Birmingham Arts Journal

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Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **FORGOTTEN COAST**, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 24. *Collection of Jim and Sue Green - Destin, Florida. Melanie Morris lives to paint in Birmingham, Alabama. A native of Mississippi, one of her earliest memories is sitting with her mother in the backyard sketching a pear tree. This fascination with nature is revealed today in her colorful landscapes and florals. www.melaniemorrisart.com*

Back Cover: **BLEACHERS AT RICKWOOD FIELD, BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA** – Digital Photo. *Larry O. Gay - Rickwood Field is America's oldest ballpark. Larry O. Gay photographs iconic structures and landscapes in his native Birmingham, Alabama. logay@bellsouth.net*

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DAYLIGHT SAVINGS

Teresa Wesson

You say it's impossible
but some of us are already doing it
Time stored away under houses
in mason jars
worms tunneling
on all sides of it

Buried in the garden
beside the okra
and pole beans
It stood still
as you rotated the crops

In the safety deposit box
it waits
the bank manager
suspicious
but he's not sure

I know a man who hides
it in tool boxes
he says to me,
Don't you know time is a tool?

You know you've been somewhere
let's say a dark alley
and you thought you heard
horse hooves
clomping
on masonry streets
That was time
asking you if you needed it
asking you if you wanted
to trade

Or you stood
slightly outside the funeral tent
of a child
eager to bind up time
and present it to your friend

I know it's here somewhere
All that daylight we've been
saving
stored away like telephone booths
God only knows where

.....

Teresa Wesson earned a degree in creative writing from the University of Memphis. She has loved poetry since childhood, but did not begin writing until a professor read to the class a letter she wrote to Toni Morrison, and encouraged her to pursue creative writing as a major. This encouragement and direction fueled a writing frenzy that continues to this day. Her work was recently published in New Millennium Writings. *She resides in Chattanooga, Tennessee, with her husband, Scott, and their two children.*

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START

Monique Hayes

We clip our helmets simultaneously, the straps clenching our chins. My father stares at us in silent judgment as the hose he holds bathes the dry beginnings of a bonsai tree. I never know exactly what he's thinking. I'm that age where it's become routine for us not to speak because he's stopped listening.

My friends listen to the shred of gravel with the rush of our small wheels; to the thwack of our boards when they buck in the air; to the flutter of our T-shirts when we reach the right height for our aerials. Jun pulls up his baggy shorts to show his latest injuries--a purple bruise that looks like a bloated birthmark, a puffy pink scab, and a red scrape on his knee. I tease him for having girly-colored cuts. He says if I'm such a big shot to show him mine. I say I have none, which is true. Sheng runs a hand through his spiky, jet-black hair and picks at his fraying elbow pads. He is the quietest of our group, even though his accent is the most absent. But all of us never talk too loud or too much.

Our textbooks lie on the cracks of the sidewalk where they'll remain until the sun goes down. We greedily go through magazines and dream of skateboarding moves we can't do. Yesterday, I told my mother about them while my father collected the rest of the sweetened bean paste onto a piece of bread. She failed to understand. Her mind figured that a helipop, a gingersnap, and a kiwi flip were junk foods that my friends shouldn't be giving me. Maybe that's my fault because I didn't translate from English to Cantonese. My father learned both languages, but didn't bother to help. He told me I should study, bean paste dripping along his chin. I went to my room to watch the national skateboarding championships.

Reading the news section, Jun and Sheng gasp at the latest competition scores. My father urged me to read more than scores, to read about the scores of lives lost. He asked about what I've been learning in school and if his history has shown up yet. I asked him to be specific. While I was skateboarding, he put a set of books on my pillow and didn't say why. He seldom says why, for anything. I leafed through the books with red and black covers. There were pictures of bodies on the sidewalk, as if they were sleeping sideways, their limbs under overthrown bicycles. Blood dribbled down awestruck expressions, coating shirts and skin in scarlet. Green and brown tanks rolled in single file along the stained red streets. My father earmarked a page. It had a date, June 4, 1989, and location, Tiananmen, under a photo of the tanks. I want to know why my

father is showing me dead young people, if he knew them, but I'm afraid to ask dumb questions that might hurt him.

Jun checks his wristwatch. He says that it's getting late and Sheng makes no protests. I remind him that the magazine is mine and Jun sluggishly surrenders it. They skate away and I stare at the back of the magazine. There's a band of boarders, smiling, cloaked in black skater gear of the same brand. The other colors are bright, neon yellows and blues, protective padding everywhere. I wonder why nobody defended the young people in my father's books. I hear a loud sigh and turn to him.

"Did you read them?" asks my father.

I pretend I am distracted by fetching my books. He shuts off the hose and his sneakers crush the grass as he walks to me.

"I don't know," I say.

He tosses his gloves at my feet. They're covered in dirt and water, the result of three hours of yard work. I lower my head as he glares at me.

"You're too old not to know," says my father. "I was there. That's when young people did important things."

"It was a long time ago," I moan.

"No," says my father. "Not that long ago."

"I don't want to read it then," I say.

His top lip gets tight to a point where his beard starts to fold into his skin, exposing the cheekbones underneath. He shakes the axle of my skateboard and the wheels whirr in response. Our talk ends with his going in afterwards.

I follow him into the foyer and then dash upstairs to my room. That's where I am free from his evaluating eyes. Apparently, he sees an older me that should care. How can I care for strangers? I open the biggest book to show that it's impossible.

My fingers find a solitary photograph. The body of a beautiful girl in her twenties lies in the courtyard, caption stating that Tiananmen is the Gate of Heavenly Place. My unblemished arm strokes her black bruises. Her mouth is open, maybe questioning this. I want to put a paper flower in her hair, and imagine that the other student nearby is murmuring a dirge. But I can't. It seems like such a childish wish, a passing young thought. Maybe I'm too old to wish it away.

On weekends, Sheng, Jun, and I go to the park with the most paved streets in town. We search for the hill that is the highest, and climb it for a good start. Sometimes, though, I hear my father warning me in my mind not to go further. Sheng and Jun became distant dots when I stopped. My father wishes that I would stop and see. I'm not sure what I should be

seeing in this book, not yet. I just know that I should look with him or fear our silence.

He's on the living room couch when I enter. I point to the page with a purpose. My father arches his eyebrows and smiles.

I nod. "Tell me about it."

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Monique Hayes is an MFA graduate of the University of Maryland College Park and is employed at the Folger Shakespeare Library. Her work has been published in Prick of the Spindle *and* Mused*, and she won the 2009 Missouri Writers Guild flash fiction contest. peachykeenwriter@yahoo.com*

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AFTER HE LEFT

Matt Hlinak

It was an ordinary Monday morning except that she'd been up all night crying. Trudging to work like a sleep-walker, she followed the familiar path without really meaning to, oblivious to the city coming to life around her. And then a sparrow plummeted from the cloudless summer sky onto the litter-strewn sidewalk in front of her. A sour breeze drifted out of the alley, ruffling the hand-sized bird's ash-colored feathers. People scurried around her while cars honked irritably at one another from the street. No one else saw the bird struggle back on to its feet before teetering over onto its back. No one else saw it kick its right leg for a moment, while it's left leg lay still, as if riding half a bicycle. No one else saw it stop moving altogether. She slumped down beside the sparrow on the pavement and whistled softly, a faintly-remembered lullaby from her childhood. And the world fluttered past them as if they had never been there at all.

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Matt Hlinak lives in Chicago, Illinois, with his wife, Liz, and their cats, Pierre and Natasha. He teaches at Northwestern and Ellis Universities. His work has appeared in Mississippi Crow*,* Newcity Chicago*,* Bable Magazine*,* Catalyzer Journal*,* Silver Muse*, and* i. *m-hlinak@northwestern.edu*

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CREAM OF WHEAT

Katie Boyer

Only thin steam hovers over the saucepan, but somehow the windows are cloudy. My hair, still wet from the shower, is wilting in the moist heat. Where the hood light shines on the stove, sponge-circles from its last cleaning swirl like fingerprints. Milk bubbles heavy like a hot spring in the middle of the pan, but against the sides it sizzles and turns almost crispy.

He's in the other room, laughing at something he read. His joy has firmer edges than the weak sun in empty trees, and is warmer. I shake in cereal grains and peer under the pan so the flame gets low but doesn't go out.

The black spoon circles and circles and bends a little if I press down.

It's a plastic hum in my hand that won't let the milk scald. I'm stirring a smell that reminds me of babies, of watching my mother make the same motion, but in a shallow pan, with a metal spoon. Her stirring was the sound of a key on the sidewalk.

My baby, I suppose, is him, since we don't have a smaller one. Unless you count the white cat sneaking a walk around the dining room table.

Which I don't.

His mom stirred cream of wheat for him too when he was young, so we understand each other. Once, at midnight, I tossed in slices of banana.

On weekend mornings I just put in butter and sugar and stir over the stove in my pajamas, thinking what a warm thing Saturday is.

After a long stirring, the grains open and turn clear, take the milk and get full with it. It's like love, really, the way each grain fills thick, like when what you are just opens up, and you draw someone in.

Done enough. Time for breakfast.

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Though trained as a journalist, Katie Boyer has been writing short fiction for years. Her work has been published in the journal Wingspan *and has been accepted for a Birmingham writers' anthology forthcoming from Greencup Books. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and teaches composition and world literature at Jefferson State Community College. cat.bird2@gmail.com*

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ANNABELLE LEE
Tim Reed
Wood & Miscellany Sculpture
9" x 14"

T.R. Reed lives and creates Creachter Kinetic Sculpture in Chattanooga, Tennessee. His work is exhibited in museums, galleries, and art shows throughout the U.S. http://www.odd-creachter.com/creachterkinetics/index.html

ONE-LINERS

Christopher Davis

- Amidst the so-called controversy over Ms. California's answer to Hollywood gossip succubus Perez Hilton's question about gay marriage, she has become another instant celebrity. One of the by-products of this instantaneous fame is the rumored possibility of a book deal. So make sure to be the first in line to get a copy of Ms. California's Guide to Walking While Smiling. I hear it comes with its own crayons.

- Until I saw the TV commercials for the Snuggie®, I didn't realize the ills and perils of blankets. Now I can stay warm at my favorite outdoor sporting event while still pulling off that sexy Gregorian Monk look.

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Christopher Davis is an illustrator and graphic designer. He performs stand-up comedy with Fresh Ground Comics. He's also a member of ETC (Extemporaneous Theatre Company) where he performs improv comedy at Birmingham Festival Theatre. DC027@aol.com

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"If you cannot find a companion equal to or better than yourself, journey alone--do not travel with a fool."

--Buddha (Dhammapada)

THE INCITER

A.E. Skalitza

It all started a few months ago when someone painted the yellow caution line very wide. Wide enough for a person to stand on and his feet would fit. My feet fit. I stood on that line, grinning broadly. An old man watched me. I stood very still, not moving. If I moved I would lose my balance, falling down onto the railroad tracks below. Didn't want to do it that way.

A minute before the train was due, I saw its light in the distance. Just a pinprick, nothing more. Took a deep breath and listened: a bleat of a horn, then a wail, then silence. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the old man hobbling toward me. The light loomed larger, the gates nearby started their staccato beat. I felt the insistent rumbling become more and more intense. It was almost time.

"Hey! Hey you!"

Like a knee-jerk, his words caused my right foot to slip off the platform. I should have ignored him. Shouldn't have bothered with that old man's sandpapery voice. I lost my carefully choreographed leap. Like a bird stuck in a crazy wind, I floundered, flapping my arms, kicking my legs, touching air. I heard the high-pitch sound of a woman screaming. My right arm hit the metal rail and snapped, pain shooting through my body. I held my arm against me and rolled between the rails. Flattened myself out against the wooden trestles under me, as flat as a hundred-thirty pound man can get. I shut my eyes tighter than I ever thought possible. My hair singed as the train rolled over my body, inches above my back. My ears hurt from the noise, like being inside a thundercloud, with lightning shooting out all around. Must have been five cars on that train, maybe more. I wasn't counting.

The rumbling receded. The air was still. It was an express train that kept on going. My heart stopped its thumping in my chest. Now I was furious. That wasn't the way I had planned it!

"Hey! Hey, you!" that abrasive voice croaked from up on the platform. "You stole my spot!"

Sure, I stole his spot. Did it on purpose. For days I had watched him standing there looking down at the tracks, studying them. His feet fit

inside that yellow line perfectly, too, only he let his toes extend over the edge. I knew what he was trying to do but at the last minute, the last second, when the train stormed into the station and the engineer applied the brakes, its wheels making that metallic, ear-splitting, teeth-gritting screech, when it should've been the perfect opportunity for the old man to jump and get it over with, he stepped back. After all that, he stepped back! I couldn't take it anymore. I had to rectify the situation. I'd show him how it should be done. I'd show him how easy it was. How painless and quick. Now he had ruined it for me.

Holding my useless arm, I slowly managed to stand. Another train was due in five minutes. A local one this time. I looked up and saw that old man, staring wild-eyed at me. A few other people had gathered, waiting for the next train, surreptitiously watching to see how maimed I was.

I stumbled down the tracks to where the platform was closer to the ground and managed to wriggle out of the pit, rolling onto the cement. I lay there near the station. No one bothered with me, a vagrant, a crazy-dude, an insane case. No one bothered with the old guy, either, as he hobbled onto the yellow danger stripe, toes pointed toward the tracks, motionless.

I felt the ground shudder under me as the next train came. When the engineer applied the air brakes to slow down, the old man did the most beautiful swan dive I ever did see. Right in front of the silver and gray engine. Some woman screamed. Probably the same one as before. I slowly stood up, holding my arm, incredulous that the old man finally did it, and that he knew how to do it right. I shook my head, grinning.

Now for the first time in my life I have a purpose. There are other train stations, other people like that old man, waiting. All they need is me usurping their territory, stealing their spot. So now, when the time comes, I gallantly step aside, allowing them their perfect leap. Satisfied, I move on.

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A.E. Skalitza is a New Jersey freelance writer with several short stories, poems, and essays published in magazines, newspapers, and online. anneskal@optonline.net

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FOOL'S ERRAND

Suvi Mahonen

2 April 2009

Well that was a waste.

I had it all worked out. It finished three days ago and I should ovulate in another six. The Best Way website reckons sperm is at its peak if you let it build up for three days. Any more than that and it starts to deteriorate. I must stop thinking of Anthony's testicles as factories, but website also says that output is best with regular production. So I figured last night for practice, Saturday to drain it, then the real deal when he gets home on Tuesday.

He was taken aback when we went to bed and I started rubbing his groin while we were reading. I guess I rarely initiate it and it was a Wednesday night.

I know I was worried that his amorous moments would become somewhat awkward and staged in timing and frequency once I told him I'd stopped the pill. But it hasn't been like that at all. In fact I've actually been a bit paranoid lately that he might be having second thoughts.

Anyway, sproing, sproing, nothing fancy, quickly over, he's off to the bathroom. When he came back he looked surprised.

"What are you doing?"

"Reading. What does it look like?" I wasn't doing anything funny, just practicing the position. Lying flat on my back with my knees up, book balanced on them, letting the fluid collect.

He got back into bed and didn't say anything. Even when I didn't turn over for my usual cuddle. Half an hour later though he did. I'd visited the bathroom, the lights were out and we were finally settling to sleep.

"Oh, by the way. I'm not doing the twenty-four hour shift on Monday."

"That's great."

I don't know why I had to be told right then. I'm sure it could have waited till the morning. But that's what Anthony does.

"I'm doing the shift on Tuesday instead."

"OK."

Hang on. I sat up and turned on the bedside lamp.

"What do you mean you're doing the twenty-four hour shift on Tuesday?"

He squinted up at me as if I'd lost my head.

"I'm doing the long shift on Tuesday."

"But you always do that shift on Monday."

According to my plan, that would have meant he'd leave home Monday at seven, cover the station all day and night, back on Tuesday afternoon. Ovulation day. Perfect timing. Sure he'd be knackered, but I'd do most of the work. Best Way says only deposits within forty-eight hours before or twelve hours after ovulation are any good. Wednesday will be too late, and on Sunday or Monday his sperm won't be at its peak since thanks to my groin rubbing I've just started his three-day production cycle.

"You can't do Tuesday," I said.

"I have to. I already said I'd swap."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Kate asked me to."

"If Kate asked you to shoot yourself in the arse, would you?"

"At least I couldn't miss."

He must have seen the look on my face because he smartened up quickly.

"I'm sorry. So I'm doing Tuesday instead of Monday. What's the big deal? We don't have any plans."

"Thanks for checking first," I muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. Let's just go to sleep." I switched off the light and turned over, taking more than my share of the doona with me. He gave a loud sigh. I ignored him.

This morning I "accidentally" slept in when he got up and went to work. Sitting here now with my diary, stewing. I'm sick of him acting like I'm not part of the equation. If that's the way he wants it I figure he can take care of his own drainage and production.

Until my next cycle.

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Suvi Mahonen is studying for her master's degree in writing and literature at Deakin University in Australia. Her fiction has been published in literary magazines and online in Australia, the UK (including on East of the Web*), and the United States. She has worked as a journalist both in Australia and Canada. She lives with her husband and best friend Luke Waldrip in the Dandenong Ranges near Melbourne where they spend time together gardening and writing.*
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POMEGRANATE SEASON

Hannah Holden

When he first arrived in Santa Fe, he found work at a roadside fruit stand. Before he even knew how to say, "Hello, my name is…," he knew the words for "Apples, $1.09 a pound," and "Yes, these pomegranates are organic."

Every other day, eight-wheeled trucks would pull into the vacant, dusty lot behind the stands. Julius unloaded the white wood crates, sometimes with the truckers and sometimes by himself. His gloves were getting worn and his palms callused. He wondered how long he could live like this.

But it wasn't too bad. The pay had been enough to put his truck in the shop and a deposit on an apartment he had circled in the Santa Fe Reporter. He liked the dumb locals who bought the out-of-season apricots and strawberries to coo over him--a political refugee seeking asylum in our little town, a forlorn casualty of neocolonialism.

Word had spread that he was the son of an impoverished coca bean farmer and had to send enough money home or his sister would be sold to pay off debts to the local drug lord, Fernando Gutierrez. The myth had been retold and expanded at art galleries and dinner parties to include a cross-continental prostitution ring, Inca legend, and several tough-talking C.I.A. agents. For Julius, the new history provided a kind of anonymity, and for his customers, a brush with fame.

His shift ended just before sunset, when swarms of fruit flies pressed against the green netting around the stand and the last of rush hour traffic dribbled by. He walked the nine blocks to the bus stop and stood under the awning as the chipped, blue bench filled up with poor pregnant women and elderly drunkards.

The bus pulled up to the sidewalk, and he followed the crowd through the doors.

Julius shuffled down the aisle, almost losing his balance as the engine restarted and the bus rolled forward. He took a front seat next to a middle-aged woman with curly red hair tied back with a bandana. She clutched a ceramic flowerpot in her lap and clay stained her nail beds red. He couldn't decide whether she was humming the overture from “Carmen” or "Penny Lane."

He had been introduced to both Bizet and the Beatles in his dorm at the Universidade de São Paulo. Back then, everything had thrilled him: the framed record sleeves his roommate had tacked to the walls, his studies in metallurgy, and, most of all, Sampa.

In July, the humid air had swelled with Portuguese and Italian voices. Radios propped onto porches played smoky-voiced songs about slums and immigrants. Street vendors laid out toy cars on sidewalk blankets. Julius bought a tourist book about the cities of Brazil and climbed to the top of the Edificio Italia to watch the sun rise through an opaque scrim of pollution.

He had considered settling down in São Paulo, until he realized what settling down anywhere would mean: to become like his father, bored and passive, smoking cigarettes along the train tracks of Paranapiacaba to pass the hours, or like his mother, ambitionless and unchanging, painting small figurines to sell in Embu das Artes the third Saturday of every month.

The bus stopped and he stepped off, taking one last glance at the woman through the window. Pale adobes lined the dark, quiet road. His boots clicked against the pavement as he walked to the Super 8 Motel.

The parking lot was filled with only a half-dozen cars, but the neon sign above it shined NO VACANCY. He stepped into the bland, two-story building. Florescent lights hummed like a bug zapper. Julius scrunched his nose as he climbed the stairs--it smelled like bleach.

He unlocked his door. The telephone on the desk blinked with one new message. He hit play and listened to a landlord mumble about why he couldn't return Julius's deposit.

Julius slid open the closet door and took his clothes off the hangers. He reached under his bed for a lost sock. On his bed, he unlatched his hard-shell suitcase and threw his clothes in. He could go home, he thought. Home to Sampa with its cramped gray skyline, clogged roads, and his future. But not now, when he had enough money for a Greyhound ticket to Monterey and pomegranates were still in season.

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Hannah Holden writes in Irvine, California. She is a student at Orange County High School of the Arts. This is her first published piece.
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TO THE MOTHER, WHO TRIES SO HARD

Julie Yi

Every night you like to
Pluck the white strands
From your hair and discard
Them in the sink; a rush of
Water will whorl it down
The drain--out of sight.

On your bathroom counter
Sit three anti-aging lotions.
You finger-paint with rough
Brushes underneath your eyes,
Around your mouth, on your
Forehead and wait for your
Mask to harden.

Go to sleep promptly at
10:00 P.M., long before
Your teenagers behind
Closed doors turn off
Their loud music and blinding
Lights.

Wake up at 5:00 A.M. without
An alarm—you don't need
Those anymore. Prepare
Breakfast, wake up the children,
Hurry around the kitchen, invisible
To your balding husband.

The first Monday of every
Month you take the morning
Off and drive to the hair salon,
Dye your hair chestnut brown,
Claim it's your natural color.

On Saturdays you come home
With newly bought clothes
For your daughter. She scolds
You for being out of fashion;
You apologize and hide them
In your closet with the rest of
Your youth.

.....

Julie Yi is currently a student residing in Birmingham, Alabama. She dedicates her free time to photography and poetry. Her goal is to emphasize thought-provoking sentiments in her work. She has been published in numerous art and literary magazines including Stirring, Lo-Fidelity, *and* The Ampersand (&).

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TRITAL

Mira Desai

She moved fluidly to the sixteen-step beat, lost in thought, not a step out of place thanks to years of rigorous discipline. "The Lucknow School, after all," she thought, hiding a smile at this whimsical pride.

Pride, despite all that had happened.

The basic beat, taa thai thai tat-aa thai thai tat, echoed in the sparse practice room. This was her sanctuary, her cocoon; away from the whispering world of stage, concert, cliques and intrigue where she'd always felt a stranger. Yet, she'd played that part with perfection too.

Her footwork was flawless, the controlled energy of her movements just right.

Sometimes she felt that the blood in her veins surged and ebbed to a beat. As if an energy source embedded deep in her brain marked time; sometimes the notes were a faint whisper, sometimes each note was distinct. The rhythm a constant companion quartering time.

"Temperamental. Flighty. Witch." That's what Nikhil, her husband, used to call her. She'd laugh at the labels, her dimples deepening.

Often, her sharp tongue ran away at will--she was impatient with fools. Although she tried, oh yes, how she tried, to keep her temper in check.

"When you get mad your eyes flash like lightning striking a limpid pool at midnight," Nikhil had once laughed, teasing her, and she'd walked away in a huff, throwing her head back in faked annoyance, her long rope-like plait swinging out in an arc....

But that was then and this was now.

She effortlessly added a complex move to the same basic footwork, and after a while the step took on a life of its own, free of forced thought.

That indeed was then. The "before" time, the sunshine-time.

It now seemed that the hours moved to a different beat then, an adrenalin-drenched tempo. They had been a unit, still a family. The two of them. Still together. The move to Bombay had quickly zipped past the difficult stage.

Both of them had found work. Some assignments had trickled in for her, some roles for him, on and off. The way it is for people who make a livelihood from stage and film. As long as things kept moving, something would turn up, she'd laugh and say.

Of course they fought. Lovers' tiffs. And sometimes the glass would fly. "Cruise missiles!" he'd say, and run.

That was then.

Before Srilekha, as fragile as the jasmine that she wore in her hair and a whole decade younger, entered his life.

Of course she'd held on tight, fighting and grabbing with ferocious intensity.

"With Srilekha, I feel peace," he'd finally said. "She doesn't mark my shortcomings on a checklist."

That had been the unkindest cut of all. She'd let him go, quietly accepting a mutual consent decree, emotionally empty till the beats beckoned again, although they seemed disjointed and awry and distant--you'd need to strain to hear them. Yet to the beat of the familiar taa thai thai tat-aa thai thai tat she'd come back to life, in time each nerve ending revived, and she'd felt the energy return, the rhythm a bedrock.

That was then.

This was now.

The photo and caption on page one of the Times. The racy story that accompanied hinted at innuendo, at deceit and shenanigans, much ado was made of the other woman.

A pretty Polaroid jostled with world news.

Women activists. Celebrity chasers. The do-gooder brigade. They had a field day. It couldn't get more humiliating.

Sometimes she felt like picking them one-by-one, flinging them headlong into the sea. Paragons of righteousness! Where had they been the first time around, when Srilekha had worked her charms?

She smiled at her reaction and quickened her step. For long, it hadn't mattered. She began a set varying fluid pirouettes, building a tempo. This act of catching the beat on the first step was reassuring, a sign that all was well with her world.

And this was now. She'd have to decide what to do. She didn't want anything long term, she'd told Asim clearly, laughing at the dark circles and fine worry lines that had begun to make their appearance felt on her face. She'd had enough of marital bliss, she'd said.

She didn't want to be part of a triangle, the accursed other woman, she'd told him, annoyed. He could stay. Or he could go. It didn't matter. Live for the day.

But no. He didn't want it that way.

His family was that of an illustrious line of artistes. A family of performers who traced their ancestry to the Mughal court. They were connoisseurs of the arts, of fine breeding, tehzeeb. Yes, he was married; but for long it had not mattered, he would correct that. He said he was mortally afraid of losing her, and that a scornful glance from those large eyes could reduce him to dust just as a downcast look could shatter him.

She'd roared with laughter when he said this.

"Your majesty, this is the 21st century," she'd said. "In this city, no one cares. People come, people go--it doesn't matter, no more than a wave that washes up on some shore and retreats."

But he was obstinate. Insistent that they make a proclamation for the world to recognize.

"I'll pay my first wife off; I'll get her off my back. She can't dictate terms like this," he'd said. "She kept my son away for five years. Even my religion makes an allowance, breaking free a union that bears no meaning before Him."

And that was when they had served the talaqnama, distasteful though it had been. After which, they'd been featured. Along with the scamsters, conmen and sundry politicians on page one of the Times. And they had been swarmed. With unending calls… averted glances and knowing smirks she itched to slap away.

This fight has only begun, she promised herself, as she furiously executed an unending series of chakkers to the beat. Now there was nothing left to lose.

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Mira Desai writes in Bombay. As a translator, she has been published in Indian literature, from Sahitya Academy (India's National Academy of Letters); and in pratilipi*, an online magazine. Her work has been featured in* Six Sentences Vol 2. *She is an active member of the Internet Writing Workshop.*
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"The past is not dead. It isn't even past!"

--William Faulkner

NEGATIVE SPACE

Franchot Ballinger

I've found a photograph: it's 1938,
they're still just Ben and Anna,
not Dad and Mom. She leans into him.
One foot on the Chevy running board,
hand around her waist, shirt
open to his chest, head cocked,
he throws a jaunty look my way…
no, towards the unseen photographer
who caught this tableau
a year before my birth.
My absence is incredible.

When I show her across the table,
she turns away.
She doesn't change the subject exactly,
but snared in the moment now
without my father to hold her
and with only me to hear,
she disinters name after name.
Faces blow like thistledown across a darkening field:
an old girlfriend gone sour as vinegar,
a favorite teacher impaled on the cusp of cancer,
an uncle withering like an apple in his dotage.
and more--a very Joseph's coat of loss--

until we both stand stripped
in the hollow kitchen silence.

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Franchot Bellinger is retired from University College, the University of Cincinnati, where he taught English for 37 years. He spends part of his time as a spiritual care and music therapy volunteer playing Native American flute in a hospice in-patient unit. His recording of Native American flute music, Quiet Heart*, is available on CD. His book,* Living Sideways: Tricksters in American Indian Oral Traditions*, was published in 2004, by the University of Oklahoma Press. Additionally, his work has been published in numerous poetry journals.*

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THREE TULIPS
Kay Williams
Acrylic on canvas
20" x 36"

Kay Williams studied art at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. She has a Bachelor's degree in painting and sculpture and a Master's degree in Art Education. Kay's work is all about the joy of color. She has exhibited throughout Alabama and the Florida panhandle.
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TACKY YARD ORNAMENT

Ann Hite

My love affair with tacky yard ornaments began when I saw a bright yellow and green tin flower in the yard of a nearby gift shop. She was four foot tall and nothing like any live flower I'd seen. As I pulled her green stem from the ground, I was sure the flower smiled at me. I hurried to the clerk, lest someone pull her from my hand for his or her own.

I surveyed my garden for the best place. The flower was tall and needed companions so as not to look too spindly. Her stem pushed into the ground, as if she were helping me, right next to the deep purple and lavender butterfly bushes. Her shape reminded me of the flowers I dotted my crayon landscapes with as a child. The petals would be seen from the highway nearby. She was a beauty and well worth her cost of twenty-five dollars.

Hubby's face wrinkled into a frown as he pulled the car into the drive. It had taken six months to convince him to give me a tiny plot of our lawn for my garden. Finally he had come to accept the wildness of the herb bed, butterfly bushes, and wild flowers of every color among his checkerboard pattern on the lawn. But a yellow tin flower was quite another matter.

"What have you planted?" Hubby's voice was in control.

"That's my yard ornament. Don't you love her?"

He only huffed.

I never intended to find another beauty. I promise. But that's how life goes sometimes. When you least expect it an obsession is born. This time my treasure was hidden in the corner of the garden department of Wal-Mart. The giant multicolored wheel, designed to spin in a breeze, begged me to take it home.

Hubby shook his head. "It's tacky. The neighbors will complain."

Ah, this was enough to spur me forward. I added wind chimes by the dozen, more tin flowers, little brightly colored animal statues, glass dragonflies, and even a bright green metal lattice with a moon face in the middle. This is where I planted my rose vine.

Hubby gave up and accepted my donation to what had been an incredibly dull yard. As for the neighbors, small yard ornaments began to spring up here and there. Nothing at all like my beautiful creation, but improvement all the same.

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Ann Hite's work has been published in Christian Miracles*, edited by Stephen R. Clark, in* Long Story Short*,* The Right Words At The Right Time, Vol 2*, by Marlo Thomas,* Weddings Something Old/Something New*,* Christmas Through A Child's Eyes*, and many others. www.annhite.wordpress.com*

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SOPHIE'S SONG

Sue Ellis

The cabin's not quite what I pictured, but it's cool. The trees and ferns press in close all the way around, and only a walking path leads up to it. Mom had to park the car out on the road. She's hiking back down there now to get the suitcase.

"Jason!" That's Sophie calling me again. She can be a real pain.

"What do you want now?"

"Can I have a samwich?"

"I think Mom wants you to wait for dinner."

"Will you read to me then?"

Sophie's four. She gets on a kick about something and there's no getting her off it. I am seriously sick of reading that same stupid storybook. It's about wild things and a little girl that lives with them in the woods. That's what got us here in the first place. Well, that and the leukemia. "Bring it here," I say. There's no use telling her 'no' because she'll just follow me around until I give up anyway.

What a pest. She not cute anymore either, like I thought she'd be when she was first born. Her nose is too big for her skinny face now, and her hair always looks cottony and messy, even right after it's combed. She's all Cheez-It breath and sweaty socks, right under my feet. I used to wrestle with her, getting a good pinch in for payback sometimes, but it wouldn't be right to pinch her anymore.

Uncle Dan said we could use his cabin--said there would be deer around for sure, and since it's September and rutting season, we might get lucky and hear the elk call. Mom thought it would be nice to give Sophie a reward for being good through all those visits to the doctor. If you can call 'that' good. I went along a couple of times and she yelled so loud it made my heart pound. Mom works graveyard shift, so Sophie and I have been on our own at night since I turned twelve a few months ago. That's about the time she started crowding into bed with me. It drives me nuts, but at least she doesn't jabber at night.

We barbeque hamburgers and open a can of baked beans for supper. Mom says no marshmallows because Sophie needs to eat healthy stuff, so we have apples and almonds. There are deer all over the place. They stand really still with their ears flicking, waiting for me to make a move. If I take even one step, they run off. It smells nice in the woods, mossy and damp like the greenhouse at Manito Park back in the city. Some of the white-barked trees are pretty amazing because their leaves have turned yellow

and gold. Sophie's been gathering them into her Barbie backpack as they fall.

We sat out on the little porch and listened to the night sounds for a long time after it got dark.

"What's that sound, Jason?" Something's rustling in the ferns a little ways off.

"It's probably a squirrel putting nuts away," I tell her. Like I have a clue.

"It might be a bear though, huh?"

"It might."

"What would we do if it was?" She slides off Mom's lap and grabs my arm.

"We'd RUN!" I grab her up and run off the porch with her, jogging a little ways down the path until I get a good scream out of her. She's giggling by the time we get back. You can't scare her much.

Mom says it's time for bed and that me and Sophie can have the bedroom. Mom'll probably be up half the night since that's what she's used to.

Sometime in the night I wake up and the cabin is dark and quiet, but I hear something outside. I lay still and listen. There it is again--a sound like a breathy clarinet note--just one. A second note follows, but not right away, and then a third. The notes keep on like that: undependable, soft and haunting. They don't vary much in scale, but once in a while one of them squeaks like a kid in band class just learning clarinet and blowing too hard into the reed.

I saw a documentary on TV about elk once, how the males bugle to call the females, and how predators go after the calves in the spring when they're still wobbly-legged and can't keep up with their mothers.

A quarter moon slants through the timber and the worn out lace curtain, leaving a shadowy tattoo on Sophie's cheek. I slide from under the covers and go to stand beside the window. It's surprising how much natural light comes from just a sliver of moon. I can still make out the lodge pole pine and thick underbrush. It sounds like the elk are about a mile away, but I can't tell for sure. After a while the sound makes my throat ache with sadness. Maybe the elk know that their calves might not make it. Whenever I ask Mom how Sophie's doing, she says, "Don't worry. She's getting better."

Sophie stirs and sits up. "Where are you, Jason?" Her words are all soft and round with sleep.

"I'm here."

The sonar that keeps her underfoot is working again. She pads across the dark room and reaches out to me. "What's that sound?"

"It's the wild things, Sosie," I tell her, using her pet name, "They're playing a song for you."

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Sue Ellis is a retired postmaster from Spokane, Washington. She is an avid sock knitter, soap maker, grandmother and fledgling writer of short stories, some of which have appeared at Wild Violet, Six Sentences, *and* Flash Me Magazine, *all online publications. She is a member of the Internet Writers Workshop.*
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BRUNCH ME

P.T. Paul

He baconandeggs me,
barefooted, in his blue robe,
breaks the eggs into hot bacon grease,
minds the yolks as the sizzling albumen
spreads its brown-edged white ruffled skirts.

He hotbutteredtoasts me,
damsonplumjams and orangemarmalades me,
honeys my cup,
swirls milk until my pungent Columbian
loses itself in tan abandon.

He joins me at the kitchen table,
we raise our cups to the honeydewed morning,
our robes falling open,
my naked toes sneaking
across the cool Italian tiles.

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P.T. Paul is a graduate student at the University of South Alabama, Mobile, Alabama, where her work has received numerous awards.

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YELLOW UMBRELLAS

Lisa Oestreich

Digital Photograph

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 the University of Alabama at Birmingham, until 2002, when she took a leave to pursue her passion of documenting light, form, and texture.
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SEAS LIKE BLUE SATIN

Terry Sanville

From the rooftop bar of the Ambos Mundos Hotel, Jason scanned Havana's empty harbor and the Florida Straits beyond. It wasn't supposed to be this hard, he thought…and Raul should've spilled it. But nobody had spilled anything, least of all the new Presidente. It was the same ole same ole…an orchestrated event, carefully delivered speech, praise for the dying Fidel. I'm supposed to wring 30 column inches out of that? Yeah, right!

Jason stared at the hieroglyphics in his spiral-bound notebook. The third mojito was taking hold and he knew he'd better write something fast, have it down before his evening flight to Miami and the meeting with his editor. Elliot had warned him, "This is your chance, man, make it work or you'll be back writing the obits." Jason actually liked the obituaries. But that job had as much of a future as the people he wrote about.

He unpacked his laptop, powered up, and stared at the on-screen image of a Caribbean island. Icons blinked into place. He created a file. The dreaded white page appeared. A warm breeze rustled the cantina's potted palms, bringing with it ocean smells. Complaining seagulls circled above. Jason's shoulders relaxed. His head drooped, heavy with thoughts of the dead.

"So when's your deadline?"

Jason jerked up. A gray-bearded man with white hair and protruding gut sat across the table from him.

"Wha… how'd you know…?"

"Relax, kid. I used to be in the business."

"So you know deadlines?" Jason sighed and leaned back in the wicker chair.

"Yeah, working as a stringer for the Toronto Star, they sent me out to a barbers' college. Wanted a story pronto."

"So what did you do?"

"I walked into this joint and about got my damn ear sliced off. Free or not, that shave wasn't worth it."

Jason chucked. "Well I've got three hours to finish a piece on Raul Castro."

"Raul…what a wimp. I used to like his brother…then things got…complicated."

"You know Fidel?"

"No…but after Batista and those other fools, Fidel showed promise…was one tough hombre."

"So, if Raul is such a wimp, how am I gonna write anything worth s___ about him?"

"That's your problem. I used to struggle over a single paragraph, a single sentence…but no more."

"A single sentence, really?" Jason shook his head, remembering days cranking out mindless copy, the five "Ws" but little else.

The old man laughed. "Once I bet a friend ten bucks I could write a short story in six words. I won that bet."

"What did you write?"

"For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

"Huh, I read that somewhere. It gets ya thinking."

"That's the trick: see, feel, think, pick powerful images, cut out the rest."

"But I can write Raul's story on the back of a napkin and my editor wants a full spread."

"Then dig…think about the history of it. Find the drama…and don't sugarcoat anything. If the guy's a jerk, then show that."

The old man lifted a thick-stemmed goblet and sipped what looked like a Daiquiri. His flat black eyes studied Jason, the right eyelid drooping. They watched a patrol boat skirt the harbor. Offshore, a battered skiff rolled on the thick swell.

"I used to fish those straits," he said, pointing, "marlin, swordfish. Loaded the Pilar till her gunnels barely cleared water."

"So why'd ya stop?" Jason asked.

"Nothing left but old men…and an empty sea."

"Yeah, well everything changes." Jason smiled. "The Castros are just about gone…and the real action is in the East, or maybe Africa."

"Spent time in the north of Tanganyika…I was writing fiction then…we made camp across the plains from Kilimanjaro…a big party, out for lion, wildebeest."

"I watched a news special about Kilimanjaro," Jason said. "More than eighty percent of the glaciers are gone. Global warming, ya know?"

The old man snorted. "Christ, I'll have to write a sequel."

"A sequel to what?"

"Forget it…I'd just upset the animal rights nuts." He took a long draw on a ragged cigar, its tip glowing red in the afternoon shadows. Jason watched the smoke billow into a cloud, like a genie escaping its bottle. His chest tightened, head ached. A hand touched his shoulder and he flinched.

"Mas mojitos, senior?" the bartender asked.

"A… a….no, gracias." Jason rubbed his forehead where it had rested on the hard table. He stared across at the empty chair. "Donde esta viejo hombre?" Where is the old man?

The bartender looked confused. "Lo siento, senior. No lo se." I'm sorry, mister, I don't know. He retreated behind his counter, taking with him the ashtray with its smoking cigar stub.

To the west, a gilded sun hung above the horizon. Jason thumbed the laptop's touch pad. The white page returned. He gazed northward at the sea, still slick and blue. Closing his eyes, he searched for that first image, first sentence, knowing he would struggle long and hard to find it.

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Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California, with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and one fat cat (his in-house critic). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, poems, an occasional play, and novels. His short stories have been accepted by more than 80 literary and commercial journals, magazines, and anthologies including the Houston Literary Review*,* Storyteller*,* Boston Literary Magazine*, and* Underground Voices*. tsanville@sbcglobal.net*

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THE BLIND MAN'S MEAL

Kevin Marshall Chopson

– after Picasso

He knows the jug is full,
feeling the weight of the water
against his hand.

He knows the plate is sparse,
smelling the scrap of bread
slight in the air.

Measured out,
he knows all is sufficient
in this blue light.

The muse has moved
beneath the film of cataracts –
and he sees.

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Kevin Marshall Chopson received his Master's of Fine Arts dgree from Murray State University. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the English Journal, The Broad River Review, Poem, The Chaffin Journal, New Madrid, *and* The South Carolina Review, *among others. He teaches at Davidson Academy, a small private school just north of Nashville, Tennessee.*

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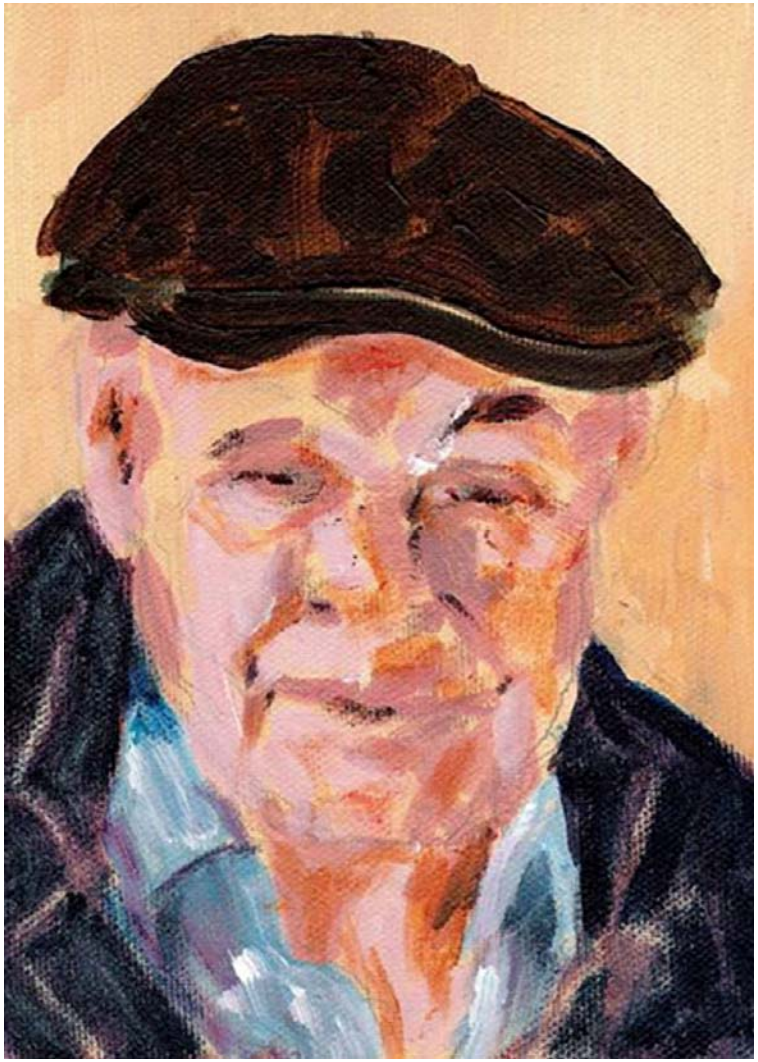
"Each one sees what he carries in his heart."

--Goethe



TOMMY
Ted Openshaw
Acrylic on Canvas
8" x 10"

Ted Openshaw recently moved to the Birmingham, Alabama, metro area from Clearwater, Florida. He lives and paints in Lipscomb, Alabama.
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CHARLEY'S UNCLE

Charles McKelvy

Dave Vincent sat back in his easy chair and smiled at his three "boys" and their cousin Charley Smith from Chicago. Dave was three years sober, but he knew he had just this one day, and he was mighty, mighty grateful.

And so he smiled as he sipped his black coffee and let the boys be boys. Well, young men, actually, because his nephew Charley was the youngest of the lot of them, and he was already 19 and still growing like kudzu on a telephone pole.

So the kid's not old enough to drink beer—so what? Where were they going to go? Out on the canal to wrestle the mosquitoes and 'gators?

Dave Vincent didn't think so.

No, Dave thought, if they're anything like me at that age, they'll be content to sit with the old man and hammer down the beers. And hammer them down they did.

Charley Smith, whose mother was Uncle Dave's sister-in-law, wanted to keep up with his Florida cousins, so he popped through the popular Florida brew until he was in the stew. And then he looked drunkenly at his uncle and said: "Come on, Uncle Dave. Have a beer with us!"

Uncle Dave lifted his coffee mug in good cheer and said: "I'm fine with this, Charley."

But Charley wouldn't hear of it, because he had heard from his own father what a legend Dave Vincent had been back in the days of two-fisted drinking when he was a sports reporter for a Philadelphia newspaper. Dave Vincent, they said, could bang out a better baseball story dead drunk than any ten sober reporters from the competing papers.

"Dave Vincent," Charley's dad often said, "could hold his whiskey morning, noon, and night." And now Charley looked at his uncle by marriage and was sorry to see he was holding nothing more than a mug of steaming black coffee.

"What's with that?" Charley thought aloud.

"What?"

"Oh," Charley slurred, "I'm wondering why you're not drinking beer with us, Uncle Dave. My dad says you could drink anyone under the table. So how come you're just having coffee, when we're drinking beer?"

Charley's three cousins stopped drinking and looked from him to their father and back to Charley. Sensing he had stepped into something sticky and stinky, Charley sought refuge in his beer by draining the bottle of its last golden drop.

When he looked at his uncle again, he could see that the legendary drinker was calmly sipping his coffee and smiling at him.

"So," Charley persisted, "why don't you have a beer with us, Uncle Dave?"

And so Dave Vincent told the truth: "You get a quota in life, Charley, and I already drank mine. Seems I couldn't pace myself too well. So I've retired the beer mug, shot glass, and hip flask, and I'm just not taking a drink for today. "

"What about tomorrow? Will you have a beer with us tomorrow?"

"All I've got is today, Charley. I'm not going to worry about tomorrow until it's today."

"Oh." Charley looked at his cousins who gave him the look like they had heard it all before. But Charley wasn't ready to give it a rest, so he said: "So, what you're saying is you used to drink a lot, but now you don't drink anything. At least today."

"That's it. But you enjoy your beer." Uncle Dave lifted his mug in good cheer and said: "Cheers!"

Charley lifted his bottle and realized it was empty. So he grabbed a fresh one, popped it open, and chased his fears with good, cold Florida beer. But, you know, one day--some 11 years later, Charley S. walked into his first AA meeting and, when it came his turn to share, admitted he was an alcoholic and that his life was unmanageable and that he was: "mighty grateful for my Uncle Dave who twelve-stepped me without even knowing it."

Oh, but Uncle Dave knew.

Did he ever.

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Charles McKelvy has been writing for publication since the early 1970s when he was first published in Bicycling Magazine *and the* Chicago Tribune Magazine. *He was a reporter for the* City News Bureau of Chicago *and writes a weekly travel column for the* Beacher Newspaper *in Michigan City, Indiana. He lives with his wife and fellow author, Natalie McKelvy, in Harbert, Michigan, former home of Carl Sandburg. cnmckelvy@sbcglobal.net*

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NEITHER OF US WILL SEE HER AGAIN

Dennis Vanvick

The same grumpy guy is at the desk. Wiry and sad-faced, his sallow skin thin, like cigarette paper. He doesn't look up as I walk through the entrance door and head toward the stairs. Evidently, the tentacles of Homeland Security have not yet reached the Northern Lights Assisted Living facility in Washburn, Wisconsin.

"How you doing?" I stop and ask.

He lifts his head, "Haven't seen you for awhile," he says, unsmiling. He was wearing the same black Harley Davidson t-shirt five months ago.

"Yeah, well, I've been in Chicago."

He waves a tattooed arm–illustrating his love of country and naked ladies--to the stairs, "She's up there, waiting. Number 202."

Waiting? Thanks so much. And I don't need the room number reminder. I turn and head to the stairs. Halfway up, I stop, determined to demonstrate a bit of sensitivity, "It must take a lot of patience with the oldsters, huh?"

"Not as much as you think. You just got to remember they're children."

"Children."

"Yeah, they're like little kids, just like we was and just like we're gonna be. The closer they get to the end, the more they get like kids."

Ah, another motorcycle philosopher. Perfect. An expert in Zen and the art of relationship maintenance. I nod knowingly, as if he has just imparted some startling original thought, and take the rest of the steps two at a time. I talked to my mother two weeks ago and she was more lucid than the savant at the desk. More adult, too.

Outside her apartment, I rap loud enough to hurt my knuckles. A couple of minutes pass. The door opens slowly. She looks the same, save for more spidery lines around her eyes. Her mottled face is nestled into her bramble of hair like a smiling sparrow egg. It's that pasted-on, little old lady smile, the one that makes silent promises… I don't know who you are but don't worry, you can eat all the cookies you want and I won't burden you with my health--even though my bursitis is killing me… . And I'll share my secrets of a long life, childhood memories, even my ginger snap recipe and you may stay as long as you like, until you get heartburn, or hell freezes over, or I fall asleep in my chair.

"Hi, Mom!" I shout above Wheel of Fortune raging from the television in the corner of the tiny room.

"Oh, it's you," she says brightly to the stranger. "C'mon in."

I put an arm around her humped shoulders and guide her in a slow shuffle back to the big chair. A TV tray sits in front of it, a Kemps carton on the top. It holds a spoon and the saucy remains of chocolate ice cream; ginger cookie crumbs litter the tray and the carpet below.

"How's the greatest mom in the world?" I shout into her ear, still competing with Pat Sajak.

She stops, her upturned face is frightened, defensive, like a child asked about a missing sister, "I don't know. I haven't seen her."

"Don't worry, she'll turn up," I reassure us both. I stay until she falls asleep in her chair. On the way out, past the desk, I wave to the Harley man and say, "Thanks for the warning."

"Have a nice evening," he answers, smile just wide enough to explain its reticence.

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Dennis Vanvick is a retired, self-employed techie. He winters among the 7 million inhabitants of Bogota, Colombia, and summers amongst the flora and fauna of northwest Wisconsin. Dennis has been writing fiction since 1997, after taking a creative writing course at the University of Minnesota. vanvikd@hotmail.com

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"It's really dangerous and ultimately destroys you as a writer if you start thinking about responses to your work or what your audience needs."

--Erica Jong

ORGY

Jim Reed

I'm the man who sleeps with Elizabeth Reed
I'll be the first to admit it
Elizabeth Reed is my own true love

But she's only a part of my tale
For I also sleep with others nearby
To keep me company through the insomnia night
Others who've won my heart my mind my loins
Just as surely as Elizabeth Reed

There's Sara Teasdale shining nearby
On the white bookshelves of my bedroom
Shining as bright as the stars she described
Hovering over her moonlight body on a dark hill

Then on the night table there lies Ella Wheeler Wilcox,
Trapped in Victorian slumber but dreaming
Always dreaming
Of what it would be like to be liberated like
Sara Teasdale and her bold starry expressions

And always in the peanut gallery near my bed
There sits Dorothy Parker, shrewdly commenting
Lewdly staring
Caustically making me laugh
Wishing she could surrender and become
More ladylike like Ella Wheeler Wilcox
More softly intellectual like Sara Teasdale

And lurking somewhere on another shelf is Anais Nin
Always feeling her own sensuous pulse
Always hoping for a silent lover to take her
Take her away
Always hoping for the inner peace of Sara Teasdale
Always wishing for the Victorian restraint and passion
That Ella Wheeler Wilcox knew
Wishing for the wit and distance of Dorothy Parker

And above them all on the stack is Maude Adams
Maude Adams who lives somewhere in time
With the sure knowledge that love lasts longer than time
That love lives on beyond its own presence

And here I am lying next to Elizabeth Reed
Elizabeth Reed, the woman envied and hated
By Ella and Sara and Dorothy and Anais
And admired by Maude
Because she's the woman whose body I read
While their words I can only read page by page
Caressing Braille-like their black against white
Meanderings through Victorian times and Flapper times
And lewdly warlike times

I am the man who sleeps with Elizabeth Reed
I'll be the first to admit it
But what parties I have in my insomnia dreams
When all these wild women show up at the same time
And fight for my heart

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Jim Reed owns Reed Books/Museum of Fond Memories in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. He is editor of the Birmingham Arts Journal. www.jimreedbooks.com

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THE SOUTHERN WAY

Brenda Wilson Wooley

Many of my favorite writers are Southerners: William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Lee Smith, Anne Tyler. The list goes on.

I enjoy other writers' work. But you just can't beat a deep, dark story like Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*; Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*. Tear-jerkers, like Horton Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful*, and quirky ones, like Fanny Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*.

One of the reasons I enjoy Southerners' work is because I identify with them. And although I'm small potatoes compared to the literary giants, we do have some things in common.

First and foremost, we are Southerners. We think of ourselves as being from somewhere, as belonging to some place; regardless of how far we roam or how long we've lived away, most of us eventually come home. And we are welcomed back with open arms.

But not without validation. When I returned to Kentucky after many years in Illinois, I was met with a little suspicion and a lot of curiosity. Until they figured out who I was: "You're Miss Muriel's granddaughter, aren't you?" "I know you're a Wilson; y'all all look alike!"

Another tradition of Southerners is storytelling. Our ancestors told stories they never would have been able to write, and I think it was their way of handing over the legacy.

I grew up in a family of storytellers. I loved sitting on the front porch on summer nights, listening to my relatives tell one story after another: a great-grandfather, who walked everywhere he went and had a song written about him (Walk, Tom Wilson); a corncob-pipe-smoking great-great grandmother who took off running and hopped on her horse from the rear; a distant cousin who strolled into the local truck stop, perched himself on a stool at the counter and leisurely sipped a cup of coffee. (Did I mention he was clad in nothing but a towel?) Neighbor Hannah Lee, who baked cakes when she was depressed. Many cakes. All night long.

It took the storytellers a long time to get to the point; they were always adding to the story. Or jumping in and telling another story about the person in the story. Which reminds me of writer Barry Hannah's version of the light bulb joke: "How many Southern writers does it take to change a light bulb? Two…one to unscrew it and the other to talk about what a good old light bulb it was!"

A powerful thread that runs through Southern writers' work is religion. And it's no wonder. We were threatened with hellfire and damnation at every turn. During revival time, the evangelists' screaming sermons echoed in my ears long after souls had been saved from the fiery pits of Hell and baptized in Tyler's Pond. Even now, when I hear the relentless chant of katydids on stifling summer nights, frogs croaking, bugs thumping against the window screens, my mind conjures up images of that volcanic lake of fire where one lost soul begged for a drop of water for his parched tongue.

I was relieved when we left the church, but a sense of impending loss surrounded me as we drove away. And I still feel that sense of impending loss when I return. My childhood fears coming in on me? Mourning the past? I don't know. All I know is I am unable to leave it all behind, and I am driven to write about it. As Faulkner once said, “The past is not dead. It isn't even past!”

Like the fog that hung in the swamps, secrecy shrouded the South in which I grew up. There were things I couldn't quite put my finger on, unspoken things that simmered just beneath the surface. And then there were things everyone knew. But acted as if they didn't. (As Pat Conroy wrote in The Prince of Tides, “That’s the southern way!”) Things like Hannah Lee's nerve problems, Georgie's “spells,” or Dorothy, who "had something to do" with any man who showed an interest. The adults spoke in low voices when they discussed such things, so I skulked here and there, gathering information. I was fascinated. And a little fearful. But I was thirsty for more, regardless of how horrible it might turn out to be.

My siblings were also curious, though not as curious as I. We were unable to get any answers, so we were soon joining in. "Guess Georgie's having a spell tonight," one of us would say as we drove by his three-story house late at night and saw it all lit up, cars parked haphazardly in his yard. (Neighbors always sped right on over as soon as they got word. His wife needed help; it took several men to hold him down.)

So how do Southerners deal with such things? We write about the Hannah Lees, the Georgies, the Dorothys. I've written Hannah Lee's and Dorothy's stories. And I'm in the process of writing Georgie's. Believe it or not, I still don't know what caused his spells. And I don't think anyone else does, either.

Nevertheless, that metaphor was my identity and love, where my family and community were. It nurtured my imagination as I lolled in the front-yard swing on hot summer days, the scent of fresh-cut hay drifting through the air as the big trucks rumbled past our house; on frosty nights,

sitting close to the warm-morning stove, reading. And listening, always listening. To me, there wasn't a better place on earth to grow up. Everything I am is in that land. That place. Those people.

Southerners seldom lose their sense of humor, even during their darkest hours. I learned at a very young age that even within the most dreadful situations, people continued to say and do peculiar things. My siblings and I were quick to pick up on it, and we sat trembling and stone-faced, stifling our giggles, at every somber occasion. Just being kids? Maybe. But it might have been our way of dealing with that burden of a religious philosophy that insists that things of this world are evil. And we were evil because we were laughing when we should have been crying. Or, at the very least, acting serious. (I can't say my siblings felt that way. But I know I did. To me, it was not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured.)

There is not much porch talk anymore; most people have no porches. Air conditioning takes us inside during the hot summer nights; television has replaced the storytelling, often portraying Southerners as ignorant, toothless hillbillies who do nothing but feud and swig moonshine. Movies, like Deliverance perpetuate that image.

I resent that classification. I know better. And I guess that is one of the reasons I write about them. Granted, there are odd people in the South, but there are odd people everywhere. It's just that Southern writers feel compelled to write about them. As Flannery O'Connor said, “When I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it's because we are still able to recognize one.”

Although I prefer the word "eccentric" to "freak," I know what O'Connor means. And I agree with Eudora Welty, who said, “In a way, I think Southerners care about each other, about human beings in a more accessible way than some other people.”

We do care about all of our people, including the eccentrics. We celebrate their eccentricities by writing their stories.

That’s the Southern way.

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Brenda Wooley’s work has appeared in Etchings*,* Existere*,* Wanderings*,* Straylight*,* Mississippi Crow*,* Amarillo Bay*,* River Walk Journal*, and elsewhere. She makes her home in Paducah, Kentucky, “where I split my time between writing short stories and working on my novel.”*
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BROOKS ROAD

Kevin Marshall Chopson

Just off Brooks Road, somewhere in Kentucky,
a tool company is blazoned with murals.

Diego Rivera is proud to see this.
From his grave he smiles at how far his hand

has reached. Workers in bold Mexican colors –
maized yellow, bloodied red, earthened brown

– nestled among sweeps of blue grass and the
never-ending slope of hills running toward

the Ohio and Tennessee. In winter they will
remain in shirtsleeves, rolled to their elbows,

working into the night. Drivers glance over
to the building, spot-lit and brimming with hope,

as a translucent curtain of snow falls before
these brown faces. Dust here is white, sweat invisible.

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See bio on page 29.

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THE OLD PLAYGROUND

Sheila D. Lawrence

Cornelius peered out through a slim opening in the drapes. The antique vehicle at the curb honked like an impatient goose in heat as the early sun bounced off the polished hood.

What a waste of a perfectly cloudless day just to spend it with his paternal grandfather. He'd rather play video games than go to some place called "the old playground."

When he presented his case to his mother, she simply said, "Today is special." And so, the sentence stood. He would spend the day with the man he referred to as G-pop--a much cooler name for a twelve year old to call his granddaddy.

Like a shackled prisoner, Cornelius marched down the walk to join his warden for the day who waited by a limousine-sized car with the personalized license plate, "Snatch." Snatch? He didn't ask; he didn't want to appear as if he cared.

"Hey, don't look so happy to see me," said James Cobb as he gave his grandson that under-and-over glare of a Cy Young pitcher.

"Come on. It'll be great." He rubbed Cornelius' nearly bald head in that irritating way that old people have. Cornelius forced a smile and asked, "What's so special at the park today?"

"Green grass, blue skies and good times."

"We can have all that at the Met and see the Barons."

Through a weighted sigh, G-pop uttered, "Look, I'll make you a deal. If you don't enjoy yourself, I'll buy that video game your Mom says you've been wanting. That way, it's a no lose situation."

"Deal." Cornelius shook to authenticate the wager. As far as he was concerned they could stop by the video store on the way and save some time. Carelessly, he allowed his thoughts to slip out via his lips.

"Thanks for keeping an open mind," G-pop said and fell silent. As the car turned off Lomb Avenue onto Fourteenth Street, Cornelius asked, "Why we turning here?"

"I wanted to show you something. See that vacant lot? That used to be Mr. Sam's store. For some of us, he was the only white person we ever had dealings with growing up."

Oh, brother. He did not wish to accompany G-pop on this stroll down memory lane, but thankfully, he captured this remark. As he stared

into a pair of muddy eyes set deep into a leathery bronzed face, he saw that this meant something special to G-pop.

Cruising through the tiny community, G-pop pointed to where things used to be--the Shoe Shop, where Mr. Collins could rebuild a shoe from nothing and you could get a shoeshine like he had only seen in old movies; there had been a barber shop next to it. They rode past Princeton School where all the neighborhood kids had gone but it was now some fancy magnet school where parents camped out to get their kids enrolled. There was a church on almost every corner and one in particular where G-pop announced, "Good ole Rising Star. That's where I was baptized. How'd you like to go there with me?"

"I got to go to my own church."

Seemed he heard G-pop's bubble burst, so Cornelius softened. "Cause I sing in the choir."

"Oh, I'd like to hear you sometime."

Only silence responded until they neared the entrance to the field when Cornelius said, "I thought this place was shut down. What're all these folks doing here?"

"They're here for the big game."

"The Barons?"

"Nope, the old-timers game."

"Old-timers?" Cornelius frowned as if he had swallowed castor oil.

"It'll be fun. And if it's not, you've got a video game coming."

The thought made the smile return to Cornelius' face. "Why are we driving inside? There won't be any parking."

G-pop didn't answer. He kept going and an attendant waved them through to a special area that had empty spaces.

"They know you here?"

"You might say that."

Cornelius couldn't let on that he was impressed so he read the championship pennants painted on the wall.

"Hey, I didn't know the Negro League once played here, too."

"Well, son, you're about to get an education."

They entered through the turnstiles, climbed the concrete steps and settled in on the green wooden benches. G-pop handed him a cushion and a glove. Cornelius shot him a look like that of a child watching a magician.

"I'll be back. Here's some money for snacks."

"Gee. Thanks, G-pop."

HEAD IV
Charles Chambers
Oil on Canvas
20" x 18"

Charles Chambers' work focuses primarily on the human form. He has been in numerous group and one man shows in Birmingham, Alabama, New Orleans, Louisiana, and Atlanta, Georgia. His work is in private and corporate collections throughout America. He lives in Birmingham, Alabama. kcandcc@bellsouth.net.

Cornelius watched G-pop stroll off. Funny, but he didn't look so old as he walked away. Cornelius turned his attention to the antics on the field. He watched old men throw balls around the bases, swing weighted bats and stretch.

Popcorn smells came looming and his first purchase was a small box and a cola.

As he munched, he heard what sounded like the swell of thunder. Much to his amazement, he realized it was feet stomping in the grandstand. It was followed by applause and shouts for a player taking the field.

Cornelius squinted to read the number on the uniform. Number thirteen. He opted to buy a program next. He flipped through the pages until he got to the players' profiles, conveniently listed in numerical order: eleven, twelve, thirteen.

Cornelius gaped at the picture before squinting back at the player. There was a familiarity about number thirteen's saunter as he assumed the shortstop's position.

"G-pop?" Cornelius mouthed as he stood with the other attendees to sing The Star-Spangled Banner while a billowing flag saluted from atop its pole.

Cornelius watched intently for nine innings until his old-timers sealed four nails into the coffin of the opposing old-timers with a grand slam off the bat of none other than James "Snatch" Cobb, number thirteen.

Amidst the frenzy, Cornelius shouted, "That's my Granddaddy." He waved his baseball cap with the flurry of a bumblebee; G-pop removed his cap and returned the love.

Finally, breaking through the crowd, Cornelius threw his arms around G-pop, clinging to him like a sliver of steel to a powerful magnet. Seconds later, other kids followed suit.

"May I have your autograph?"

"Sign my ball, please."

"Write on my program here by your picture."

"Autograph my jersey!"

G-pop shouted over the requests, "Do you mind, son?" With that all too familiar over-and-under look, he added, "I know how anxious you are to get to the video store."

A boy close to Cornelius' age yelled to him, "Boy you sure are lucky to have Snatch Cobb for your granddad!" Cornelius only smiled.

On the ride home, neither he nor G-pop as much as glanced sideways when they passed the video store.

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Sheila Dene' Lawrence is a computer systems analyst for Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama. She holds a Doctorate in Theology and is a minister at Rising Star Baptist Church. She has authored titles in both fiction and inspirational non-fiction. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama. ohsheila@writeme.com

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"Everyone must leave something behind when he dies, my grandfather said. A child or a book or a painting or a house or a wall built or a pair of shoes made. Or a garden planted. Something your hand touched some way so your soul has somewhere to go when you die, and when people look at that tree or that flower you planted, you're there. It doesn't matter what you do, he said, so long as you change something from the way it was before you touched it into something that's like you after you take your hand away."

--Ray Bradbury
Fahrenheit 451

DREAMSCAPE

Lisa Lopez Snyder

My suburban childhood would only last until I was 18. This one thought jettisoned itself through my brain a split second after the plastic bowling ball I tried to lodge over the roof of our house instead blasted through the kitchen window. It was only a matter of time before I would be old enough to explore beyond the boring confines of little Huber Heights, Ohio. And this I thought as the spray of glass shattered in the air.

Certainly I didn't intend to destroy the kitchen window. But my brother Jeff and I happened to be a few neighborhood kids short of kick ball, so we resorted to the next best thing: playing catch with a small plastic bowling ball and throwing it over the roof of the house, from the front yard to the back. It actually wasn't too hard to accomplish. The ball was small enough to get a firm finger-splayed hold so that one could easily sling it over the house. Only this time I must've been day dreaming.

"Do you realize how much that window costs?" Dad was standing in front of me. His words blew past me like a freight train. His normally chipper face was strained, his thick black brows that never met were now shaking hands. I looked beyond him, past the jagged edges of the glass that now framed our kitchen, and into the living room and through the patio screen to the patio, where Jeff stood with saucer eyes, his hand cupped to mouth.

It wasn't Dad scolding Jeff and me about breaking the window that made my mind turn to other thoughts beyond our town. It was the realization that everything in my 11-year-old world had become a circular staircase, a déjà vu of sorts, quite frankly: a daily ritual of classes, track practice and homework. No excited hum bubbled in and around the confines of this very small suburb. Huber Heights had no town square, no place to really "hang-out." The Internet, cable TV, and cozy bookstores with cafes had yet to be discovered. After-school activities for girls at my Catholic school were limited to Girl Scouts, softball, track and cheerleading. Every fall I ran track, but that was mostly just to do something, and to hang out with my best friends.

For sure, summers started out with great promise. Simply having school-free days was the first delight, followed by pajama parties and evenings practicing on my guitar.

Of course, reading lots of books at the Huber Heights Library was something to look forward to. One summer I challenged myself to read as many books as I could, including books in the adult section, like, I Never

Promised You a Rose Garden by Hannah Greene. The book chronicled a life of a disturbed woman. As I read about her torment, I wrote down unfamiliar words to look up in the dictionary and scribbled their definitions in my notebook. If I was well-read, I reasoned, I could increase my vocabulary, get into a good college, and then travel the world.

One summer I even kept count of the number of books I read, listing the title, the author, and the date I read it. That summer I read over 50 books. Sadly, I later realized if I had only registered for the library's summer reading program I would've been eligible to receive some free bookmarks or a glossy library poster exhorting the thrill of reading. Towards summer's end, reading lost its glow.

Another venture was one I shared with my best friend Denise. Every couple of weeks we'd walk to Grants, the local five and dime, excited to add to our growing collection of twenty-five cent miniature porcelain horses and dogs. The figurines sat forlornly on the metal shelves, and we'd pick them up one by one, carefully eyeing their poses and their facial expressions. I would scan each shelf for tawny brown or rustic red horses, due to my obsession with Misty at Chincoteague. Denise looked for figurines of large dogs, drawn by her affinity for Old Yeller. For weeks we'd save our change to purchase just the right one. Yet it seemed even this activity would build to a crescendo and then decelerate, much like the sluggish fits and starts of a city bus. Eventually we collected all the porcelain dogs and horses that Grants carried, and their sullen, dark eyes peering from the shelves would lose their charm. Our attentions then turned to the Teen Beat magazine Denise's mother let her buy.

It was actually a happy, sometimes charming life, but I just felt an urge to see beyond the bounds of my neighborhood, to go somewhere where other people's routines were my curiosity, where winter was warm, where blue waves crashed on a beach near farmland. I yearned to visit the places we learned about in Miss Zak's social studies class, like India, maybe New Delhi, to see groups of brown women wrapped in soft, colorful swirls of silk, gliding along crowded streets beside cows that wandered among markets where burly, mustached-men sold snake skins and belt buckles.

Sometimes I would think of driving West. I would calculate in my notebook the years and months it would take me to reach the magical independent age of 18. I would be ready when the day came because I had it all planned out. I would cheerfully wave to Jeff and my parents as I set off in a bright, cherry-colored Volkswagen beetle filled with all my favorite worldly possessions: My first and only America album, my

philodendron plants flourishing from thick clay pots, a sweet cat I would name Virtue (we had a dog, but I figured a cat would be much easier to sneak into motels along the way), a cooler with Cokes, my favorite pair of bell-bottoms and my floppy Disney World hat.

These were all wonderful thoughts, but this fantasy would likewise fade, now broken by the sound of my mother sweeping up the pieces of glass.

"Are you listening to your father, young lady?" she cried out from the kitchen. From the sound of her voice I could tell she figured I was solely responsible for the idea of throwing the plastic ball over the house. I looked past the patio screen. Jeff had disappeared. That was typical, since he usually wasn't willing to stick around for something we both had gotten ourselves into. Brothers! A conundrum, for sure!

Maybe I could write about that in my notebook.

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Lisa Lopez Snyder is a Midwest transplant to Columbia, South Carolina. Two of her short stories won second place in the 2007 Carrie McCray Memorial Literary Award, sponsored by the South Carolina Writers Workshop. She has a poem in Quill & Parchment. *LopezSnyder@sc.rr.com*

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"When you see a good man, think of emulating him; when you see a bad man, examine your own heart."

--Confucius

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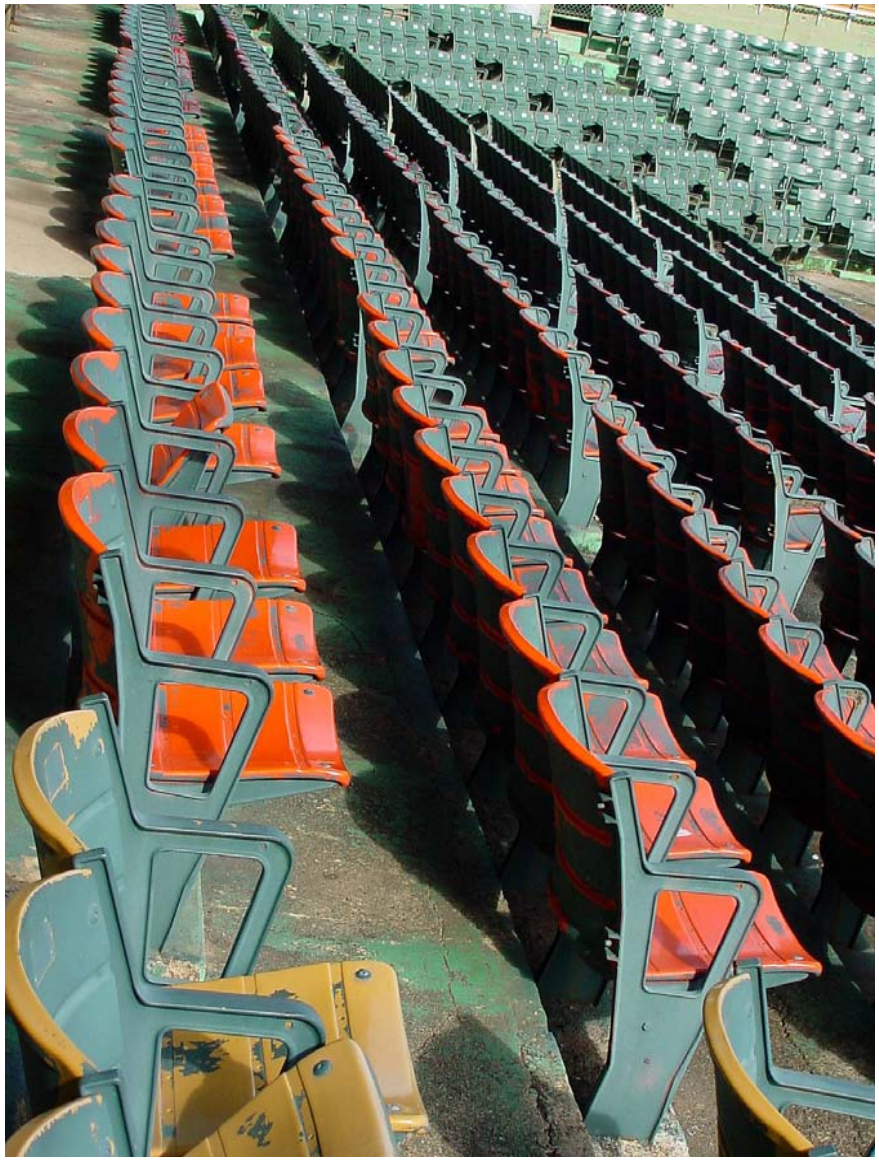

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