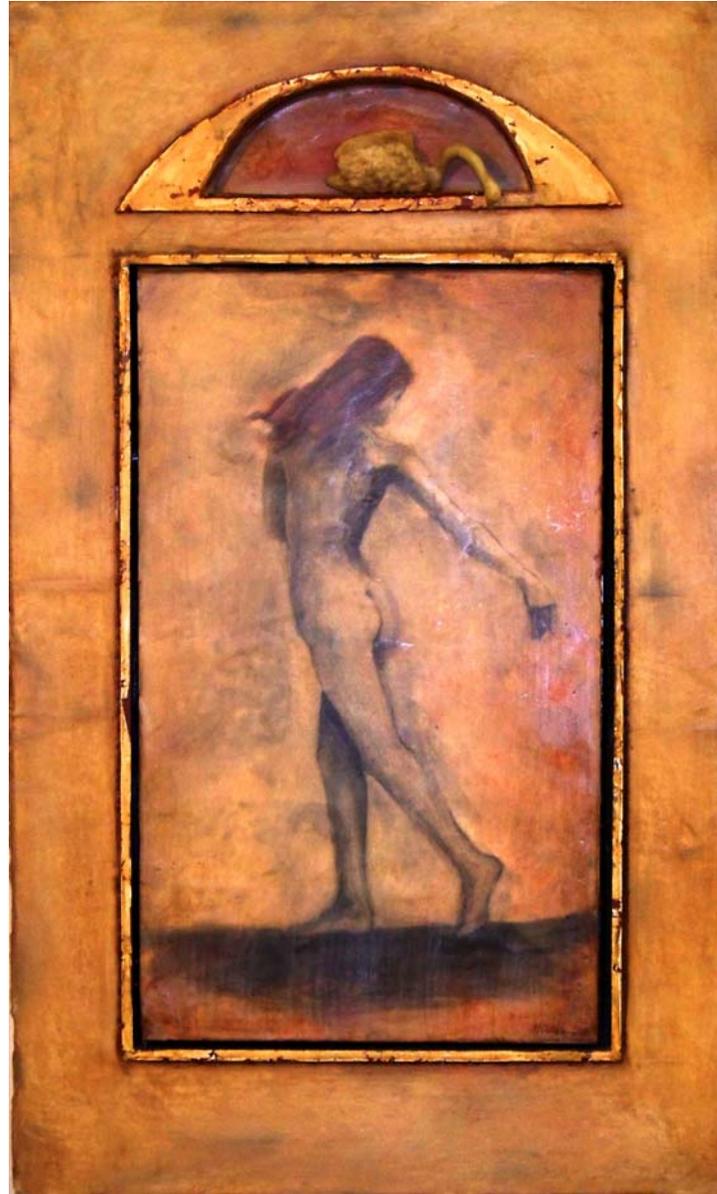


# Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **LEDA AND THE SWAN**, Encaustic on Canvas, 24" x 48"  
 Maralyn Wilson is an artist and gallery owner in Birmingham, Alabama.  
 Many of her works depict themes from Greek and Roman mythology.  
 MaralynWilsonGal@BellSouth.net

Back Cover: **J. LILITH, BORN IN CONTENTMENT SOMEWHERE  
 NEAR CAHABA**, 16" x 20" Oil on Canvas  
 Jeff Faulk lives and paints in Birmingham, Alabama. jeffart61@aol.com

## THINGS I LEARNED WHEN YOU LEFT

Colleen S. Harris

I found small things:  
the places on my body  
I can't reach to scratch,  
my long buried wishes  
for a daughter with your face.  
I've misplaced my joy,  
learned to cook for one.  
I can't warm my bed,  
I carry winter with me.  
The seasons never change.  
In just a few months  
you left scars inked  
more deeply than any tattoo.  
I learned that colors can leak  
from the world with no warning.  
Fitting a large bed  
with a sea of sheets  
is a chore best made for two.  
Mostly, I've learned  
that silence is a living,  
pulsing, purple thing, and that  
I cannot surprise myself  
with my own touch in the dark.

.....

*Colleen S. Harris currently works as an assistant professor and librarian at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Her poetry has appeared (or been accepted for publication) in Wisconsin Review, The Sow's Ear Poetry Review, descant, Free Verse, Main Street Rag and Appalachian Heritage, among others. She is working on a Masters Degree at Spalding University in Louisville, and when not writing or teaching undergraduates how to research, she is ruled by her basset hound, Otto.*

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## **BEARING THE PRINT**

Sue Scalf, *2008 Hackney Literary Award Winner*

1.

Autumn mist swirls above the river,  
the souls of the dead they say.

Water birds ask muffled questions.

Sound is a slow drum

that becomes the rain.

In my hand I hold a fern fossil,

each leaf almost alive,

like memory, but never green again.

2.

My hand upon your back,  
your neck, a bump on your shoulder,

how well my hands knew you,

even now I feel the touch of silk,

feel the slide, the curve and dents,

the small of your back,

the rise and fall of love.

All is kept: pressed flowers,

bearing the print of meadows,

springs ago,

tender as touch and as frail.

3.

Touch is all we know  
of the gold Logos  
of autumn's  
most abstract lie:  
the script of a leaf .  
in stone.

4.

I stand here, bemused, numb,  
while around me leaves fall,  
curl around trees in mounds,  
and the wind speaks  
over and over again  
accept accept accept.  
Not even the leaves  
can teach me how.

.....

*This poem won second in the Hackney Awards and is the title poem for Sue Scalf's latest book, published by Negative Capability Press (Mobile, Alabama). Scalf's next book has been accepted by Coosa River Press. She has lived in Alabama since 1965 and considers herself a dual citizen, as she is very much an Appalachian, also. She taught creative writing and English at a private school in Montgomery and at Troy State University, Montgomery, for over twenty years.*

.....

## CRACK AND METEORITES

Joe Christensen

Crack and jewels and shoes on Jackson Street are sold without regard to magic or history.

Cars go by, tinted windows down. Ludacris, Outkast and Young Jeezy sing from traffic flowing slowly and correctly. People smile. There are wars somewhere far away. Men in suits and women in dark glasses see themselves in store front windows.

Merry sees this all as he walks to the station for the ride home.

Movement and sounds and fading sun and people, some with dogs and some with parasols, should fill this scene with nervous energy, life, but it is stagnant, as in a line Merry remembers from somewhere, “stagnation is worn by the street like the jewels of a dead queen.”

Two children chase purple-headed pigeons with glee. Their obese mother has a spot of blood on the enormous back of her khaki shorts.

Merry’s sales figures are down. Everyone’s sales figures are down, but someone is going to have to go. Merry is on bad terms with Mr. Blue.

The bottom of a young woman in blue shorts, a marvel of geometry, bounces past Merry toward the obese mother and her two pigeon chasers. The girl stops and whispers something to the fat woman, who stops. The young women then head into the darkness of the cavernous station and Merry follows close behind.

It’s hot in the station. Merry is breathless, dizzy. His heart races. Finally the train arrives. The girl disappears in the fluorescent glow of the train. Another girl takes her place. This one is standing and rapping something fast and hard and rhythmic in the face of another girl, who is seated. Something about Soulja Boy.

The train takes off with an electric hum. As he closes his eyes and tries to catch his breath, it feels to Merry like the train is running backwards. His mind runs backward with it.

He is eight, riding in the back seat of Mr. Russell’s blue convertible Cougar -- top down on the Taconic. “Light My Fire” is playing on the radio. Mr. Russell, red headed, mutton chops, greased back hair, is driving. Merry’s Dad is in the passenger seat. Wind blows hard on Merry’s face as the he sits in the back seat. Seeing blue and red spots as the wind blasts into his eyes, he leans forward to tell his dad. Dad’s hand

is holding Mr. Russell's hand. Merry leans back in his seat and says nothing.

Merry is 13. He tells his parents that he wants to be a writer, a poet. His father tells him that people will think he's a faggot, and makes Merry turn over his notebooks. Dad burns them in the fire pit behind the house. Merry watches his words evaporate into smoke.

The train stops. Yellow taxis are gathered in a circle around the sodium lights at the station exit. As he heads for his car, Merry looks up into the dusky sky as a streak of light runs in a white line across the darkening grey of evening. Merry tries to remember what it is called, then he remembers: a meteorite.

That's it, he thinks to himself, a meteorite.

.....

*Joe is a new writer living in Atlanta Georgia. Since starting writing in Fall of 2007, he has had six publication credits in fiction and poetry.*

*rowie711@netzero.net*

.....

**"Genuine poetry can  
communicate before it is  
understood."**

**-- T. S. Eliot**



## **PATAGONIA, ARIZONA**

Digital Photograph  
Lisa Oestreich

*Lisa Oestreich sought a career in photography but was discouraged by what she perceived as fierce competition in the field. She followed her other love, medicine, and practiced neurology at University of Alabama, Birmingham, until 2002, when she took a leave to pursue her passion of documenting light, form, and texture.*  
*[lisaostreich@charter.net](mailto:lisaostreich@charter.net)*

## PROPERTY TAXES

James Mersmann, *2008 Hackney Literary Award Winner*

Where I live in small woods only five miles  
from the latest Wal-Mart, nature still  
exacts her taxes, demands I sharecrop  
with wild things, submit my tithes  
to the teeth and talons of the ragtag feral  
remnant who gather well but do not till.

Even in a landscape so mercilessly malled,  
I can't stop the taking, the hawk striking  
the pullet even as we stand talking with friends  
in the henyard. And the great blue heron  
some mornings standing almost at my door  
as if to ring the bell before stepping  
high-legged into the lily pond to choose  
his golden and thrashing breakfast croissant.

I've nothing to gain calling Thoreau a liar,  
but I say Henry harvested damned few beans  
if there were any whitetail in Emerson's woods;  
he would have found his sprouts well pruned  
each morning, and the rabbits and woodchucks  
starving to death on the remainder.

Out here the opossum is still a strict assessor  
and raccoons audit all my accounts.

But thank God the wild few are still here  
and still hungry, still willing to risk  
closeness to the contagion of our politics  
and photo phones, the smut and smear  
of our motorized and TV dwindled lives.

Brother predators, I turn from my  
predations to welcome you, to give you  
both substance and awe. You cannot steal  
what I grant as already yours. Therefore  
the following properties I hereby cede and entail:

*To the red fox this iridescent rooster  
with bright comb and golden hackles,  
so that she may carry it upside down  
across the green pasture as glory.*

*I accept as Zen painting, and recompense,  
the koi lifted crosswise in the heron's beak  
where he stands doubled by water and dawn  
among lotus and bending cattail.*

*The deer's browsing on my azaleas,  
I hereby write-off as pruning;  
This torn rhododendron bleeding milk  
I count as grace where the fawn may suck.*

*I pay this goose to the scraggly coyote  
who stalks circling the misted cattle pond  
like a grey nightmare, a grainy photograph  
of dead ancestors. I turn all loose.*

*To the snapping turtle I remit every tenth bluegill,  
so he need no longer dine on proverbial broomsticks.  
This unfledged squab shall be the rat's haute cuisine.  
These hens' eggs, the ratsnake's heavy hors d'oeuvres.*

*And this small chick, whose species has lost flight,  
I bless and let go, so he may fly anyhow  
high in the hawk's talons and look down one moment  
on the marvelous and disappearing world.*

.....  
*After many years teaching American literature and poetry writing, Jim Mersmann is retired and living on a small Alabama farm, following his own and Whitman's longing to "turn and live with the animals." His publications include articles and poems in journals; a literary biography of Allen Ginsberg for Scribner's American Writers series; Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry Against the War; and two books of poetry, The Isis Poems and Straying Toward Home.*  
.....

## DOUBLE-BIRTH

Richard Boada

Improbably, two foals clumsily approach  
their mare. Thin phalanxes and coffin bones  
buckle as hoofs slip in the morning grass.  
They trust hock joints, pick up gallop,  
one snout knocks the other. Breaths fog  
the air. The mare's a quay in bluegrass  
panicles and her young are muscular  
vessels that fleck moisture off their black  
pelage. They'll run this birth coat off.

.....

*Richard Boada is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Southern Mississippi. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Yalobusha Review, The Louisville Review, Poetry East, Limestone, New Madrid and Santa Clara Review among others.*

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**"What really interests me is  
whether God had any choice in  
the creation of the world."**

**-- Albert Einstein**

## FOOTPRINTS

Jason Wiener, *2008 Hackney Literary Award winner*

Harry took off his mask once and choked. It was making him crazy, trying to breathe, trying to see. He felt sure he spent as much time brushing dust from his lenses as he did moving through the rubble. He remembered the stories told by his cousin Amnon in Israel after the Gulf War. The days spent huddled in shelters, the children crying to take off their masks, the parents resorting to nightmare descriptions of ruined flesh and bleeding eyes to make them stop, so that months after the war ended Amnon's little Benjamin still took his mask to bed at night, and shook with fear at the ringing of the telephone or the sound of television being switched on, lest it be a siren call to hide again.

Safe in Harry's living room in New York, America, Amnon told Harry stories about the smell. After a few hours the gas mask reeked of your fear, he said, from your breath, from your sweat. After a day of smelling your own terror you were ready to give anything for relief. Take my country, take my family. Just let me breathe. But you don't take off your mask, even for a moment, because the children might see. You leave it on, and sit, and wait. And try not to think about what you're smelling.

Knee deep in New York rubble, Harry sneered when he thought of Amnon's story. All they had to do was sit, after all. They didn't spend hours crawling over debris, pushing past pipes and concrete, lifting shards of metal, wood, and plastic. They didn't have to wipe their masks every minute to brush away the caking dust to see, to look for people, to keep from impaling themselves on what was left of the Towers.

After the first few hours Harry equated the wreckage with the attackers. He fought the stone and metal that hid the people and lay in wait to cut and burn and crush him. The loads of poisoned ruin borne away by cranes and trucks simply revealed inexhaustible depths of more to search. The rubble grew below him, burrowing into the bones of the city. Every hour it swelled larger as the number of hopeful missing withered away to the confirmed dead. It was the debris that did it. It hated him.

Harry felt differently about the pieces floating through the air. Sometimes congealed smoke, sometimes pigeons in heat, they fluttered with every draft, crisscrossing on currents as complex as a New York City street. Once in a while, Harry saw his fellow workers pause. Like people packing their homes to move, lingering on long-forgotten fossils of years

lived there. They held pieces of paper -- envelopes and folders, reports and memos. They read a word, a half sentence, and let it fall as they moved on to work. Not Harry. He ignored it all. Not because of the delay. No one could be faulted for pausing as a life fluttered by. He was honestly not interested. None of it was his son.

Harry's job on the Site, thirty-seven hours after the fall, was to look for solutions: to scout out ways lower into his assigned section and call for teams to excavate. Layer by layer they worked down with care not to shift wreckage into a pocket where the injured might be waiting. Harry was a huge man, but getting on in years, and so his role was just to scout. Digging duty they gave to younger workers. But they were too slow, Harry thought. David could be just inches down, or he could be under twenty floors of rubble, waiting for him. Far too slow. They had to move faster. He had to move faster.

"How many hours, Harry?"

Harry didn't have to look up to see the foreman. Instead, he moved as if his work led him away. He headed for a higher pile of wreckage, calling over his shoulder, "Just got on again." He listened as he climbed. No footsteps walked away.

"I saw you an hour ago." Harry pictured the foreman behind him, hands on his hips, exhausted like everyone else. Ted was an old friend at the station house, and he was just doing his job, keeping track of his team.

"Wasn't me," Harry lied. "This is my shift." He kept climbing, could barely hear the foreman's voice behind him.

"You take off after this shift, Harry."

Harry cleared the hill until he was out of Ted's sight. Gazing around for a place to start again, he saw signs of other workers; deep footprints in the dust, like photos of astronaut impressions made on the moon. Harry's son David once wrote a poem about that, when he was still in school writing poetry, when he still shared it with Harry: "Did the moon lose its romance when we trod there? Did we leave more behind when we flew there? Displace all the gods watching from there?" Harry remembered when Armstrong spoke from the moon. The sense of power. For Humanity. For America. Human beings became thicker by leaving those footprints on alien soil -- more real. Bigger in the universe. The Towers were cut from the same material. Taller than mountains, housing whole countries in their halls. Babel structures to heaven, transformed in an hour to these large, dirty footprints.

David's feet were too small. As a baby, you could fit ten pairs of David-feet into those bootmarks. The doctors told Harry the boy needed surgery. They warned him David might never walk at all. Harry, the mountain, the sportsman, with a wife who bled out and a premature baby with under-developed feet. Harry, the high school football player, with a boy who couldn't run? Impossible.

He gazed through the glass at his son in the nursery ward. It was weeks after the birth that cost the boy his mother, and he'd gained strength enough to open his eyelids. Harry looked into those eyes, small and green like his, and saw the same smile David would carry into adolescence and adulthood. It was wide and tight, like everything was so delightful that to actually laugh would be a painful understatement. David's smile. Then he kicked his legs, and his too-small feet. Either way was risky, the doctors admitted. Harry chose to trust his new son's smile. No surgery, he told them. Just the therapy. It might be years, the doctors warned. Harry shrugged. Then it will be years. He'll do it.

He did. To the surprise of the doctors and therapists, David found a way. He walked at two and ran at four. He was not the athlete his father was, but he was strong and quick and bright as his mother had been. David always found a way.

Harry pulled at a jagged, half-buried slab of concrete. It refused to budge. He stepped back, and snarled. It fought him! The wreckage knew where David lay. It knew and schemed, hiding his boy, devising ways to discourage his efforts. Harry gathered some lighter rubble to provide support for his crowbar and heaved. The slab turned a little, then a little more. Something came loose beneath a corner and the block slid off down an incline. Harry felt a blast of hot air and staggered back from an assault of ash and smoke. He steadied his footing and stared at the new hole. Flame caressed the sides like a tongue tracing cracked lips. A trap. The wreckage thought it had him. It tried to burn him. Harry threw a clod of rubble into the newly smoking hole and walked over to another pile.

"Harry!" The foreman, Ted, again. Sounding angry. Harry wiped dust from his faceplate and looked up into the other mask. Somehow, the mask looked angry, too. "I checked, Harry. You've been on for over twenty-six hours. I saw your log on the duty roster. Get the hell off. Take a break. We don't need you collapsing. Come back after you've had some sleep." Harry stood, waiting for the foreman to leave so he could get back to work. The mask stayed, however, and when Harry began to walk away

the mask followed. It herded him off the smoking, shifting wasteland back onto solid street. Harry's legs wobbled, like they'd disembarked from weeks at sea and did not know what to make of steady ground. "There's a relief station over there, Harry," the foreman pointed down an avenue, his voice gentler. "Get something to eat and drink. Then go home." Harry stood there, waiting for the mask to leave, but it waited with him. He would not get back on the pile now. He turned and walked down the street.

The noise of the Site and the clouds of ash began to recede, and Harry took off his mask again, spitting and sneezing dust. His nose quickly registered the strange acrid smell that infected the air near the Site. Buildings rose to either side -- still strong, still standing -- but shattered windows stared with hollow sockets and he kept his eyes forward and down as he approached a line of people. He was dully aware of cheers and applause but could not imagine their origin. Who could have reason to cheer? He moved toward outstretched hands. One hand offered him a towel. Another gave him a box of food. There were words in the air, but no definable source, nothing and no one behind those hands to speak or think or have eyes that begged for news. A bottle of water appeared for him, wrapped in fingers, like the others.

"Harry Bloom!" A young woman. She was attached to the hand holding the bottle. She pulled at the paper mask covering her jaw and smiled warmly, anxiously. "Miriam Stein, remember? From synagogue. From Or Shalom." Harry stood and waited. His head might have nodded for him. "My brother, Jonathan, remember? He was there. Second Tower, ninety-eighth floor. He's an accountant. The ninety-eighth floor. Have you...?" The words dropped into the filth caking the street between them. Harry wanted to leave them there, to walk past the hand that had a face on to those that floated, detached.

"He's dead," he muttered, turning away. He left the line with his water, and headed for a row of empty storefronts where he could sit. Everyone was dead. Every one. Except the one he knew had survived.

He approached a row of deserted storefronts and looked for an open door. Here, a men's shoe store. The glass survived on this one. The inside might even be somewhat clean. Someone had written on the window, traced in the dust: "God bless America." Harry frowned at the words, but walked by them into the store. David never said "God" away from a synagogue. It was not to be said outside of prayer, his Yeshiva friends



## **FROM VOID COMES ORDER**

Digital Photograph  
Raymond Mears

*Raymond Mears studied nature photography with Beth Young and drawing with Floyd Hosmer. His work has been published in the Cahaba River Society Annual Report. [gobil@earthlink.net](mailto:gobil@earthlink.net)*

taught. They were the friends David made while searching inside himself for his long dead, religious mother. They said "Hashem," meaning "The Name," and did not carelessly write the word either because once written it must not be destroyed. David would be disturbed to see it scrawled in the ash, where a twist of a hand could wipe it away. David waited under tons of steel and concrete, however, so Harry was disturbed for him.

Harry sat at a display table near the window. He opened the water and looked out into the hazy sunshine as he drank. He saw people stream by -- some workers from the site, some civilians. He saw a girl, five years old maybe, drop to the ground. A fraction of Harry tried to rise, to help, but he only sat and watched as she lay, her small form stretched as far as it could go in the centimeters of dust, and began to wave her arms and legs side to side against the road. Then she rose, her back coated gray, and turned to inspect her ash angel. A grin pushed wide her cheeks until she was wrenched off the ground. A new cloud grew and swallowed her as her back was rapidly slapped. Harry listened as the child received a scolding from her mother. With the noise in the street and the distance he could not be sure, but he thought he heard references to ruined skin and bleeding eyes.

Back on the site. Back where the ash was thickest. Back on the shifting wreckage that hungered for his flesh, not satisfied with mere thousands. It wanted him.

Can't sign in, Harry thought. Can't take a section. Fine. More time to look for David. Harry trudged among the other workers and made his way back to the area roughly describing the North Tower. David's Tower. Here, somewhere, David would be found.

Harry attacked a particularly steep incline and felt a piece of wreckage loosen under his boot. He struggled for purchase in the rubble but felt suddenly dizzy. He stopped and sat, angry. The break had made things worse. Harry was starting to feel the passage of hours. Why couldn't Ted have left him alone? He would still feel strong if he hadn't been stopped and reminded. No time now to waste. Harry got to his feet. This he could do. He was never the best student, but he could always keep moving, keep working. Keep breathing.

David, who loves study, told Harry at dinner last Friday -- a week ago? A year ago? -- about Tzimtzum. "More Kabala," Harry groaned. For what? Better the boy should focus on his business work. Move up in the company.

"But, listen, Dad," David said. "It's about breathing."

"Better you should spend time shmoozing with your co-workers than studying with zealots," Harry answered. "Didn't you say there was trouble at the office? With the economy? Now is not the time for play," he admonished his son, his boy. "Now is not a good time to be out of work."

David smiled. "I do OK, Dad," he said. "I always find a way, remember? Now, listen to this. Hashem made the world, right? The world, the universe, everything, right?"

"Sure, right," Harry said, giving in to the smile more than the words. "So?"

"So, before making the universe, Hashem is everything, everywhere. There is no place to put the universe. There's no room. It's a paradox, see? How could Hashem create the world if He occupied all space?"

"He rents a condo."

"Funny," David says, smiling, unperturbed. "No, really, imagine a time when all there is, is Hashem. The universe needs to be created. What can He do?"

"I am bereft of an answer."

"He takes a breath, Dad. Hashem inhales, thus carving a cavity in Himself. A space. Then He breathes into the space. Woosh. That was creation. Inhale, exhale. Woosh. Cool, huh?"

"Yeah, pretty cool, Davey."

"There's more. We can take the idea further. That was Kabala, and now we extrapolate. The first breath is like Big Bang Theory; a contraction, then an expansion. Those who subscribe to the Big Bang model think it is how this universe will end, too. Everything contracts again, scrunching up to a point, and then boom! Expands out again to start over."

"You're losing me, David."

"OK, OK. I'm almost done. Here's the point. So, if creation was a breath, how does it end? Another inhale. Hashem breathes in His creation, taking it back into Himself. And then He starts over."

"And you get girls talking about this stuff?" Harry smiled at his son, and was rewarded with David's smile, in return.

"Dad, you have no idea."

Girls. David's girl. Rachel. She must be worried. Probably left a dozen messages back at Harry's apartment. He hasn't been home to remind her not to worry. For others, you could worry. Not for David. He

was fine. Hurt, maybe. Scared, maybe, but not badly. David, named after Harry's grandfather who survived Warsaw, whose feet were too small but who walked anyway. David, who always finds a way. David was alive. Under that piece. There. A bit more. Probably just another few yards down.

It was all wrong. It was too big, too quick. Big things don't disappear so quickly. A mountain takes millennia to wear down. The Towers, similarly, should have eroded slowly. The disintegration was so fast, so final. A million years of erosion collapsed into minutes, cremating lives with sheer speed. The souls trapped there were not just gone -- they were long gone. They lived only forty hours before, but a thousand years of decay could be read in the dust of their bones.

David spent a term in Jerusalem, in college. He told his father of standing at the Western Wall, a relic of a two-thousand year old ruin, and feeling time compress before those stones. Looking up, he said, he could see the glory that once stood there, and could hardly believe something so magnificent, so important, could be gone. Harry raised his head and saw the South Wall of the Second Tower floating in a dreamswirl of dust. Would generations gather there to remember the shape of the whole in these tattered remains? No, he thought. The two-story shard was unstable. It would be taken down soon, and carted off with the rest. Harry felt an absurd sadness, a sense of waste, that this shard had stood a thousand years after the building fell, and now it would be torn down like it was something new, a mistake, a simple construction site. The dusty clouds cleared for a moment, and at the base of the wall Harry saw workers, and he remembered that it was all new, it was a construction site. It was just forty hours.

His knees weakened. Harry found himself sitting and staring as capricious winds covered the workers once more in the gray remains of mortar, metal, and people. He ripped off his gloves into his lap and shook his hands before him, like trying to brush off water. He stared at the wall and did not see it, but sat, shaking.

Rubble came loose under him and he lurched to his feet before sliding down. He turned and saw a woman, in civilian clothes, crawling through the ruins. Waving, he worked his way toward her, shouting. "You! Hey, lady! You can't be here." As he neared he saw she was digging, frantically, with bare hands in the dirt and splinters and razored metal. "Hey!" He

reached her and grabbed an arm, lifting her to her feet. She dropped immediately back to her knees. Bloody hands held close to her lap.

"I can't leave," she cried through a disjointed paper facemask. "Just a few minutes longer. I can find him. I know I can." She tried to lean back into the waste but Harry kneeled and grabbed her shoulders, holding her up before him. He wiped soot from his mask and momentarily tipped hers below her chin, to see if the face matched the voice.

"You're from Or Shalom," he said.

"Miriam." She said it without looking at his masked face, her eyes back on the debris.

He took off his mask to be sure she could hear him, and let it rest by his knees. "Miriam. Right. What do you think you're doing?" He used his official voice, firefighter's voice, for when there was a citizen to protect. "Look at your hands! You have to get out of here."

"I need to find my brother," she cried, looking at him now. "I know you can't find him. I understand. I know you have to help thousands. You're too busy. I understand. I can find him, I know it! Just a few more minutes. Then we'll leave. I promise."

"He's not here."

"Yes! I can find him -- "

"Miriam," he cried, shaking her harder than he meant. "No, he's not! He's not here. No one is here." He locked her with his small, green eyes. "No one. Do you hear me? There is no one left to find. He's not here. It's just ruins. And dust."

Miriam looked at him. She did not seem to breathe as Harry listened to his own words get carried away on warm, dirty currents. Then she crumbled. Her face shredded into grief and she sank in his grip, into his chest. He folded his arms over her and felt them rise and fall with her sobs.

Harry closed his eyes. He should be moving her, he thought. He should be standing up and searching. His boy was waiting. He was so close. Just a few more minutes, he was sure. He should stand.

Instead he stayed kneeling, holding the girl in his arms as her cries shuddered through him. He was aware, for the first time in recent memory, of touching something. He felt the wreckage where he sat, poking him through the padded uniform. It was solid, sharp, and real. He felt the girl twist and cry against his arms and torso. Her cheek pressed against his chest. A hand grasping his back. He felt the wind blowing dirt

in his hair and against his cheeks and brow. It stung him until it built enough layers of ash on his flesh; valleys of dust that moved only when streams of sweat passed through them. The rivulets merged under his chin, dripping sediment down his neck. Where they passed, new ash clung. He imagined the dust swirling around him, pushing at his skin, searching for a way inside. Tiny. Basic. Like the building blocks of creation.

Harry opened his mouth, and breathed in his son.

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*Jason Wiener's story won first prize in the national competition of the 2008 Hackney Literary Awards. He lives in Somerville, Massachusetts.  
JasonWiener@gmail.com*

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**"Would that we could at once  
paint with the eyes! -- In the  
long way from the eye through  
the arm to the pencil, how  
much is lost!**

**-- Gotthold Lessing**

## MARGOT

Mary Evelyn Hollaway, *2008 Hackney Literary Award Winner*

At first she stayed for all his words:  
the ones that told her  
she was ugly,  
the ones that told her  
she was nothing,  
foreign, stupid Kraut,  
not even fit for Hitler's Youth.

Later when the words were  
punctuated by his fists,  
she learned to grow small  
fold herself in and over  
melt through her pores  
and ride the breeze like pollen.

Often she collected  
in the far corner  
of the porch swing  
under the waxy leaf  
of the Wandering Jew  
and smiled at the irony  
of such a shelter.  
From its safety  
she watched the woman  
bleed and bend  
under his heavy hand.

Sometimes she drifted farther  
caught a tailwind and  
sailed higher and higher  
past the sharp edge of his world.  
Garmisch air buoyed her,  
sifted her with its clarity,  
its coolness off the mountain snows.

“Das Leiderbach, Das Leiderbach,”  
the song of the water  
filled her ears,  
melded with cow bells  
tinkling in the upper pasture,  
and made his words  
blacken and drop,  
impotent dung,  
his lips still gaping  
his mouth working silently.

Today his hands are idle.  
“He is better,”  
she tells me over and over.  
Searching her eyes, I hold her hand.  
Squeezing her fingers,  
I pull her back into her skin.

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*Born in Cullman, Alabama, Mary Evelyn Hollaway earned her undergraduate degree in English and Music (Applied Voice and Music Theory) from Huntingdon College, a Master's of Education degree at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and her Ph.D. at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. She is the Staff Development Specialist at Mountain Brook High School.*

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**"You will find poetry nowhere,  
unless you bring some with  
you."**

**-- Joseph Joubert**

## MAN DOWN

Erik Smetana

Ceramic. Reflective aluminum. Plastic in varying shades of pastel. A cluster of twenty bowls lined in a tidy row against the far wall of the kitchen. Leo fills each one; he has a system, food (two cups, no more, no less) then water (to the brim), food then water, food then water...

Only after each bowl has been filled to Leo's exacting standard does he finally allow the cats in. He opens the door from the bedroom and moves out of the way, every day thinking the same thing, *like herding cats*. A thought that makes him smile at its absurdity and truth.

Trampling over each other, the cats -- two Persians, a Ragamuffin, three Siamese (Leo's favorites), a Maine Coon, a shorthair, a longhair and a wirehair of mixed origin -- stage their own version of Pamplona's bulls in miniature. As they settle into their meal, quiet, gulping large mouthfuls of the dry food, they resemble hungry dogs more than their own nature. Watching the cats eat gives Leo a warm feeling, the sort his grandmother used to call a glow.

Unaware of his own body working autonomously, Leo whispers their names as he stares. "Ronald, David, Georgia, Pablo, Steven, Devon, Sarah, Peter, Rich, Chris."

With their bellies full, the cats retire to the recliner or Leo's bed (some underneath) as he gets himself ready for the day. A steam bath, the water making his skin flush, precedes the Wimberley Post and some quality time with a builder grade American Standard before finally shaving and pulling on a standard issue set of patrolman blues. A quick run of his hand (slicked in pomade) through his cropped hair and a glance in the mirror to make sure his badge is straight and then Leo is out the door.

Locking the deadbolt behind him, Leo walks to his patrol car and then around it. He checks for dents and dings. He looks for tires with too little air. He concerns himself with potential oil leaks. Inside the car, Leo

locks the doors before inserting the key. He fastens his seat belt and checks the mirrors. He inserts the key and sits.

He reaches for the glove box and opens the latch. Leo grabs a strand of beads, a rosary and begins to pray.

“O my God! Source of all mercy! I acknowledge Your sovereign power. While recalling the wasted years that are past, I believe that You, Lord, can in an instant turn this loss to gain. Miserable as I am, yet I firmly believe that You can do all things. Please restore to me the time lost, giving me Your grace, both now and in the future, that I may appear before You in wedding garments.

“Please forgive me for my faults, my sins against You and my fellow man. I beg of You to remove the heavy burden that rests on my heart, to help me cope in the aftermath of what I have done. I ask that You bless the unfortunate souls whose lives were cut short by my zealotry. If nothing else, Lord, please let those ten souls who entered Heaven as a result of my command sit by your side for all eternity.”

Opening his eyes, Leo wipes a tear from his cheek. He returns the rosary to the glove box and closes the latch for another day, returning to his routine. Leo lowers the driver’s side sun visor and touches the photo tacked to it. Eleven officers captured in black and white, smiles on their faces, he brushes each one with his fingertip. The only face he ignores in the photo is that of the commanding officer. His face.

Leo lowers his hand to the steering wheel and turns the key. The engine roars and Leo backs out of the drive.

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*Some of Erik’s works can be found in 52nd City, Boston Literary Magazine, Thieves Jargon and The Late Late Show. He is currently enrolled in graduate studies for creative writing at Lindenwood University just outside of St. Louis. eriksmetana@yahoo.com*

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**PORTRAIT**

Steve Rand  
Digital Composite

*Steve Rand is currently completing his BFA in Media Arts at the Hartford Art School. Steve has been working with mixed media for several years and much of his work is technology based. Common themes in his work include freedom versus conformity, the invasiveness of technology, and social criticism. Steve lives in Hartford, Connecticut. rand@hartford.edu*

## **BLUE EYES DON'T CRY**

Sandra Kolankiewicz, *2008 Hackney Literary Award winner*

isla mujeres

1988

The neighbor women don't trust her. They stand in whatever shade is offered by the doorways of their two-room, concrete-block houses and watch her make her way up the street with her empty nylon shopping bag on her way to the market, Noè at her side.

"Look at the way she walks," they say. "It's a gringa walk," and then one of them imitates her with a hard, fast pace that somehow still lets the hips swing back and forth, and they all cackle, throwing their heads back, hands on their plush hips.

"He must be doing all the cooking," another says, a woman with a straggle of long thin hairs around the raised mole on her chin, fat arms folded across her chest. "Everyone knows gringas can't cook. Shut up!!" she barks over her shoulder at her crying grandchild, and if he is close enough, she makes as if to swat.

"And who is doing the laundry?" Doña Gloria adds then, stopped maybe on her way back from the corner store at the sight of the other women talking together. "Gringas send everything out to be laundered."

"She cleans, though," Leonor says next. "I saw her toss a bucket of soapy water out the front door," as they all do with the contents of their dirty mopping pails, to keep down the dust and the flies,

Eventually they can't ignore the smell of fresh bread wafting out the open windows, or the odor of garlic and oil heating up in a pan. The sound of water sloshing on the other side of the new cement-block wall is unmistakable as well, and when the wind is blowing, they can hear the flap, flap of clothes on the line, even though they can't see them. Finally, Lupe sends her oldest son up a nearby coconut tree to peer into the back yard.

"She is picking the pebbles from frijoles," he reports when he finally slides back down, "and there is a cat at her feet."

"A cat!" the women exclaim. Everyone knows that cats sit on your chest at night and suck the air from your lungs. Or they slit your throat with their long front claws. Only a dirty gringa would have a cat in her house; the other women shoo them or throw stones at them. Cats are

dangerous; they carry disease, crawling in and out of garbage barrels like rats, with their pointy island cat faces and their scabby bodies and torn ears.

Every day Noè comes home straight from fishing, no stopping anymore at the cantina or the whorehouse or with some gringa loca on the beach, all the places where their own husbands are. Since gringas are rumored to be cold in bed, they think he must be interested in her money, since all Americans are rich.

"He will throw her out," they predict, "as soon as the dollars are gone."

"It's her money that built the new wall," they gossip. "She doesn't want to look at us. She thinks she's better than us. Wait," they say, "until the dollars are gone," and then, satisfied, they return to their pots of escabèche, or the rice they are plucking through, or the weevils they sift from the flour they use to bread their fish.

There are no dollars. The wall was built after Rosendo's murder, thrown up in the matter of a week. After over a year of her living with him, Noè still takes her on the back of his motorbike to the southern-most end of the island, where they climb the roof of the Mayan ruin, still sleepy from their siesta, and watch whatever boats are coming in. Recently, he has even been taking her running, following behind on his moto, watching over her while she chases the sunset.

Noè never returns home drunk anymore, and his visits to the women in the whorehouse have stopped since she came to live with him. When he isn't fishing, he is with her alone. They go to his sister-in-law's, or to his father's, where, when Chepo, Noè's father, is sick, she visits every day to give him a bath, her instead of his own daughters.

Sometimes the gringa even cooks and cleans for Chepo as well, and also for Jasmìn, his unmarried daughter who lives in the shack with Chepo and her three children under five, Jasmìn who sells beer illegally out the back door on Sundays because she has no husband to take care of her.

"She is not like other gringas," Jasmìn says in the market when Noè's neighbor women stop her and ask. "She has no money."

So the women begin to say, "She never comes out and talks to us because he won't allow it. He keeps her a prisoner in his house, and that is why he built that wall."

None of them has a wall, and they all want one. Their laundry disappears from the lines when their backs are turned. At night, someone

steals the almost-ripe tomatoes from the vines they covetously guard, grown in the sand like miracle plants, always to be counted on when the fishing fails.

Trying to get some information, they ask the mailman and are told that after the first envelope the gringa posted, she has sent no letters and none have arrived, very unusual for gringas, who always send postcards to someone.

"Poor thing," they say among themselves. "She has no family," and they cluck their tongues in sympathy because for them to have no family is unimaginable and to be separated from home unendurable.

But no one speaks to the gringa until Lupe's youngest son swallows a hollow plastic bobber he finds in the gutter.

In fact, Lupe doesn't even know her son is missing. Usually her mother, Leonor, watches him and Lupe's other two children, born out of wedlock to different fathers whom Lupe has never named, perhaps because she isn't sure. Every day, including Sundays, Lupe works from 4 p.m. until 11 at a shop that sells t-shirts. At that time she usually has a 'date,' the source of her secondary income and what little amount of affection she gets.

Leonor has gone to the market, and Lupe, who is supposed to be watching her own children, has fallen asleep in the hammock. No one notices the little boy cross the street and pick through the overflow from the tambor in front of Noè's house, the rusting diesel barrel that Noè has put out front for the garbage. The bobber has a hole in it, and Noè tossed it out with a knot of fishing line. No one sees the little boy pop the red bobber into his mouth like it is a piece of penny candy and swallow it whole, where it lodges in the back of his throat.

The women keep cooking, sweeping their front porches, singing along with the radio, emptying buckets into their laundry pots. The knife sharpener keeps pumping the wheel on his cart and honing a blade, the taxi driver keeps checking his oil. Berta keeps scolding her children, and the palsied old man keeps marking time by when the bus passes on the street.

No one hears the little boy's sharp intake of breath and then his stifled gargle as he begins to choke and his eyes become wide. Except the gringa, who flies out her front door, jerks the boy upside down by his feet, and whacks him on the back between his bird-like shoulder blades. The

bobber shoots out of his mouth, bounces against the front wall of Noe's house, and rolls back into the gutter.

When she looks up, all neighborhood eyes are on her, and for the instant before the little boy begins to wail for his mother, hands stop whatever they are doing, arms freeze mid-motion, feet halt mid-stride.

"Lupe!" a woman's voice cries. "The gringa has saved your son!"

ii

Let's get down to reality, I say to my father, the unemployed son of a dead coal miner. Everything rots here, even a dried up old bean you throw in the sand; it rots, and eventually you have to deal with it. You just watch the ants that come to carry it off, the flies that hover over it, or you pick up that old bean and throw it away.

You have to be clean, I say. You're dealing with a whole other thing; it's not like insurance protection or having a local city hall where you can go to fix your logistical problems. Government offices don't exist here; they're just the names of buildings.

You have to be clean here because the flies come, or the cockroaches, or things begin to stink. You learn to wipe things when you're done with them, or you live in s---.

It's how big your family is, how many of them there are to protect you. It's whether you can afford to pay the money for the fake papers and the signatures, like on the forged tourist card Noè bought for me from Rosendo when mine expired. The new one looks just like the old for what amounts to a hundred bucks, but this one won't expire for another year.

Americans think they're safe, I tell him, even the poor ones. They have their money, their car, fire, health, theft, and death insurance. Their government parachute, Social Security, medical card, food stamps, and Welfare. Even if you don't do everything right, there's still money somewhere. Then one day, your wife dies or your father, like you will, I say to him, and you realize that any control you have is an illusion -- the important things are beyond you.

Disposals take away spoiled food. People die, and the Health Department makes sure that professionals pick them up from refrigerated morgues and either burn them for you or stuff them into their best blue suit and put them in a pretty box.

Here, when you die, your family bathes you, dresses you. People get you into the ground quick before you begin to smell, and they've sat up the whole night with you praying and weeping, all night so you won't be alone.

You say, "Get an education," but here, a doctorate is no good. They want a real doctor who can set their bones, deliver their breach births, heal their child's lazy eye or limp.

You could say, for example, that you have a degree in art history, that you specialize in the pre-Raphaelite era, but they'll tell you that Luis up the street is an artist because he painted the name on their boat.

The names of all the poets you've read won't feed you.

There are no rules here except that the sun goes up and down, and somewhere in there you have to eat, work, cry, screw, and laugh. There's laundry to do by hand. There's keeping a dirt floor clean.

No one pretends here. People don't hide their deformities; they're merely ways of naming someone. We have the Mute, Crooked Leg, Fatty, Skinny, Twisted. We have people nick-named Turtle, Dog, Knife, Curious, and Crab.

This isn't a bad place, I assure him. It's just a different place.

Then I realize I'm doing one of the new tricks I learned at school. I'm quoting, cheating.

I'm living in the sub-structure, I finally say. The base.

Meanwhile, of course, I know my father is not really here at all.

I make him lie back in the hammock until he's just swinging away like he's enjoying himself under the two palm trees in my back yard, his feet off the ground.

My mother? If I could see her, she would want to walk the beaches with me, looking for shells or the bleached bones of tortuga. We would talk about books, stories she remembered from the hills, the day she met my father. When I wasn't looking, she would sit here in the shade, exhausted, exasperated, thinking I have ruined my life by dropping out of college and living on a Caribbean island with a Mexican fisherman who has a third grade education.

Or perhaps she'd be secretly pleased. She'd lounge in a hammock in a loose dress with no bra, buy some of the hand-painted masks they bring here from Guatemala, splash them like color around her kitchen when she got home to Reunion. She would visit once a year if they could afford it,

for a month each time, and we'd snorkel, then come to my home and drink a beer while the rice boiled and the fish grilled.

We'd clean everything later, throw water over the concrete table in this back yard while my father and Noè dozed off their lunches. The flies would come and then leave, seeing there was nothing we'd left out to spoil.

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*Sandra Kolankiewicz's above work is excerpted from her novel. This story won the Hackney Literary Awards contest in 2008. Sandra.Kolankiewicz@mail.wvu.edu*

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**"I can live with doubt and  
uncertainty and not knowing. I  
think it's much more  
interesting to live not knowing  
than to have answers which  
might be wrong."**

**-- Richard Feynman**

## MOTHER

Willie James King

Cold late-winter days I sat  
alone, bent above my line  
knowing a stopper often bobs  
before it suddenly goes down,  
fast, beneath the brown floe  
of Dusty Branch. I sat in deep  
quiet peace, contemplating  
what death is, needing departure  
somewhat daunted by all  
those already taken by its dark grasp.  
That was before it took You,  
Dad; there had been many  
others. So, I took those quiet  
moments needed to be tough,  
not really caring if I caught  
a catfish, an eel, turtle, or perch.  
And no matter whatever else I  
was doing, at any given time  
supposedly mine, there had  
almost always been an umber  
of icy musings, not only of me

.....

*Willie James King resides in Montgomery, Alabama. He is widely published in such literary journals as The Southern Poetry Review, Willow Review, Alehouse Press, Poesia, Sendero, and CuTThroat: A Journal of the Arts. His latest book, The House in the Heart. He welcomes readers' comments at [wll3ki@aol.com](mailto:wll3ki@aol.com).*

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**untitled**

Alex Ward

c'mon, as a  
leaf, and  
fall down the  
river. that  
swirl in the  
river, all the  
dark autumn  
trees. (churn,  
of the silt-engines)  
soft, are the  
coalhorses, that  
step, through  
spent fires.  
(leaf) pirouetters,  
ascending,  
in death.  
full, of  
desire, they  
draw their  
last.  
breath.

.....  
*Alex Ward been writing poetry since age 12, when he won an Arbor Day poetry contest in Dayton, Ohio. First prize: getting to shake the mayor's hand, and help plant a tree by the river. Ward is a big fan of Walt Whitman and has worked in factories all his life.*  
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## MOMENT AS FRAGILE AS A BUTTERFLY

Joel Willans

A butterfly sits on a bruised-looking roadside weed. Its swirling design is so intricate and so precise that Ellie Smith, spindly in a heat haze and almost out of sight of her betters in the mansion, wonders if she might be seeing a miracle.

“It must be a rarity this one, it must, mustn’t it? With these colours and all?” she says.

Lazlo laughs. “So many people talk nonsense and I have to put them straight. That’s why I’m a footman and you’re just a pantry girl. That’s no rarity, that’s as common as dirt. They’re everywhere ‘round here.”

Ellie pinches her nose and breathes deep. Her eyes never leave the butterfly. It closes its wings once, then jerks into the air and catches a breeze, zigzagging over marigolds that blaze like new pennies towards the woods. There are oak trees there, three of them, and Ellie just knows that is where the butterfly is headed. She hitches her skirt and follows.

“What’s you doing, my dear Ellie Smith?” Lazlo says, “What do you see in the woods?”

“I’m not your dear yet,” Ellie mumbles.

She stumbles forward, swatting branches and bushes aside, eager to see her butterfly again, just once so she can keep it safe in her mind. Keep it there forever. She aims to draw it one day when she has time between the scrubbing and the cooking, the sweeping and the polishing. Her eyes catch a flutter of colour and there it is again, on the side of the tree.

“You can’t go in there. No, no. It’s forbidden that is. They’d have my hide if they found out I let you in there.”

Ellie can smell Lazlo behind her. His tobacco, his sweat, his dopey dogs. She ignores him and carries on through the bristling heat, wishing she were able to rip her clothes off and swim in the river. Though she has only a dove’s flitting of a family herself, one brother and one sister, both far away, she wishes they were all back together so they could paddle like they used to.

“Girls don’t normally have much courage, but it looks like you’re different.” Lazlo grabs her arm. “But if you go in there and get all dirtied up, I’ll get a right telling off.”

“That would be my worst nightmare,” Ellie says pulling away and walking, faster and faster, her heart beating in time to her steps. The



## **WHITE VINE**

Kim Hagar  
Digital Photograph

*Kim Hagar has been a resident of Alabama for all her 50+ years. She currently lives on the Elk River and has had poetry and prose published in many local publications as well as others across the country. She has recently developed a love of photography and feels it is a poetry of another sort! [bkhaqar@yahoo.com](mailto:bkhaqar@yahoo.com)*

butterfly is still there, still as stone. When she is no more than a few paces away, Lazlo grabs her again.

“Why are you like this?” He licks his lips. “I’m just trying to be friendly. Show you nice places and all you can think of is chasing creatures around.”

“I want to look at it again, that’s all.”

Some said Lazlo scowled at Mistress when she wasn’t looking and now Ellie believed them. Lazlo’s face scrunched up all tight and he shook his head. “If you go see that damned butterfly I won’t be taking you out for walks again. Not now, not ever. There are plenty others that’d be happy for the chance.”

Ellie looks him up and down, then over his shoulder, at the redbrick mansion looming high, blocking sunshine and happiness alike. It looks as if it will last a thousand years, but this moment is as fragile as the butterfly. She peels Lazlo’s fingers, one by one, off her arm. He doesn’t say a word, just gawps, as she walks with her head held as high as a Duchess toward a rainbow fleck sitting atop the oak tree’s crinkled bark.

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*Joel Willans is a copywriter with Konsepti Advertising in Helsinki, Finland.*

*joel.willans@konsepti.fi*

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**"No two identical parts are alike."**

**-- Beach’s Law**

## METAL OF A QUEEN

Gladys Sherrer

“Category five Hurricane Ivan approaching Alabama’s Gulf Coast...”

The forecaster’s words meant hopping a plane to New York or missing a date. Ivan -- having killed 64 in the Caribbean, three in Venezuela -- was the strongest hurricane on record in 2004. Deadly winds approached.

Bummer.... all flights will be cancelled.... Had living in a state on volatile Gulf of Mexico rendered me numb to weather disasters? I’d vicariously cut teeth on my brother’s hurricane reconnaissance, his battling storms on US Coast Guard planes and vessels from North Atlantic to South Pacific. Today my plans were at risk. I packed, dashed to the airport, away from a storm.

As my plane circled New York City thrills surged. I was sailing to the Canadian Maritime Provinces, a passenger on Queen Mary II maiden voyage, a ship christened nine months earlier, one year past sea trials. Ahead lay another. Although I’d sailed small craft in the Gulfs of Mexico and Alaska, this was my first cruise and I’d chosen the largest transatlantic liner built to date. My hopes were high as Alabama cotton in August.

While in the Big Apple, I watched newscasts as Ivan wreaked havoc, marching north, producing wind damage, floods; splitting, reorganizing with a southwesterly turn; remnants continuing northeast producing floods. Northern air will weaken Ivan, I thought.

Evening -- champagne bon voyage party as we sailed from Pier 92 at Port of New York, September 17, 2004 -- included celebrants from around the globe. High above the bridge, flags of Great Britain whipped in near gale force winds. In the distance, but passing quickly, was the Empire State Building.

Passengers who’d planned for a glimpse of Manhattan’s skyline abandoned top deck as wind tangled well-coiffed hair. We sailed past Statue of Liberty. Soon all hints of humanity faded in a cloak of fog, gathering darkness. We were an island, a city afloat, population 3800. While churning our way into the North Atlantic, I learned Ivan had killed 25 in the US. In a few days he would conspire to kill four more in Canada.

“High Winds,” signs warned two days later. Yet some were seen on deck, leaning against winds which gained strength and shrieked like banshees. We sailed toward St. John, Newfoundland. Massive chandeliers vibrated like castanets as stormy waves beat the ship’s hull. The vessel

began listing, leaning to the starboard side, forcing wobbly passengers to hold onto corridor railings. Elevators were defunct, clearly due to gravitational force -- heavy metal's vertical plunge in reclining elevator shafts. The worst weather is happening now, I thought; on the largest ocean liner, no problem.

Near midnight, in formal attire, I elected to extend a day of extreme contrasts -- opulence and stormy seas. A stiff north wind blew, spitting sleet against window panes. Inside was cozy as the ship pitched in blackness.

After polishing off a chocolate dainty I went to my cabin on tenth deck, dropped quickly into peaceful sleep, roiled by the continuous motion as our floating city forged ahead in frigid seas.

Before dawn I was jolted awake by a terrifying plunge. My bed was falling like an airplane hitting air pockets. After dropping as an elevator, the hull shuddered with great intensity -- overstressed engine noise. Lying sleepless in a dark cabin, my fear rose with each raging swell and crash, as I thought of ill-fated vessels whose watery graves littered the North Atlantic. The fact we were off the coast of Halifax, Nova Scotia -- the region of the tragic Titanic maiden voyage -- brought no comfort. Didn't our captain, Commodore Ron Warwick, eerily resemble Captain Edward John Smith of the Titanic, which lay about two miles deep where we churned?

As light dawned I grabbed a video camera, imagining crew donning life jackets, readying life boats. Public spaces were empty of passengers. A single crew member walked a corridor. An ominous blackness outside a window on third deck drew me closer. Mountainous waves plunged over our 151,400 ton ship. Seawater drenched windows.

Few came out of cabins, except for a small group huddling over a map book in the library. We knew our geographic coordinates, wind velocity -- eighty MPH, fifty-foot waves. Seas were Category Nine. We sought warmth from fellow travelers. A Newfoundlander supplied no calm with her shared knowledge of the North Atlantic. Hurricanes escalate when joined with an arctic cold front, as had Ivan. Ships seeking harbor after storms commence can be grounded and roll over. The Queen -- with her steel hull -- must battle the storm in deep seas.

Suddenly dark waves broke over the ship's bow, crashing onto eighth-deck library windows. Hair raised on my neck, mouth went dry as I tried to email. Data refused to be sent into a screaming dark tempest.

I'd plunged into the long corridor, on a path to assess my scopolamine-drugged cabin mate, when the inner corridor doors began slamming automatically, as they do in public fire alarms. The loudspeaker's jarring bell grabbed my attention, Commodore Warwick echoing our plight. In a direct, somewhat chilly manner, quintessential British, Warwick stated the dire situation.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I regret to inform you that we will not be making landfall in Newfoundland. I have concern for the ship if we continue on course."

He has concern for the ship?

There is a fate common to all mankind, regardless of opulent façade. When one's steely resolve meets life's storms, the concluding clash is only between you and your Maker. Those next hours were deep soul-searching ones, reflecting on life as before facing major surgery, imminent demise. I finally fell asleep.

In cathedral calmness, a fog horn's deep bellow wakened me. The four-day storm at sea ended. Gone were the falling, shuddering, vibrating. I lay counting seconds that turned into minutes before the Queen's bell resounded, as we sailed in dense fog in shipping lanes on the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The fog and precisely-timed sounding continued for hours as clearly stunned passengers came to life. Near Newfoundland, four fishermen had drowned when their boat sank. Still shaken, I tried emailing, finally got through to my brother. His words of relief came in a tense reprimanding voice. "Little Sister, never cruise the North Atlantic in hurricane season!"

I didn't need to be told. Stepping on soil in Quebec City, I stifled an urge to kneel, kiss Earth's sweet firm face. The Queen's metal was tested well during the storm.

And so was mine.

.....

*Gladys Sherrer lives in Birmingham, Alabama, where she is polishing a novel and writing freelance articles. Her work appears in Renewed & Ready magazine, and in news journals, such as the Birmingham News, Phoenix GoodLife News and the Harding County Roundup. She is a columnist for the Shelby County Reporter and a member of the National League of American Pen Women.*

*gsherrer@hotmail.com*

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## ATLANTA TO BIRMINGHAM

Athena Strickland

Measured in slowly-but-surely Southern time  
Three hours with a stop figured in  
For gas or food or comfort.  
Mile markers memorized  
Herald the official countdown  
Inner child silently inquires,  
“Are we there yet?”  
Uneven pavement sends vibrations  
Disrupting hypnotic white line fever  
As cinematic visuals in Technicolor  
Play on the windshield’s widescreen.  
Cow pastures dotted with blacks and browns  
The occasional gray goat confuses the eye  
Median wildflowers painted by God  
A kaleidoscope begging to be picked and held up to the light.  
Truck stops with two-storied inhabited islands  
Occupied to capacity  
Fill-r-up and Wash-r-down  
Off you go onto the asphalt yonder.  
Illuminated floating ads in the sky  
Beckon travelers seductively  
Exit here for your shopping and dining pleasures  
Exit here for nothing at all.  
Weathered fencing replaces the imaginary line  
Separating the mobile from the immobile  
Houses all painted the same stark white  
Line up to say, “Drive safely.”  
Produce hauler in the far left lane  
Rushing peaches to the grocery stores  
Leads the parade on the final stretch  
As the odometer rolls to its goal.  
Destination Birmingham arrived  
Atlanta left behind  
Three hours give or take  
In slowly-but-surely Southern time.

.....

*Athena Strickland is a native Georgian who draws on her Southern upbringing for many of her stories and poems. She was inspired to write this poem by her frequent business trips from her home near Atlanta to Birmingham. She can be contacted at [athenstrickland@windstream.net](mailto:athenstrickland@windstream.net)*

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## THEY TAKE SUCH GOOD CARE OF US - CONDO LIFE

Alice Folkart

They take care of us here,  
rake the leaves, water the lawns,  
trim the trees with chain saws  
singing in the dewy morning,  
and they put the poison out,  
to kill the birds, stray cats, and  
giant, shellacked cockroaches  
long as your hand, and handsome.

How do I know?  
Is the poison set out  
on sweet little dishes, like cream?  
Oh, no. It is hidden, sprayed,  
coating the grounds and stairs,  
and every now and then  
a roach who has succumbed,  
lies on his back, on a walkway,  
legs in the air, antennae still.  
Kafka would have recognized him.

Shall I too, lie one day,  
legs in the air, eyes rolled back,  
still, still, still because they  
took such good care of me?

.....

*Alice Folkart writes on the island of Oahu, in Hawaii. Her work has been seen in a  
number of on-line literary journals.*

.....





### **STILL LIFE WITH PEPPERS, FLOWERS & BASKET**

Oil on Canvas

20" x 16"

Kathy Lumsden

*Kathy Lumsden is a self-taught artist who has been painting exclusively in oils since 2004. She finds painting a wonderful, creative outlet and stress reliever after working a hectic 12 hour shift as an RN in the intensive care unit at Brookwood Medical Center. She is a resident of Pelham, Alabama, and a member of the Birmingham Art Association. Her paintings grace the walls of homes in the Birmingham and Mobile areas, and have been exhibited in BAA Members' Shows. [kathylumsden@yahoo.com](mailto:kathylumsden@yahoo.com)*

## GRAND OLD OPERA HIP HOP

Jim Reed

I used to have this recurrent fantasy.

In my daydream, I am driving along, heading down Birmingham's 20th Street, windows down and radio turned up full-blast. Bliss is written all over my face. I pull up to a traffic light and in the lane beside me is a man whose radio is turned up full-blast, too. His radio is playing emotion-laden, scatalogically robust hip hop music, full of profanity and violence. And it's real loud. Attitude Bliss is written all over his face. My radio, on the other hand, is playing emotion-laden, violence-ridden, over-the-top grand opera. Suddenly, for a split second, he realizes that my music is his music. I realize that his music is my music. Each music in its own small universe is the music of nightmares and reality and deprivation and hopefulness, love, lust, and celestial warfare. The driver looks me in the eye, raises an eyebrow, and nods, then speeds away. I continue my trek through Downtown, a moment of revelation and wisdom filed away for later.

At the age of 17, I became a radio announcer at a public radio/classical music station in Tuscaloosa. Back then, in 1959, there were only a few such stations in the country, but they set the standard for what really good public radio stations would be for the next forty years. On our Tuscaloosa station, we concentrated wholeheartedly on classical music, opera, music from the theatre, ballet...with a smattering of jazz, stand-up comedy, folk and experimental music.

And on Saturday afternoons, there was the Metropolitan Opera.

I had never heard entire operas before, but as the newest member of the announcing team, I got to work the shifts nobody else favored -- and that included Saturday afternoons. While other students were attending football games and going creek-banking, I was trapped inside the control room, listening to opera. While I performed all those tasks announcers were expected to perform -- file recordings, cue up tapes, read transmitter gauges, fill in program logs, write narratives and promotional announcements for future shows -- I was exposed to the wonderful dulcet announcing tones of Milton Cross, the host for the Texaco Opera. Cross always sounded as if he were the world's greatest and most well-informed opera buff, and he told me way more than I ever had planned on knowing. At first, I felt like the nerd that I was, listening to all those great singers.

But it didn't take long for me to immerse myself in the music, appreciate the enormous voices that opera singers always possessed, and eventually feel very incomplete if I didn't get to hear an entire opera at least once a week.

It was an incredible education, and I was being paid to obtain it!

And, so, fifty years later, I still find myself arranging life so that I am a captive audience of the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts. I work the Saturday shifts at Reed Books, and I do all those things that bookdealers have to do -- catalogue new acquisitions, file and arrange books, pay bills, greet and assist customers, answer the phone -- but mainly, I get to listen to a full opera each Saturday all by myself. But wait -- the opera is no longer on the air, the local station no longer broadcasts the Metropolitan Opera. So, I no longer listen to the station... I just play opera on the record players in my shop -- sometimes on 33 1/3 rpm LPs, sometimes on 78's, sometimes on antiquated cassette tapes.

It's been a wonderful life. Even to this day, when local broadcasters no longer care for live opera, I still listen to those big artists, those orchestras a hundredfold larger than hip hop bands. And all right here, in the center of the universe, at my Museum of Fond Memories.

Why, if anyone ever took opera and classical music away from us, wouldn't that be as cruel as removing Daniel Schorr from the airwaves? That would be like taking the wisest, most experienced journalist in radio and locking him inside a padded room.

In another daydream, I'm actually in a padded room with the late Milton Cross and the present-day Daniel Schorr, and we're having a great time, listening to the music and chatting between acts. And the hip hop radio guy joins us now and then, listens knowingly, then plays us a cut or two of his music. And after awhile, we begin to appreciate and understand one another, and the diversity that all forms of music can bring to the world, if we'll only keep listening together

.....  
*Jim Reed still listens and even writes an occasional operatic hip hop poem, at the Museum of Fond Memories and the Library of Thought...in Downtown Birmingham at Reed Books. [www.jimreedbooks.com](http://www.jimreedbooks.com)*  
.....

## WHERE I'M FROM

Jon Carter

I am from chopsticks,  
from boxed lunches with fish and rice  
set neatly beside steaming soy soup  
(a measured peace in every corner).  
I am from the mulberry bush,  
whose leaves are quietly devoured  
and spun into silk.

I'm from matchbox cars at Shimizu's  
but avoid the dirty comic book rack.  
I'm from drunks at the train station  
offering Poky pretzels and mikans  
or pushing me around for Hiroshima.  
I'm from Haven of Rest sung to  
the bellows of my father's pump organ.

I am from strong missionary stock,  
pungent mushrooms and bamboo shoots,  
from a formal voice preaching  
the Word of God as black heads bow  
in deep reverence over wooden benches.  
The slides we showed our supporters  
still flash before my eyes, now faded red.

I am from foreign soil -- uprooted  
and brought to a home not my own.  
My branches still strain eastward.

.....

*Jon Carter teaches at Briarwood High School in Birmingham, Alabama.*

.....

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR

Doris M. Kneppel

Fear took her breath away when her call went unanswered. "Mom, I'm home. Mom?" Ruth listened for a response. The silence was cold and heavy.

She had, as usual, called home during her prep period at school just to make sure she was OK. But today there had been no answer. It was too late in the school day to call a substitute so she could go home to check on her. The next best thing was to leave a message. When the machine picked up she tried to keep the panic out of her voice as she asked Mom to call the school and leave a message telling Ruth that she is OK. There was no message waiting for her. Well, she reassured herself, Mom often slept through the ringing of the phone. She was probably napping or maybe had television blasting.

As she hurried up the path to the front door, she kept telling herself that as soon as she opened the front door she would be greeted with loud TV and the sight of her Mom staring mindlessly at the flickering picture. A heavy silence greeted her.

Ruth rapidly walked into the kitchen, her heels beating a quick tattoo on the wood floor.

"Mom, the least you could do is answer the phone, for goodness sake!" But as she rounded the corner, an empty kitchen greeted her. The first thing that caught her eye was the kitchen table, still set for breakfast, as she left it this morning. The box of cereal stood there. The milk still waited to be used and the electric coffee maker was still plugged in. The kitchen was strangely silent and mourning its emptiness, as though abandoned. For a long moment she stood there transfixed. She was aware that somewhere at the back of her mind she was relieved to see that at least the gas was not on.

She flung her purse and jacket on a kitchen chair. Her mind said to hurry upstairs but her feet would not obey. Instead she stood frozen on the bottom step, clutching the newel and called again, "Mom?" Using the banister, she willed her feet to carry her. The climb seemed endless.

What would she do without her Mom? She had always been Ruth's bulwark -- the loving support she needed whenever times were bad. It was Mom who comforted her when Jack left their marriage. It was Mom who helped her pay the rent. It was Mom who was always just a telephone call away.

She stood at the top of the stairs. Her legs trembled and she sat abruptly, waiting for strength to return. She called again, but there was no answer. Was this the moment the doctors had warned her about when they diagnosed her mother with an inoperable brain tumor? "Frankly, we can't tell you how long she has. It depends on a lot of things like rate of growth and which direction it takes." Ruth moved Mom in with her and kept a careful an eye on her. Jenny, a part time caregiver, came in Monday through Friday but she called that morning to say she was down with a cold. Mom assured Ruth she'd be fine and since it was almost the weekend they didn't need to call in a substitute.

Ruth let herself be talked into not calling in sick but she was remembering now how, over the past month, Mom seemed to be getting more and more fragile and less and less able to care for herself. She seemed to be gently fading away.

Finally, the strength returned to her legs and with new resolve she hurried up the stairs. Mom's door was closed! How unusual! She found herself tiptoeing to the door. Placing her ear against it, she listened for some sound -- any sound. Nothing! Gathering her courage and taking a deep breath, she knocked softly. "Mom?" No answer. Panicked, she knocked harder and shouted.

"Yes, Dear. Come on in." Ruth rushed in expecting Lord knows what. Mom was sitting in her favorite rocker, a book open in her lap and eyeglasses perched on the tip of her nose.

"Mom, why...," but she stopped short when she saw her mother's hearing aids on the night table.

Her mother's eyes followed Ruth's gaze. "Oh, I decided it's a lot more peaceful to read without having to contend with distractions. You're home! Is it already that late? I guess without Jenny, I kind of forget to eat, but as soon as I finish this chapter I'll be down for dinner."

"No rush, Mom. Enjoy your book. I'll let you know when dinner is ready."

.....  
*Doris M. Kneppel is a freelance writer in New Jersey and a member of the International Women's Writing Guild. Her work has appeared in several magazines, and her first novel, Tell Them No Secrets, won honorable mention by The National League of Pen Women. She is presently at work on her second novel, The Long Good-bye. dukekn@optonline.net*  
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