

She'd straighten up that splash of red bow tie  
And overlook the oily patches where  
His hair pomade had bled onto his neck  
And shirt. He always wore a shirt, a tie,

A suit made by a tailor for how much?  
A whole week's wages gone like that? But she  
Was worth it. Once they skived an afternoon  
Off work and spent it at the pictures. Once

Bill waited for her in the usual place,  
The usual box of chocolates in his hand,  
But she was late. He came to realise  
That coldness had a smell all of its own.

He ate a chocolate then to mask the taste.

She never let him live that down. She tells  
The story still, between the bingo and  
The ballroom club. He held the opened box  
*Like this*, she says, one hand held out, *like this*.

.....

*Rachel Plummer is a 23 year old pet shop owner from Edinburgh, Scotland.  
Her spare time is spent reading and writing poetry, with the emphasis very  
firmly on the former. She is influenced by the more traditional poetical styles,  
and feels these have an important place in modern poetry.*

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## A SUMMER'S TAN

Jim Herod

"Bartoli!" The County Engineer rubbed the sleeve of his shirt across his forehead, turned, and walked away. "You handle him," he called over his shoulder. I rammed the posthole diggers into the hard packed gravel one more time and looked up to watch the approaching cloud of dust. The County Engineer's truck drove off just as Bartoli's big Buick was coming to a stop.

I could see my reflection in the dark windows of the car. Rivulets of sweat had left tracks in the layer of red dust covering my body. I wiped my hands on my jeans as the driver's window slid down.

"Hello, Jim." I was surprised that Mr. Bartoli knew my name.

"You're working and making money," he went on. "You're not quitting school, are you?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir. I am working, but I go back to school in September." I nodded to him and then to his daughter in the back seat. I should have worn a shirt.

"Ah, yes. A summer job. No?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Study hard, Jim. Then, you'll make more money than you get doing this." He nodded toward the posthole diggers.

"Yes, sir. I need the money." The dark window in front of his daughter's face was sliding down. "And, I need to study hard." I was talking to him, but I was looking at her.

"Hi." That was all she said.

Mrs. Bartoli looked back at her daughter and then leaned across her husband to speak to me. "We miss having you bring our

newspaper every day, Jim.” She had always called me Gem. I liked that.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“You should wear a shirt out here in this sun. Your skin, it’s going to be like leather and will crack open when you’re a little older.”

I bent over and looked through the car window. “Thank you, Mrs. Bartoli.”

Maria spoke to me again. “Would you like to go skating with some of us tonight? We’re driving up to Selma. You could come with us.”

Mr. Bartoli turned and looked at his daughter. It didn’t seem like a good idea for me to say yes out here. Mr. Bartoli didn’t like her asking me. Besides, all her high school friends would be there.

“I’ll call you.” I smiled. Maybe Maria would not be busy on Saturday night.

We didn’t talk very long when I called the next evening. I knew her mother was listening. I was surprised that her father let her go out with me. He was sitting on the porch when I got to their house on Saturday. He told me that he usually didn’t let his daughter date older boys. But, there were two circumstances, he said. I came from a good family, and my father was a good friend. The first was true and the second was a lie. A good customer is what my father was. We bought our bread, our milk, our flour, and our clothes from the Bartoli Mercantile. In the spring, my father went there for fertilizer and seed.

I said thank you to Mr. Bartoli and told him that I would have Maria home by the curfew he had set.

I knew that high school boys didn't usually take their dates out to dinner and then to dance at The Spot. I thought Maria might like that. We both did.

We drove into the Bartoli's front drive five minutes before her curfew. The light of the front porch came on as we stopped. I had expected that. Didn't matter. I had already gotten my first kiss from Maria. And, that was only our first date.

When she touched me on our last date that summer, her fingers made me shiver. She laughed and said that my sun tanned skin made me darker than she was. I took this to be a compliment. For sure, the touch was a caress.

"But, you'll go back to school and all this will fade away."

Yeah. She knew that. I told her no, but that's what happened.

.....  
*Jim Herod grew up in an enchanted place a little south of Selma and spent a lifetime as a mathematician. He now lives in and writes from Grove Hill.*  
*jherod@tds.net*  
.....

"From the solemn gloom of the temple  
children run out to sit in the dust,  
God watches them play and  
forgets the priest."

--Rabindranath Tagore

## PHOTOGRAPH OF A FOOTWASHING IN KENTUCKY

Rita Quillen

The big man cannot believe he is here  
The others have their hands in the air  
But his are gripping the edge of the bench  
Those big ham hands that jam the gears  
On his Peterbilt, grab g-strings as strobes pulse  
Usually clamp around a beer, a cigarette,  
A joint, a steering wheel.

The man next to him is rolling down his sock  
With trembling hands while another kneels  
Before him like one defeated in battle  
Reaching to take the bare foot  
Gently palm water over and over it.  
No man had ever before  
Touched that foot.

The catch in the trucker's throat  
Hurts so bad, like nothing he's ever felt.  
He can't make himself  
Raise his hands  
He can't just give in that easy.  
But it's a start, a shifting  
That he doesn't raise his head  
Or make any effort  
To pull away  
From the hand  
The water.

.....

*Rita Quillen's third book of poetry HER SECRET DREAD- New and Selected Poems was just published by WIND Press in Kentucky. She has also published poetry, short stories, personal essays, and critical essays pertaining to Appalachian writers in dozens of magazines and anthologies. She teaches at Mountain Empire Community College in Big Stone Gap, Virginia.*

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## LATE NIGHT GUITAR

Tom Sheehan

I hear an odd wire vibrate  
against a dark red wood.

It ripples along, hoarse,  
talks a mountain to pieces.

All Iberia is elaborate  
in string and lath;

peninsula of high heels,  
ribbons dancing on the mane,

black hats horse-parading,  
friar's lantern honing swords.

A later moon of Pico de Aneto  
dies in the dust of olive trees.

A forlorn SAC bomber, tailed,  
falcons its way home silently.

When a bull is born  
the earth shakes twice,

and an odd wire vibrates  
against a darker red wood.

.....  
*Tom Sheehan is an award-winning writer whose work has been nominated for eight Pushcart Prizes and two Million Writers Awards, and a Silver Rose Award from ART for short story excellence, among others. A Korean War veteran (31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment) and a Boston College graduate after Army service, he has been retired for 16 years.*  
.....



## IN A NUTSHELL

Kristine Ong Muslim

The newlyweds put their feet up  
on the coffee table; the television

dissipates canned laughter out  
of the tin. Not looking at each other,

the couple share a box of pizza.  
Crumpled napkins are ketchup-stained

roses on the floor. A chopstick  
skewers the wife's loose chignon.

After the courtship, names become  
shields: kids, insurance claims,

the wine that taunts,  
the bread that blasphemes.

In the toilet, the gurgling of the drain  
sometimes masks the smell of urine.

.....  
*Kristine Ong Muslim's poems and stories have appeared or are forthcoming in  
over 150 publications worldwide. Her poetry has appeared in Bellevue  
Literary Review, GlassFire Magazine, 42opus, Noneuclidean Café,  
nthposition, The Pedestal Magazine, Turnrow, and Void Magazine.  
She lives in the Philippines.*

.....





**BLACK SAND BEACH, HAWAII**

32mm photograph  
Sharon Laning

*Sharon Laning works in Birmingham, Alabama and lives in nearby Homewood. Her passion for photography was discovered on a trip to Hong Kong nineteen years ago.*



## GOOD GRIEF

### A Memoir

Bill Goodson

I'm standing on stage at the podium before a sea — well, not really a sea, maybe a small pond — of white-robed graduates seated in the middle section of the auditorium, tasseled caps perched precariously atop and threatening to slide off at every twist of the head. One girl gives up and removes hers.

I'm reminded of my own graduation ceremonies in 1953. Our class was so small — barely a hundred — that it would have fit into the first five rows of this assembly. Honors were handed out to us at the same time as the diplomas. No special Awards Day like I'm attending now.

My friend, Marshall — he's the reason I'm here today — didn't get any special honors when he paraded across the stage on that long-ago occasion. He was voted Wittiest Boy in the senior class, but that distinction didn't reach the dizzying heights of recognition at graduation. It did garner him a corner of a page in the *Pierian*, our school yearbook. He stood casually alongside the Wittiest Girl, who was seated on a bench under a tree. The photo wasn't a close-up, so you couldn't see his trademark gold-tipped incisor, but his stylish crew cut was on prominent display.

I wish Marshall could be here to witness his legacy. None of his family ever comes. Father and stepmother are deceased. Sister lives in Louisiana. Stepbrothers remain remote from the process. It's been left up to Topper Birney (another classmate) and me to carry the ball. So here I am.

Amazingly, I seem to have the attention of the majority of those assembled. I say amazing because I'm presenter number forty on the awards schedule, sandwiched between the Martha Crumrine Good

Citizenship Award that goes to a short, perky young lady, and the ROTC Scholarship for Honor and Duty.

It's my turn. I suck it in, pull myself a little straighter, and begin the short speech I've been rehearsing to myself for the last hour while giving one ear to the speakers and participating wearily in the endless clapping. I've been here for this ceremony fifteen times already in fifteen years, and, try as I might, I can't come up with anything to say that's new and sensational enough to blow 'em out of their seats. "I'm Bill Goodson."

I want to say, "... and you're not," but it would fall flat on these kids, who weren't even born the last time Chevy Chase pulled that one.

"Congratulations to all you seniors, for the dedication and hard work that brings you here today." Wow! What a roaring start. God! They didn't want to hear that again. They're sick of it. It's driving them crazy. Probably one of them, maybe the guy who's going to receive my award, is harboring a .38 snub nose revolver under his gown. He's made a pledge to his freaky friend sitting beside him, the one with tattoos and a Mohawk, that he will use it on the next person who says "Congratulations on your hard work." I scan the white pond for any sudden movements. I'm relieved. Maybe he's heard that he's getting this award. Or maybe he suddenly feels sorry for me, is overcome with a wave of uncontrollable empathy. Sure.

Now I'll turn on the charm. "Rumor has it that the Huntsville High class of 2007 has been rated the BEST graduating class...EVER!" A dull roar goes up.

"COULD THAT BE TRUE?" I shout into the mike. A huge roar this time. Maybe the revolver has been put away by now.

“Well, if it is, it had to barely — and I mean barely — beat out the class of 1953. And do you know who was in that class?” Mute stares.

I can sense the ambivalence in their as yet amorphous notions of propriety. If it is I who’s from that class, I deserve a hand, if for no other reason than I’m still kicking. But, should they be wrong, they have reckoned my age inaccurately and could embarrass themselves. Maybe one of the graduates of the class of 1953 was some famous person, like a governor or a serial killer, or a governor-turned-serial killer, and they were supposed to know that. Breathlessly, they await a clue.

I point to my chest. “Moi.” Applause and hoots.

Now that I’ve grabbed their attention, it’s time to get serious. This award is not about me. It’s about Marshall Keith.

Of course, if I really told them about Marshall, I would need an hour instead of the three minutes allotted me. I’d tell about the time he and I won first prize in a talent contest at Butler High. I’d have a slide show of his cartoons that appeared in the “Red and Blue.” I would distribute copies of the blistering essay he wrote for the student newspaper in Tuscaloosa, decrying the racist riots over admission of Autherine Lucy to the university.

And that would take me to the sixties, when a headline in the *Huntsville Times* read: “Integrationist Beaten; Sprayed With Chemical.” Marshall had taken part in a drugstore sit-in, one of only two whites participating. Later that night he was abducted from his home at gunpoint by hooded men, beaten, and sprayed in the genital area with a caustic substance.

That incident drove him from the South into the arms of New York City, where he found peers of like mind. He would never

return home to live. He worked, published some poetry, began penning his novel, and listened to Hank Williams' records. Hank provided a remnant of the South in his life of self-imposed exile. That lonesome whine spoke to his soul and to his fruitless love life.

From the age of five, Marshall had a hole in his heart. About the size of the bullet hole in his mother's head. A melancholy sort, she chose to end her life with a gun to the temple while standing in front of her two children. Marshall found it difficult to embrace a stepmother in his life after that horror. Likewise, his hopes for romance always collapsed in a heap, dashed on the shoals of self-deprecation.

I'm glad I don't have time to tell them all of that.

Instead, I say, "I'm here representing the class of 1953 to present the fifteenth annual Marshall Keith, Jr., Memorial Scholarship for excellence in creative writing. Marshall was a talented class member and friend who died of lung cancer at the age of thirty-six. He never finished his first novel. In 1992, classmates and friends raised money to fund a scholarship in his honor."

How anemic that sounds! I'm tempted to divulge the whole story. For twenty years after Marshall's death, I periodically suffered wrenching episodes of grief when something reminded me of him. All those years, only my wife knew of this cloud that hung over me. That is, until one day Topper confessed to me that he was experiencing the same pain. We resolved then and there to take steps to end our grieving.

No, I can't go into all of that. It's too personal. I'd probably break down in the middle of it and lose all credibility. Who wants to see a grown man cry? It would just confirm what teenagers suspect, that grown-ups are as screwed up as their kids are.

Back to the script. “The English Department has handled the details, urging entries from talented seniors and soliciting independent judges from the community.”

No b.s. there. The English teachers love the Keith scholarship. They love the criteria: a senior who plans to go to college. That’s all. No needs assessment, no GPA, no Good Conduct Medal. In fact, they love anything that will harness the focus of the young and the restless during that last semester of high school.

The climax is at hand.

“There were many excellent entries this year, and all deserve recognition. However, as you know, there has to be a winner. This year the award goes to...”

I want to say, “The envelope, please,” to a stiff-looking, tuxedoed CPA from Price-Waterhouse. It’s too pregnant a moment just to blurt out a name. Where’s the drum roll, the fanfare?

“Goes to David Minter!”

Applause rings out along with a whistle or two. A gangly-looking young man makes his way through the seats over classmates and strides to the stage. He isn’t smiling. Serious. A serious writer. Hope he’s not too serious. Marshall wouldn’t particularly like that — an overly studious, grim writer.

Maybe he can compensate by devoting himself to humanitarian causes such as, well, Civil Rights, or

Peace.

Poverty.

Justice.

And he could write about those causes in a way that would inspire others and ennoble the human family. Yes, he could do that.

He reaches out and shakes my hand and with his other accepts the certificate. I catch a crinkle in one side of his mouth, like a germinating smile. Maybe he knows what I was thinking.

Come to think of it, that looks a lot like Marshall's tentative smile I've seen so many times. I was never able to decide whether he was trying to hide his gold tooth, or ... maybe ... himself.

I'll be back next year for number sixteen.

.....  
A retired psychiatrist with two published books: *Re-Souled* and *The Bossuet Conspiracy*, Goodson is working on a sequel. In addition, he was selected Community Columnist for the *Huntsville Times* in 2002.  
Whgoodson@aol.com  
.....

“Where words fail, music speaks.”

--Hans Christian Andersen



## MEANDERER

D. S. Pearson

I seek

the solace

found  
in hollow places

carved

by  
moving water

.....  
*D.S. Pearson lives in a secluded valley between two ridges that form the  
southernmost tip of the Appalachian Mountains. Poetry is his passion. His  
wife remains his world.*  
.....

"Perfection is achieved, not when there is  
nothing more to add, but when there is  
nothing left to take away."

--Antoine de Saint Exupery

## BLOWING UP ENGLISH CLASS

Jim Merlini

And then there was the time I blew up my high school English class. Not exactly "blew it up," but caused a temporary riot.

We had been told to do a "show and tell" in senior class. Some guys showed how to fold paper gliders. Some guys did even sillier things.

I came to class with four Coke bottles, a one foot length of one by twelve from shop class, and my pockets filled with bottles containing a mixture of zinc sulfate dust and sulfur that many fledgling rocketeers in the late 1950s were using to set altitude records after Sputnik went up.

When my time came I explained, as I set up my experimental "hard stand" on a desk next to the instructor's, about the dangers of playing with rockets, and mostly the danger of experimenting with homemade solid fuel.

The one by twelve went atop the king size Coke bottles, and a small mound of gray powder grew as I emptied the bottles in my pockets. A tiny Vesuvius. I dimpled the top of the mound and inserted a fuse from a Black Cat firecracker.

"If you're not careful," I said, lighting the fuse, "this can happen."

The fuse burned down. The mixture exploded into a hellish yellow fireball that lifted a few feet into the air and settled on my English teacher's desk.

"Oh, crap," I thought. "I'm in trouble now."

The girls screamed. The boys jumped up and shouted, "Do it again!"

My teacher smiled as a thin powder of zinc oxide dust drifted down from the ceiling and gave everyone a case of dandruff.

I got an "A" for the session.

The powder tracks on the teacher's desk went away beneath a damp cloth.

My teacher was a cool dude.

.....  
*The author was born in Montgomery in 1942, and attended the University of Alabama's Tuscaloosa campus until the administration gave him 24 hours to get off the planet. After four and one-half years in the Air Force, he fell headlong into news writing and now lives with his two cats in Montgomery.*  
*panjandrum@bellsouth.net*  
.....

“Enough is enough, and too much is plenty.”

-- Bugs Bunny



*Liz Masoner has been involved with photography since early childhood when a photograph taken by her father of a burning railroad car captured her attention. Decades later, she loves to use her camera to find hidden beauty in the world around her.*

*About the image:  
Although it appears to belong in southern Alabama or Florida, this swamp actually thrives on the edge of an industrial complex near the Shelby County Airport. Numerous birds find respite among the trees here.*

## **HIDDEN SWAMP**

Photo  
Liz Masoner

## THE DREAM OF FLIGHT IN A DROWNED WORLD

Amanda Moore

Last night I dreamt  
of silhouettes  
who roamed about  
in search of their bodies...  
and small birds  
who sang songs  
of all-consuming floods.

I could see everything.  
Birds-eye view.

Snow of seafoam,  
white light scattered.

We were following the trails  
left by birds' feet in the sand

We spoke without sound  
and exhaled cirrus clouds.

The water rushed up  
over our bare feet,  
and then began to recede  
taking more land with it  
and our molecules, too.  
We were now of the sea,  
and the waves hissed back to us  
that which the seashells  
could never translate:  
*Veni vidi vici.*

.....

*Amanda Moore attends the Alabama School of Fine Arts. All her dreams are ink-stained and she plans to run away to Antarctica.*

.....

The water continued  
to eat up the world  
until there was only water  
and of course the sky  
(which is just an ocean  
turned inside-out)

Green and gray  
and green and gray.

There was nothing else,  
just two abysses  
talking to each other.

She turned away from me,  
looking into the sun.  
And something in the way  
her hair fell down her back  
(more waves) said,  
*There's nothing to be done.*

## CUTTHROAT

Reilly Maginn

Speeding, the corvette rounded the sharp corner, hit the curb and flipped. Skidding nearly thirty feet, it came to rest, upside down, with the unconscious driver hanging from his seatbelt. I witnessed the accident as it happened, and was the first to stop at the wreck. I'm a surgeon, and as I ran toward the vehicle, I could hear the driver choking. I crawled under the overturned vehicle and got to the driver. The driver's side window was shattered. He was unconscious, lifelessly hanging from his seatbelt. He had apparently vomited and aspirated some undigested food. Gasping for air, it was obvious his airway was obstructed. He began to turn a grayish blue and needed a patent airway, fast. With my Swiss army penknife, I incised his trachea longitudinally beneath his laryngeal cartilage (Adam's apple), as he hung upside down from his seat belt. There was a rush of air and vomit spewed forth with his first explosive gasp as I twisted the blade, opening the trachea, and he began to breathe on his own. Fortunately, he was unconscious and felt nothing as I performed the emergency tracheostomy.

I tried to calm him down as he dazedly regained consciousness.

"You've had a bad accident. You were choking to death. You needed an urgent opening in your airway. I did an emergency tracheostomy so you could breathe. You can't talk right now but it's temporary. Just take it easy. Hold on. Help is on the way."

In just moments, the ambulance and the EMTs arrived and took over the rescue. When they saw I'd done an emergency tracheostomy they were astounded.

"You saved his life, mister, with your quick thinking and the emergency *trach*."

“Thanks for the kudos, guys, but I’m a surgeon. I recognized the problem and did what had to be done. That’s all.”

Nevertheless, the EMTs leaked the episode to the press the next day and I was interviewed and got my mandatory fifteen minutes of fame on the local TV. I even got my picture on the front page of the newspapers with a short article detailing the accident and my participation in the rescue. My doctor colleagues had a fine time razzing me about my sudden notoriety. At least they couldn’t accuse me of ambulance chasing. I got to the accident before the ambulance did.

But that’s not the end of the story.

Less than a month later, my partner and I were having dinner in the dining room of a local men’s club. The low hum of conversation was interrupted by a fit of coughing and then sounds of choking and gasping for air. Someone yelled for help from across the room. As I looked up, I saw a portly, middle-aged diner struggling at a corner table. He was frantically grasping at his neck and seemed to be choking as his ruddy face gradually turned a grayish hue.

*No. Not another one. Not again. Can’t be two in a row,* I thought to myself.

I stood up and reached in my pocket for my Swiss army penknife. My colleague at our table looked at me, quizzically.

I said, “Over there; at the corner table. Look at that guy. He’s in trouble. Those two men have been talking animatedly for most of the evening and I’m sure they’ve both had a couple of drinks. He’s been distracted by the conversation, the drinks and the food. I’ll wager he’s swallowed a huge piece of that steak and it’s caught in his throat and has blocked his airway.” In the medical literature, it’s called “The

Restaurant Cardiac Syndrome.” I began to walk toward their table when the gasping man’s partner yelled again.

“Help him. Hurry. We need some help here, now.”

Before I could get to their table, a waiter tried the Heimlich maneuver once, then twice and finally three times but to no avail. The man continued to gasp and turned a darker shade of blue as they sat him back in his chair.

Struggling, the man was beginning to slump over, eyelids drooping. He was fading. His wavering gaze turned to me and then to the pocketknife in my right hand. He must have recognized me from the picture in the newspaper. Shaking his head, he continued to struggle, and was now virtually breathless as I loosened his tie and unbuttoned his top shirt collar button.

“Take it easy Mister. I’m just trying to help you,” I said.

Desperately struggling, he wheezed, almost with his last breath, “I’m having a heart attack. Please don’t cut my throat.”

“Some one call 911,” I shouted as I returned to my table. “And hurry, can’t you see this man’s having a heart attack?”

.....  
Dr. Maginn writes short stories. He also just published a novel, *BIO*. Another novel, *Tsunami*, is still in revision. He writes in South Alabama. [redreilly@earthlink.net](mailto:redreilly@earthlink.net)  
.....



## REMIND ME

*for Paul and Frances Pop Gailiunas / in memory of Helen Hill*

Dennis Formento

Young man and woman in the grocery  
remind me of you.

Young man with curly hair beneath a  
foreign military cap  
reminds me of you.

Young woman, pregnant, handling a bundle  
of groceries, reminds me of you.

Smiling with short hair.

Double H's remind me of you.

Double H's remind me of twin hospital beds.  
A birth, a death, a recovery, groping  
for the street.

"The light, the streetlight."

Double Hs remind me of heaven and hell  
heaven hill, the city atop it.

This beloved community below the sea.

CAGE FREE VEGETARIAN-FED EGGS

remind me of...

why are they feeding vegetarians to eggs?

Why am I eating bacon? Reminds me of

"Love vegetarians. Don't eat them."

Reminds me of resident bodhisattvas

reminds me of chickens.

Reminds me that darshan is a meeting with a holy person  
not a message from on high.

You are those holy persons.

Reminds me that prophecy is a telling of the way  
things are, and a warning, not  
a prediction of things to come.

Reminds me that pigs can fly.  
Reminds me that a saint is not  
    a perfect person, but someone  
        who goes around spreading love.  
Two Hs remind me of the balance of two  
    balanced opposites, female and male,  
which reminds me of you.

.....  
*Dennis Formento is a poet and sometime performer with free jazz/free verse  
band, the Frank Zappatistas. A New Orleans native, he now lives in Slidell,  
LA, with his wife, visual artist, Patricia Hart, where he is the publisher of  
Surregional Press.*  
.....

"Ink runs from the corners of my mouth  
There is no happiness like mine. I have  
been eating poetry."

-- Mark Strand

## FIRST GRADE, FIRST DAY

Don Stewart

Following Mrs. Brown's instructions, we reached into our school bags and got out our new Big Chief blue-lined manila paper tablets, along with giant First Grade pencils—the fat ones meant to fit snugly in clumsy First Grade fists, each with a bubble-gum-pink eraser the size of a gumball, anticipating an abundance of First Grade mistakes. These we placed in front of us, the pencils laid to rest in grooves cut neatly into the tops of our desks. We would need them later, Mrs. Brown said. For now, we would use our *colors*, cigar-sized crayons in the standard eight-pack of primary and secondary hues, plus brown and black. Take out the red one, and do as I do.

“Open your tablets,” she said, her taut, straight back turned to us, her hand raised to the blackboard, her voice as crisp as her starched plaid cotton dress. We were going to learn to write today. We were going to learn to *pay attention*. I did so, or tried to, distracted as I was by the surprising event unfolding before me.

Mrs. Brown was writing in *red*. And she wasn't writing words, either. I knew that much right away. She was drawing a picture. In colored chalk!

Crayons I understood. Chalk, too. We'd seen it in kindergarten, and at home in the sewing room. Sometimes Grandma let us use it to make hop-scotch squares on the sidewalk. Chalk was white, sometimes light yellow in grown-up grades, but never in colors so rich and vivid. And now Mrs. Brown was writing, drawing a long red box in the center of the board, bleeding deep, shiny lines as bold and tangy as strawberry Kool-Aid.

“Do as I do,” she said again, and I did, matching her bright chalk shapes with poor imitations on the page in waxy Crayola. Mrs. Brown was drawing a wagon: Red rectangle. Black circles for wheels. Brown

shaft. Green handle. I was drawing a wagon, too. My picture looked like hers.

Mrs. Brown wrote a large red *S* at the top of my paper.  
“Satisfactory,” she said.

Lisa, the girl who sat in the space next to me, had drawn a glorious picture, far better than mine. Hers was a dark black rectangle filled with circles and triangles and spirals of yellow and green, with a zigzag red fringe border, blue-purple wheels and a bright orange pull. Lisa was very pleased with her work. Her wagon was different from everyone else’s. It was very different from the one in the middle of the blackboard.

Mrs. Brown marked Lisa’s paper with a broad, cursive *U*, looping across the middle of her picture. “Unsatisfactory,” she said, frowning. Lisa explained that her picture was prettier than the plain red wagon on the chalkboard. Mrs. Brown said that Lisa would have to learn to follow directions.

Lisa took her paper back to her desk, buried her head in her arms, and cried for the rest of the school day. She earned many more *U*’s that year.

I liked Lisa. I liked her very much.

.....  
*Don Stewart is both writer and visual artist, practicing his dream from his studio in Homewood, Alabama. dsart@bellsouth.net*  
.....

## THE FUNERAL

T.J. McIntyre

He sat in the stiff-backed folding chair feeling beads of sweat drip down from his forehead, collect in large drops on the tip of his nose, and then fall splashing down to feed the crunching burnt grass under his feet. Moisture pooled under his armpits and he kept his arms crossed against his chest, hoping no one would notice the watermarks. The black suit he wore soaked up the sun's heat like a dry sponge dipped down beneath a running faucet. The suit, claimed yesterday from a trip to the dry-cleaner would need to be cleaned again. And this was not the first time it had needed cleaning this year.

He looked up and watched as grey clouds began condensing in the sky, marring the once crisp blue Alabama sky from a few short moments ago. The sun continued its relentless burning as it shone down upon them with an unstoppable heat, but a forming thunderhead high above challenged the sun's reign of the heavens. Thunder heralded the arrival of The Rain King.

The wind increased in velocity and it felt good to the man. Sweat beads on his face diminished in size as his skin dried. A cool wind battered away the heat of the day, and a comfortable chill slipped in to replace the stagnant humidity. The man uncrossed his arms, no longer concerned by his sweat stains, and smiled as a shiver stole along his spine. The breeze penetrated the suit and the cold felt good. He felt gratitude for the change.

It was early October and summer had clung as long as possible with hot iron claws. He hoped the approaching change of season would bring a change of the pattern he found himself repeating. Over the course of the summer, he had grown all too acclimated to these strange ceremonies. The sobs sounded similar, the grim faces merged into a single mask, and he hated the familiarity. To grow accustomed

to death's vacuous presence drained one of humanity. He attended just another funeral—one of too many.

The losses piled up this year, and he missed each and every single life. The regret of not spending more time with them haunted his thoughts. He realized he should spend more time with those who survived to stave off further regret, but he found himself too busy living. To think the world stops turning because a few souls spiral off the spinning surface would be foolishness.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” He heard the pastor announce the familiar refrain. The wise writer of Ecclesiastes stated, “There is nothing new under the sun,” and he knew that this service, too, was nothing unique: just another funeral. After attending so many, they all melded together into a sickly grey, reminiscent of the slop fed to pigs. His cheek remained dry from tears. There were none left.

At all these funerals there was one source of light which all eyes were drawn towards: The Bible and the Man of God. The two combined in this situation, merging together into the earthly manifestation of a comforting God. He remembered feeling comforted by it at one point, but after hearing the same thing many times in many different ways that power had died for him. Familiarity breeds contempt, they say. Mike Allbright was not comforted by the words. On the contrary, they made him angry. Another life gone, and for what?

The wind gusted and the casket, sitting cold and closed over the black open mouth of a hungry earth, shook against the frame of the contraption, levitating it with thick nylon straps. The frilled canvas of the tent above, sheltering the departed and the closest of surviving kin, flapped as the storm cloud gathered itself into a tall obsidian mountain in the sky. Black and ominous, it was lit by flashes of lightning crackling in the darkening skies.

Mike thought about God, wondered if He had left them below here on Earth and turned His back on them so that humanity would be free to destroy itself. He would not have to lift a finger. He thought about this and watched the dark thunderhead, resembling deadly eagles of ash, eyes burning with the embers of lightning. He watched as the storm eclipsed the sun and snuffed out the heat and warmth. Shadows blanketed the earth.

Chill-bumps rose on his arms as the light dissipated, and the almost childlike thought crossed his mind: is God's vision hindered by the clouds? If so, were they without God? He wondered if there could be any good in a Godless world...

.....  
*"The Funeral" is the preface to a collection of southern gothic and dark fantasy stories, Camellia. T.J. McIntyre writes in Alabaster, Alabama. His work has appeared in The Swallow's Tail, 55 Words, and Escape Velocity. McIntyre edits an upcoming title, Southern Fried Weirdness 2007: An Annual Anthology of Southern Speculative Fiction.*  
*www.southernfriedweirdness.com*  
.....

“The profession of writing is nothing else but a violent, indestructible passion. When it has once entered people's heads it never leaves them.”

--George Sand



## WINDOW TREATS

Mary Lynne Robbins

24" x 24"

Acrylic on Canvas

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



## PHONE HELL #4

Jim Reed

I answer the bookstore phone quickly.

"Reed Books!" I say.

An apparently-female voice says, "This is r lo R d c ...may I speak to the person who \_\_\_\_\_ your p o e system?"

I don't understand what she is saying, but I know it is a sales call.

"I'm sorry—what did you say?" I said.

"This is r lo R d c ...may I speak to the person who handles your phone system?" she repeats.

"No, I r al y don't t i k I w nt to d al w th so e ne I can't u d rs and," I say politely, and hang up.

.....  
*Jim Reed writes true and actual stories in Birmingham, Alabama. His latest work appears in two new anthologies, An Alabama Christmas: 20 Heartwarming Tales by Truman Capote, Helen Keller, and More (Crane Hill Press) and Whatever Remembers Us: An Anthology of Alabama Poetry edited by Sue Brannan Walker & J. William Chambers (Negative Capability Press) [www.jimreedbooks.com](http://www.jimreedbooks.com)*  
.....

"Not to decide is to decide."

--Harvey Cox

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