

# Birmingham Arts Journal

Volume 6 ~ Issue 3



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**\$5.00**

# Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **HEADACHE**, 9" x 12". North Carolina artist Ebeth Scott-Sinclair interprets old world themes with a unique contemporary southern vision. Her work is characterized by a fresco-like surface texture and an interplay of warm, vibrant color that conjures a world of juxtaposition. She is represented in galleries throughout the southeast. [www.ebethscottsinclair.com](http://www.ebethscottsinclair.com); [emss@mebtel.net](mailto:emss@mebtel.net)

Back Cover: **THE RASPADO CAR**, Digital Photograph

Jose Alfredo was born in Colombia, and studied graphic design and photography at the National Center for Graphic Industry in Colombia. Winner of several awards, his work has been shown in Spain and Chile as well as his native Columbia and the United States. <http://jalfredoart.googlepages.com>; [jalfredoart@hotmail.com](mailto:jalfredoart@hotmail.com)

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## BROKEN NOTE

Chervis Isom

The streetcar screeched to a halt on the slick tracks, windows all afog. The doors swung open and we leaped aboard, relieved to get out of the rain. I dropped coins in the slot and, as the car jolted into motion, we lurched down the aisle.

Exhausted, Martha dropped onto the bench seat, rivulets from her raincoat soaking into the fake tweedy fabric, already scummy and moldy from dozens of wet riders through the day.

It was then we heard the sound, a protracted, mournful note, rising in intensity, then falling, sad and lonely as Taps when lights go out.

A few seats behind us, a black man sat, trumpet to his lips, eyes closed against the world.

The note hung in the air, slowly intensified, then dropping into a lower register, it withered into a ragged, lifeless plea, flickering weakly like a candle as it gutters out ... and after a breath, began again a similar litany--a never ending cry of pain.

It was the sound a small child might have made separated from its mother, the sound of despair as deep as a moonless night.

His eyes were opaque and lifeless, the personification of despair.

Was he stoned? Was he going home after having been fired from his job? Had his wife told him he was worthless and thrown him out? Did he have hungry children at home, and had the banker turned him down for a loan? It had been years before, but I too had felt that kind of despair.

As the note hovered around me, drawing into myself, reminding me of the despair I too had felt, I thought of Miles Davis and his "Sketches of Spain," the saddest sound I'd ever heard drawn from a musical instrument.

The hair on my neck sprang up; a chill washed over me.

"Knock it off, you weirdo!"

I snapped to attention. A beefy middle-aged man bolted to his feet, his face red and enraged.

He towered over the black man, one hand gripping the pole, the other clenched into a fist, crouching, legs spread, spoiling for a fight.

"I said, knock it off. You got no right to blow that horn in here, disturbing the peace like this!"

The trumpet never wavered. The black man momentarily lifted his eyes, but they were fearless and flat and so far away his crying ceased for only a moment.

I was never one to leap into action. My nature has always been to think things through. I think humanity is made up of two kinds of folks--thinkers and doers. Whenever on those occasions I've decided that action was justified, the need had usually by then been met by someone else. So in that moment, as I dithered, my Martha leaped from her seat, brandishing her dripping umbrella like a sword.

"Get back to your seat, you idiot!"

She nailed him menacingly with her eyes, her umbrella cocked for action.

He glared as he retreated, but could not meet the unwavering gaze of the resolute school teacher.

Muttering, he dissolved into his seat, pulling his hat low over his eyes in embarrassment.

She abandoned the attacker to his own humiliation, then hovered over the young man, the personification of primitive maternal instinct. I took my position beside her, to show my full support. The lightning coruscating from her golden warrior eyes challenged everyone--even me--as I dug deeper and deeper within myself.

I said nothing as we lurched along, our stop having long passed by.

Unperturbed, the trumpeter's single note wailed and bent and broke and wailed again in unceasing pain ...

In tandem with the screeching of the trolley on the tracks ...

In tandem with the screeching in my heart ...

.....  
*Chervis Isom is an attorney in Birmingham, Alabama. He obtained a B.A. degree from Birmingham-Southern College and a J.D. from Cumberland School of Law, Samford University. He has an avid interest in literature and when he can find time, he enjoys wrestling with words. One of his stories has been published in a previous issue of the Birmingham Arts Journal. [cisom@bakerdonelson.com](mailto:cisom@bakerdonelson.com)*  
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## ON AGING

Mary Lynne Robbins

Be still and reflect  
upon nobler strains –  
a reverie  
of verdant seasons  
of precious innocence  
and beauty  
and sweet contentment

No awakening now  
to lofty promises  
and fervid dreams

Too late to bear  
the yoke of guilt  
and repentance

Dispel  
the canopy of gloom  
and  
embrace  
this mere wink of time

.....  
*Mary Lynne Robbins lives in Trussville, Alabama, where she teaches and performs music and directs musical stage productions at the local theater. Her poetry, prose, short stories and other writings, along with her art work, reflect her many interests and can be found in her self-published book I Just Had to Write It at the Trussville Public Library. [therobbinsnest@centurytel.net](mailto:therobbinsnest@centurytel.net)*  
.....

## SOMETHING

Jim Reed

Something must have happened to the Earth while I was sleeping last night. Something must have happened without my participation, because things are different right now. The sky is illuminated gray. The air is milky with humidity. The ground is damp from rain. The feel of everything is fresher. I'm achy and painful, but my energy is higher than it was last night. My skin is less oily because of the shower I just took. My clothes are fresh, my hair perfumed my nails clipped my beard combed.

Yes, something must have happened last night.

The earth probably rotated a bit to face the sun, thus explaining the lighter skies. Maybe clouds gathered and collided and cried--that could explain the rain. My perfumed aura could be explained by some complicated and boring treatise about the advertising and marketing of vanity products. My cleansed but aching gums might have come about through a series of ... but hey, I'm not interested in being bored.

There must be a million or so explanations out there about the turning earth the humid air the perfumed body, but the more explanations I ingest the more gaping the great unanswerable hole seems to become.

The real question the unanswered question looms like a Cheshire cat over us all.

The question that all the world is always asked and apparently always will ask is, why

.....

*Jim Reed is curator of The Museum of Fond Memories and the Library of Thought at Reed Books Antiques in Birmingham, Alabama. [www.jimreedbooks.com](http://www.jimreedbooks.com)*

.....

**“Comedy is tragedy revisited.”**

**--Phyllis Diller**

## PUSH AWAY THE STORM

Nancy Crowson (song lyrics)

Tears on my pillow, like the rain on my window,  
Falling from clouds like the ones in my mind;  
Thoughts that keep passing like the lightning that's flashing,  
Cold winds are blowing since you left me behind.  
Gee, it was wonderful when skies were blue,  
The love in your eyes was like the rainbow's hue;  
I need the sunshine of your smile to make my life worthwhile,  
Come hold me in your arms and push away the storm . . .  
Again.

Tears that are flowing like the thunder that's rolling,  
Breaking the silence, like you're breaking my heart;  
Pain that keeps growing like the storm that is blowing,  
Winter has come since we drifted apart.  
Gee, it was wonderful when skies were blue,  
The love in your eyes was like the rainbow's hue;  
I need the sunshine of your smile to make my life worthwhile,  
Come hold me in your arms and push away the storm . . .  
Again.

.....  
*Nancy Gilbert Crowson has been writing poetry and music for more than three decades, including several children's musicals. She has a line of greeting cards featuring her poetry and a CD entitled "My Times Are In His Hands." Nancy is active in community theater and resides in a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama. sing2theking@aol.com. www.mywaymaker.com*  
.....

## 21ST CENTURY PRAYER

A.J. Wright

open 24 hours

if we fail to give you

a receipt

your purchase is free

commercial property

for sale

will build to suit

only 100 dollars above invoice

are things in your life bad?

the singing pavement

is slippery when wet

.....

*A.J. Wright has been librarian for the University of Alabama School of Medicine  
Anesthesiology Department since 1983.*

.....

apply right over the phone

make the call now

for all the comforts of home

pain may be eliminated for millions

everyday low prices

souled American

all operators are busy at this time

help wanted

**“Ultimately, literature is nothing but  
carpentry.”**

**--Gabriel Garcia Marquez**



## A LAMENT FOR LENNY

Steve Edmondson

“Yes, siree, y’all come right in.”

I looked up from my phone collection list and saw it was my boss, welcoming a client into his office. I was working as collection manager for the Friendly Ace Loan Company, having gotten a warm inside job to get away from construction work in the blustery North Alabama winter.

“Come right on in here. We’ve got things fixed up for you just right,” he said, referring to the loan he was aiming to close for Lenny.

Lenny and his wife trudged on in. He was slight of build, pasty of color, downcast demeanor, very plain denim pants and a faded sport shirt of sorts. His wife followed. I was more familiar with my country folk who were farmers. These folks were of a new generation, fresh from the farm and working in the cotton mill for regular pay. I was raised a sharecropper’s son, but knew about lintheads from my readings of Erskine Caldwell whose bare prose left lingering images of the helplessness of the workers when the cotton mills closed.

Lenny was a doffer. A doffer pulls yarn-laden spindles from a textile spinning machine. The spindles are wrapped with hundreds of feet of new yarn. Lenny’s job was to pull down two at a time, set them aside, wrap the yarn end to a specific spot and lay the newly filled spindles on a conveyor belt, moving them down the line to the next station. And in almost the same swing of his arms, he was putting two empty spindles on the machine, hooking the thread end into the spindle as it began winding.

The textile company had figured out how many spindles the average employee of good strength and dexterity could handle per hour, and that became the norm for all. It was work that kept you jumping two hours solid, keeping up with the line. Lenny and his like worked furiously for two hours, got a small break to urinate and get a drink of water and perhaps sit down and rest for 5 or 10 minutes. Then it was back to the line. A line of mindless work, repetitive to the devil’s pleasure, until finally it was quitting time.

Lenny was coming into the finance company office to renew his past-due loan and get a consolidation loan, moving from an \$800 loan that had payments hard to handle, to a \$2,000 loan with near impossible payments, but leaving him with no other finance company to deal with. All of the loans consolidated into one, supposedly a new start. The finance rates

were absolutely as high as state law would allow, then was added a loan origination fee of four percent of the total loan. And strictly to protect Lenny's wife and family, life insurance was added to the loan, for one percent per year of the total charge.

"How could you pay this, Lenny, if you got sick or disabled? Well, we better add disability insurance to take care of you."

Manager Hawkins was awfully good-hearted and thoughtful to see that Lenny was well-protected. Besides, the insurance additions paid a fifty percent commission to Manager Hawkins for his thoughtfulness and care of Lenny and family. As an after-thought, he added a small fire insurance policy to cover the contents of his row house, which were pledged as collateral for the loan.

By the time the furniture was listed on the collateral note and all the stuff signed that needed to be, Lenny was ready to leave, now owing a total of eight hundred dollars to pay off his old loan, plus an additional twelve hundred to pay off three other finance companies. That two thousand total was going to cost him five thousand over the term of the loan, four years. I had the feeling these numbers were just strange abstractions to Lenny.

As they left, I thought I was probably going to become more familiar with Lenny down the road. Manager Hawkins made the loan; it was up to me to collect it. And sure enough, he was late on the first payment but a phone call took care of that.

In the ensuing months, more phone calls as he dropped further behind. Then a visit to the cotton mill, to catch him as he left for the day. He never denied a payment was due, and also never seemed to remember his empty promises to pay on time, or at least pay as promised.

Then Lenny was laid off from his job because of health problems. In a time when depression was barely recognized, a wise doctor had figured out Lenny's problem, acute clinical depression. It was easy to see why Lenny suffered. But wait, thoughtful manager Hawkins had added disability insurance, so Lenny was instructed to fill out claim forms, get his doctor to fill out forms describing his diagnosis and spelling out why he was disabled from work.

As was generally true of most insurance companies, there was a bit of fine print excluding from coverage certain illnesses, and just a blanket exclusion for anything mental. I had to tell Lenny, no insurance payments, and he accepted that. I asked him how he was going to make

the payments, and he just dropped his head and looked down at the ground. We both knew the depth of his predicament. I suppose at about this moment his depression doubled. No money, no job, no food to feed his family, nowhere to go, no family to fall back on.

It was clear to me what we had to do. The loan had to be charged off, a ninety percent loss, and we'd move on. Lenny would be forgotten and left to his own wits, whatever wits he might still have. I filled out the charge-off request, had Manager Hawkins sign it and send it on to the home office in Nashville. I thought I spelled out pretty well what the situation was, what we had to do. Manager Hawkins didn't much like it, as this was going to hurt his annual bonus. And those insurance commissions as well. I wasn't up to feeling sorry for Mr. Hawkins, as he liked to be called, both by me and by his clientele.

Nothing happened for two or three weeks, and then Mr. Evans called. Our supervisor for the area, calling from Nashville. He was coming to town and wanted to talk to me and Mr. Hawkins that night about Lenny. See him in his motel room at about seven, he said.

Hawkins and I looked at each other, but nothing was said. We both knew there was nothing further to do to collect from Lenny, that we weren't being called in to be commended on the fruits of our good labor.

We showed up at the appointed time, or maybe five minutes early, eager to please, anxious to impress. Mr. Evans invited us into his plush motel room, nicer than I was accustomed to, and indicated chairs for us. We obediently sat, and then he pulled out a pint bottle of bonded bourbon and poured us shots in plastic cups.

I don't like hard whiskey, never have. But nevertheless, I took it and sipped, mighty damn small sips, as they talked. Couldn't refuse his hospitality.

Mr. Evans was short, maybe five feet four. He had close-cropped black hair and reddish skin. He looked to be in his forties. His suit was well-fitted and looked expensive, as did his shoes. But what you noticed about him were his piercing beady eyes, like a gopher rat, caught in the beam of a flashlight in a corn crib late at night.

"What's the problem with this damn Lenny? Y'all talking a lot of money here for the company to eat. Can't he get another job? Ain't he got some kinfolks that can help him? Can't you carry him to another finance company and lay him off, like they probably did us?"

We patiently explained our options, which were nil. Then Evans switched over to sport, and we talked football for 30 minutes, and then it was indiscreetly indicated it was time for us to go. One more shot of bonded bourbon in the plastic motel cups, and we were walking out.

“Wait a minute, boys. Before you go, I need to tell you something. Collect that damn loan in the next ten days, get something solid going, or call me.”

Then it was goodnight, the door closed, and we were left to our thoughts. We looked at each other, hopeless. Mr. Hawkins, now the senior loan man present, looks at me and says, “You heard what the man said. Get busy, and get us some way out on this.”

“Yes, sir.”

How the hell I was to do that I didn’t know. In the ensuing days, we thought about what to do. We asked Lenny about borrowing money from relatives to pay us. No luck. Getting a job, no luck. He was sick, disabled and had no skills. The ten days passed.

“Ain’t done nothing with that damn Lenny, have you?” was the gritty phone voice from supervisor Evans.

“Go get them damn sticks and sell them, and I’ll charge off the rest.”

There was no arguing. “Getting the sticks,” in loan terms, meant repossessing the collateral. We knew it was worthless, always had been. The loan company thought it important enough to the debtor to make him pay. Didn’t work with Lenny.

I borrowed a truck from one of our client car dealers, and Roger Blevins from the Friendly Ace office across town went with me to do the repossession. It was a gloomy day, dreary wintertime.

We found their row house, found Lenny, explained what we had to do. He had to pay at least something, or we had to load up his furniture and take it with us. He had no money. His wife, dowdy in a plain, blue, cotton dress, scraggly hair, missing front tooth, looked at Lenny.

“If you let them do this, Lenny, I’m a’leavin’ right now. Nothin’ to stay here fer.”

We looked about the rooms. Truly very little to get. We looked at our mortgage list, “couch, chair, bed, dining room table, chifferobe, cook stove. So pathetic, and we knew it was worthless. Roger suggested we go call Mr. Evans one more time, explain the situation, ask him could we just leave.

Evans was predictable.

“Get them damn sticks. Sell ‘em. These damn lintheads got to understand we mean business,” and hung up on us.

We looked at each other for some sort of relief, which wasn’t coming. We backed the truck up to the front door, and began to load the pitiful furnishings. Lenny’s wife came out, with Lenny behind.

“I’m a’leavin’, Lenny. I’m taking the kid and going to Ma’s. And don’t you think of comin’ fer me.”

We looked over at Lenny, head down, hands in his pockets. We could see where he was wetting himself, through fear or desperation we never knew.

We finished loading, drove to town, went by Lou’s Used Furniture. He offered \$35 for the load. We took his cash and quickly unloaded the furniture, as it was.

I thought about Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. And in the event you’re now wondering about my integrity or lack thereof during this day’s scene, I’ve joined you many a time, examining my character that day. I know what I should have done. I didn’t, and now I’m one with Evans. There’s no absolution for me; I hope there was for Lenny.

I dropped Roger off at his office and said a quiet goodbye. He had one thought for me,

“I hate this Goddamned job.”

.....  
*Steve Edmondson writes in Homewood, Alabama. edmondsonstephen@bellsouth.net*  
.....

**“Anyone can do any amount of work  
provided it isn’t the work he is  
supposed to be doing at that  
moment.”**

**--Robert Benchley**

## THOUGHTS ON THE *QUEEN MARY*

Stephanie Evers

the *queen* whispers, but  
He only hears the Lock rattle.  
even the

ghosts forget they are dreams,  
red blushed with someone else's wine, giddy  
at the cherry chantry of Do  
you, Do you...do i.

gray girls blasted white,  
hot in a camera's neon noon, drape an  
ocean's tulle atop the tent stakes—  
sheltering the circus for  
tinder fingered aunts.

.....  
*Stephanie Evers is an English instructor at the University of South Alabama, where she recently completed her master's degree in literature. She also holds a B.A. in English from the Mississippi University for Women. Her creative work has appeared in several college publications, including USA's Oracle Fine Arts Review, as well as in the Mississippi Gulf Coast's Magnolia Quarterly.*  
.....

**“Art ... is a force which blows the  
roof of the cave where we crouch  
imprisoned.”**

**--Ernest Hello**



## **CITY GIRLS**

Andrew Tyson  
Pastel on Paper  
22" x 21"

*Andrew Tyson is an award-winning, self-taught photographer and artist with a degree in computer imaging and visualization. His medium of choice is graphite, but he has recently begun experimenting with pastels. [tysona@bellsouth.net](mailto:tysona@bellsouth.net)*

## A MIND OF THEIR OWN

Dixon Hearne

“Hold him, Cody! Grab his bit! Grab his bit!” Uncle Rafe called from behind, treading up dust charging toward us. “I’m coming, J-Boy. WHOA!”

J-Boy, being old I suppose, must have heard, “GO, BOY,” instead of whoa. We were off again with a hard jolt that emptied the wagon of its remaining Christmas goods and bounced my city rear-end to a sore fare-thee-well. Somehow I managed to grab enough leather and horse mane to hold on till the next unannounced STOP--right smack in front of our house gate.

“Is that you, Rafe? Ya’ll back so soon?” I heard Aunt Viney calling from somewhere in the house. “Hope you remembered my baking powder. Can’t make no ... Huh?” Aunt Viney gawked at the sight of me sitting astride old J-Boy. No Uncle Rafe and no evidence of any Christmas fixings. “My Lord, what are you doing on top of that horse, child? Where’s Rafe? I’ll divorce that man if he’s settin’ on that porch jawin’ and sent you home all alone.”

“No, ma’am,” I said, flushed with shame. “I tensed up I guess and sent J-Boy flying off down the road without him. Uncle Rafe’s back there in town, scratching his head probably and still yelling, WHOA.”

“Don’t know why that man didn’t take the pickup like I told him to. That horse is getting senile as him.” Aunt Viney was visibly agitated, but not at me. “And you, you old fool,” she fussed at J-Boy, “this is your last trip to town, Mister. You are officially retired.”

J-Boy seemed quite pleased with himself, prancing off to pasture. I swear he smiled back at me with those big buck teeth. Aunt Viney scrubbed my face to a healthy glow and off we flew toward town in the pickup. We managed, in fits and starts, to retrieve all the store packages and Christmas fixings before they’d met a car wheel along the road. Even the twenty-pound sacks of flour and sugar and meal were still intact. Everything was just fine--everything except for Uncle Rafe, that is. Sure enough, there he was jawing with his buddies on the front porch at Measly’s, laughing and gesturing to beat the band.

“I done gathered up and reloaded my Christmas goods, Rafe Durkins!” Aunt Viney yelled to him. “I don’t intend on *unloadin’* them when I get them home!”



“... and little Cody here flies up in the air,” Uncle Rafe laughs and continues, “and lands slap on top of old J-Boy! If I’m lyin’, I’m dyin.’ Gospel truth!” he declares. “You boys shoulda’ been there to see it. You, too, Viney,” he calls out, waving his big hand to show he sees us. “That horse said, HUH? ... and off he flew like he was shot out of a gun!”

“You see that, Cody?” Aunt Viney says to me, “I hope you’re not too tired, ‘cause we got to go down to Doc Foley and see about getting a spare brain I can wrap up and stick under the Christmas tree for your Uncle Rafe. Maybe he can split it with old J-Boy--it’s more Christmas than they either one deserve.”

.....  
*Dixon Hearne is the author of Plantatia: Hightone and Lowdown Stories of the South (Southeast Missouri University Press, August 2009). He is one of fifty authors selected to appear in Woodstock Revisited: 50 Far Out, Groovy, Peace-Loving, Flashback-Inducing Stories From Those Who Were There (Adams Media, June 2009). His stories can also be found in Louisiana Literature, Cream City Review, Wisconsin Review, Big Muddy, and many other magazines and journals. dixonh@socal.rr.com. www.dixonhearne.com*  
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**“But I, being poor, have only my  
dreams. I have spread my dreams  
under your feet; Tread softly, because  
you tread on my dreams.”**

**--William Butler Yeats**

## DEPARTURE LOUNGE

Reilly Maginn, MD

“We’re here, Dear. Time to wake up.”

“What? Where? What time is it?”

“It’s late, Dear. You’ve been asleep.”

“I’m groggy. Can’t seem to wake up. Where are we?”

“It’s okay, Dear. We’re here at the departure lounge. Remember?”

“All right. Just give me a minute to clear my head. Seems like I’ve been out for hours.”

“You’ve been asleep for a bit, Dear. Just take your time. The others are still getting off and the aisle is full now, anyway. Just relax.”

Where in the devil are we? Seems like only moments ago we were driving to the hospital. Why were we going to the hospital? Oh yes. I remember. It was my operation. Right. I was going to have a minor operation. I was going to have general anesthesia, wasn’t I? What happened. It’s all kind of fuzzy and cloudy. I remember going to sleep. Dr. Andrews was putting me to sleep but my memory begins to fade after that. Guess I went to sleep.

“Come on, Dear. The aisle is clear now and we can get off.”

“Myra, where in the devil are we going? And why are we on this bus?”

“You people are all going together, Dear. These other people going to the departure lounge too, Dear. You’re not the only one.”

“And why do I have on this silly gown. It’s all open in the back. My behind is freezing.”

“That’s what they gave you to wear when we got on, Sweet.”

“Where are my clothes?”

“Right here in this carry-on, Dear. I’ve got your watch and ring in my purse.”

“Okay. Just be sure they’re safe. That’s a Rolex you know and the ring is gold.”

“I know, Dear, I know. Don’t worry your head about them.”

“And another thing; you didn’t say where we were going, Dear. Where are we?”

“I told you. We’re at the departure lounge.”

“What airline and where are we bound for?”

“Just be patient, Dear. They’ll let you know soon enough.”

“They’ll tell me? Just me? You mean tell us don’t you? You’re going too, aren’t you?”

“I can’t go, Dear. I don’t have a card.”

“Card? What are you talking about?”

“That card you carry in your wallet. You signed it years ago. You have to have a signed card to get in this lounge. I don’t have one. You have to go on alone from here at the door.”

“Well, I’m not going on without you.”

“You have to, Dear. I’m not ready yet and you are. Besides, you’re the one who signed.”

“I did? What did I sign for? I don’t remember. Must have been a long time ago.”

“You gave them permission, when it was time, for any and all they need.”

“All of what? What do they need? And what do you mean ‘when it was time?’”

“They have to be careful not to take a donation before it’s time.”

“Donation? What donation? Hope it’s tax deductible.”

“You shouldn’t worry about taxes; that’s the last thing you have to worry about now.”

“I’m still kind of hazy and unsure what I signed for. I remember falling asleep. It was Dr. Andrews, wasn’t it, who put me to sleep?”

“That’s right, Sweet. You went right to sleep.”

“And then? What happened? I woke up here on this bus at a departure lounge. My memory is blank for the in between. Did I get my operation or what?”

“No. They started but didn’t finish. And that’s why we’re here now.”

“Well then, why are we here? Are they going to finish up now? You never did tell me.”

“No. Your procedure is over and done with. We’re here about your donation. You know. Choice Cuts is what you always said about the program. We’re all just bundles of Spare Parts. There’s a real need, you always said, and so now it’s time for you to follow through.”

“Here they come so just close your eyes and relax. You won’t feel a thing. They told me this will only take a few minutes but it will help someone for a lifetime. You can leave the departure lounge as soon as they finish, I promise, and then you can go back to sleep for a really good long, long rest. Good night, Dear.”

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*Dr. Reilly Maginn is a transplant surgeon, master gardener and a storyteller. Fifteen years as a surgeon in the south Pacific and ten years as a doctor in cow country Montana have given him a host of recollections for his story writing career. redreilly@att.net*

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## TO A WILDFLOWER

Irene Latham

I take my place  
behind bumblebee  
and butterfly, behold

your silky cheeks  
framing a heart-  
shaped smile.

How often have  
you been kissed  
by raindrop, sunshine?

And me, mere human:  
riddled with faults,  
pock-marked

with imperfection.  
Yet you do not  
turn away.

.....

*Irene Latham, recent Alabama Poet of the Year, is poetry editor of the Birmingham Arts Journal. Her novel for young adults, Leaving Gee's Bend, will be published in 2010. She lives in Shelby County, Alabama, with her husband Paul and three sons. [www.irenelatham.com](http://www.irenelatham.com)*

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**“I grant your point, but not because I  
agree with you. I’m under sedation.”**

**--Charles Saxon**



## YOU CAN'T SEE ME

Sharon Supplee  
Acrylic on Canvas

*Sharon Supplee is a self-taught artist who lives in Birmingham's Southside with her husband and 2 year old son. She works from home as a computer programmer and stay-at-home mom by day, and she paints late into the night. Her inspiration comes from her travels and her everyday life as a wife and mom.*  
[asmartchk27@hotmail.com](mailto:asmartchk27@hotmail.com)

## THE THING ABOUT OPHELIA

Daniel Koehler

I'm not complaining, mind you, but the thing you got to understand about Ophelia is not that she wants to be one of the guys. She wants to be *the guy*. Specifically, the play-by-play guy for the NFL.

Not the blonde on the sidelines doing two-shots with the coaches at half-time. The guy in the booth with the headset who says things like, "Complete! Marvin Harrison! Unbelievable catch. The Colts are in the red zone. No huddle. Less than ten seconds on the clock. Peyton spikes it. That stops the clock. They'll kick the field goal and try to go to OT. No. Timeout Patriots. Belichick's gonna ice the kicker."

That guy.

It's like when you're little and you see the Ninja Turtles on TV and decide you want to be Leonardo. She loves football like that, and if there's a pro franchise out there that she doesn't have at least a jersey or a bobble-head from, then it's probably not in the NFL.

High school football, college football, arena football, video football, soccer, rugby--they don't do a thing for her. But Sundays and Mondays, when the NFL games are on, she's glued to the tube, sitting around in the appropriate team jersey. She doesn't even have any girl clothes. Just football jerseys, basketball shorts, and flip-flops.

Ophelia's memorabilia. That's what I call it. Her mother wants to throw it all out, so she keeps it at my house. Lets me wear whatever I want.

I call her a tomboy and she says, "Yeah, Tom Brady."

Watching the game with her is like playin' Madden NFL Football without the game controllers. It's almost scary at times, her being that good looking and all, and when her team does something outstanding, she's, like, all slapping you on the butt and knocking knuckles and stuff. She acts out each big play like a human instant replay, jumping up and down on the couch when her team scores and high-fivin' me like we used to do when we played tag-team wrestling on my trampoline when we were in junior high.

She wanted to be in the WWF back then.

Her name was going to be "The Heartbreaker." She was going to be lowered down into the ring in this, like, giant red heart and then smash her way out of it with a sledgehammer while they played Pat Benatar as

her theme music. When she came out, she would be wearing a stupid dress like they wore in “Grease”--poodle skirt, bobby socks, letter-sweater and all--then tear it off and have a leather bikini, spiked dog collar, and gauntlets on underneath.

That would have been way cool.

And talk, Lord, Ophelia goes a mile a minute. She’s like Robin Williams on “fast-forward,” talking back to the players. Quarterbacks, that’s who she likes--Peyton; Brett; Tom Brady. If she’s watching Peyton throw the ball away, she gets all over him: “Brett would have tried to make something out of that” or “You shouldn’t run a naked bootleg, Peyton. Who do you think you are, Vince Young?”

For some reason, she really likes watching football with me. It’s not like I’m Joe Athlete or anything. I mean, I played on the volleyball team and intramural flag football at the frat, but basically I’m her go-to guy, mainly because I’m always available to TIVO the games so we can watch them all week.

I mean, I like football, too, but I sure as hell don’t get worked up about it like Ophelia. Those guys all running over each other just gets her crazy. I think it may be sexual or her ADHD, but sometimes she gets this look in her eye and . . . well, if you happen to be the guy nearest her, you reap the rewards.

I’m that guy. I don’t want her to ever start takin’ her Ritalin again.

I almost feel guilty about it, like I’m taking advantage of someone who can’t help themselves. But I really like Ophelia and tell myself it’s just one little idiosyncrasy, that’s all.

I can live with it.

She knows all the football idioms but uses them out of context for everyday things. When I kid her about this, she scowls and tells me to “get my game face on.” The Democrats and Republicans start shouting at each other on TV and she swears it’s “road rage.” Even when we’re making out, she throws in zingers: “The run sets up the pass” or “It’s 4<sup>th</sup> and inches. Go for it.” Or “C’mon, stay in the pocket.” I once told her her mouth’s writing checks her body can’t cash, but if the zinger’s not about football, she doesn’t get it.

Whoosh. Right over her head.

Now she’s talkin’ about gettin’ married on ESPN and wants her bridesmaids to be the Rat Pack: Peyton, Brett and Brady. It’ll make a great

music video, all those big guys in high heels, tulle, and lipstick. It'll be a big hit with the gay community, I'll bet.

She's gonna wear Peyton's full uniform, old number 18, and I'm gonna be Marvin Harrison. When she throws the bouquet, she'll audible the play to the bridesmaids. Tom Brady will be the primary receiver, since Peyton and Brett are already married.

She wants to honeymoon in Vegas so we can bet the line on how long we'll stay married.

Bet on us. If I have anything to say about it, we'll beat the spread.

.....

*Daniel Koehler lives in Little Rock, Arkansas, and is the author of three novels, a novella, a volume of short stories, and seven screenplays which have been finalists in international competitions. Prior to his writing career, he practiced tax law in New York City. [www.danielkoehler.bizland.com](http://www.danielkoehler.bizland.com)*

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**“Old men love to give good advice; it  
consoles them for being able no  
longer to set a bad example.”**

**--Rochefoucauld**



## IS ANYBODY LISTENING?

Jessica Jones

She talks but they  
don't hear her.  
When they do,  
they say *be quiet*,  
*the adults are talking*.

So many questions  
and a newly-learned  
language  
to ask them in,  
but answers are stagnant,  
or resentful, or non-existent.

She wants to know what this world is.  
They look down their noses--  
*I remember that age*.  
No they don't. They can't  
be anything but desensitized,  
demystified, knowers that words  
won't make a difference--  
so she will learn that for herself.

.....  
*Jessica Jones is a graduate student at the University of South Alabama in Mobile,  
working towards a Master's Degree in English with a creative writing  
specialization; she plans to graduate in December. She served as the 2008-2009  
poetry editor for Oracle, the University's fine arts and literary review, and received  
the Shelley Memorial scholarship for poetry in 2007.*  
.....



**YELLOW CHEVY**

**Les Yarbrough**

**Oil on Canvas**

**28" x 24"**

*Les Yarbrough is a highly-regarded landscape painter who shares his expertise in classes offered by Alabama Art Supply. For more information, contact [alabamaart.com](http://alabamaart.com)*

## TO LOVE AND TO HONOR

Octavus Roy Cohen (c. 1930)

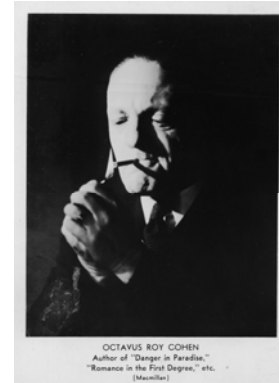
It was rather surprising to discover a deep vein of sentiment in little George Potter. I had been his friend and his lawyer for many years and had watched the always fat and once alert little man settle into a domestic routine. He had been moderately successful in business, sufficiently successful to permit him to retire from business and to travel about the world a little if he had wanted to do so. But instead he and Esther were content to sit night after night in their pleasant living room; she was busy with her sewing or reading, he passing the time with his excellent collection of postage stamps.

Looking back over the years of my friendship with Potter, I can see that the vein of romance had probably been there all the time. There was, for instance, his romantic love-affair with Althea Deane--an affair which almost became a scandal. But just when people began to gossip about them, George married her.

That marriage appeared to extinguish George Potter's last spark of romanticism. It never had a chance to be successful, and when Althea left him suddenly, George's friends thought that he was fortunate to lose her. Later came the news of Althea's death while living abroad, and a couple of years later George began to call upon Esther seriously. The people of our group were only slightly interested--it is difficult to become greatly excited over a possible marriage when both the man and the woman are equally rather dull and uninteresting.

The marriage was a very nice affair. There followed the usual series of parties for the newly married couple. Then it seemed that George and Esther retired from life. Even his business affairs ran so well that there was little need on George's part for my services as his lawyer--and while I never ceased to like him, we found less and less in common as the years passed. I couldn't imagine that they were happy; perhaps they were contented, but not really happy. There wasn't enough sentiment that's the way I figured George. And nothing happened to change my opinion until a few weeks before their twenty-fifth anniversary.

It was then that he came into my office his fat little face shining with enthusiasm, and told me of his unusual plans for the silver anniversary. His





bright eyes shone as he explained the thing, and I'll confess that I was pretty well confused; not alone because his plan was very sentimental and profoundly impressive, but mainly because it was quiet, dull, old George Potter who was planning this thing--the very George Potter who had lived a quiet life since his second marriage and who had avoided social contacts.

According to what George told me, he was doing this thing for Esther's sake. "It'll please her," he explained. "Women like that sort of thing, you know--and this seems to me a real idea. You have to be a part of it, because you were the best man when Esther and I were married. It's just a gesture on my part--a sort of sacrifice to please the old lady."

I'll say this to George; he didn't do things halfway. Instead of the usual party, he presented a perfect duplication of his marriage to Esther twenty-five years before. There was even the same minister--very old now--and the same violinist who had played "Oh, Promise Me" at the other ceremony. A good many of the original guests were there: most of us rather gray-haired now. But the thing was very impressive: Esther in the same bridal dress she had worn twenty-five years before--let out around the hips perhaps--and carrying a bouquet of bride roses; even a person to carry the ring. It was great fun and very impressive where one might have expected it to be absurd.

As for Esther, I never saw a woman look more beautiful. She took on an aura of genuine beauty. Of course she would have been less than human and far from feminine to have failed to respond to this magnificent exhibition of husbandly devotion. George himself was as frightened as he had been on the occasion of their first wedding.

But finally the ceremony was finished and the guests went to the dining room for the rich supper which had been prepared by special cooks employed for this occasion. George and I were left alone and he sank exhausted into a chair. I placed my hand on his shoulder and congratulated him on the success of his party.

"You really think it was a success?"

"Wonderful! And," jokingly, "you certainly should feel completely married."

"Yes, I do." He became silent for a moment or two, and when he spoke again it was in a deeply serious tone. "There's something I've got to explain to you as my friend and my lawyer." He stopped for a second, and then asked suddenly: "You remember my first wife?"

"Althea?" I was surprised by the question. "Certainly."

"Did you know," he went on in a strange voice, "that she died only then last year?"

"Good Lord! I thought she died twenty-seven years ago."

"So did I," he said quietly. "And when I married Esther, I thought I was a widower. But I wasn't--and in case anything ever comes up--well, I want you to understand that affair tonight was a real wedding for Esther and me."

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*Octavus Roy Cohen lived at times in Birmingham, Alabama, from 1909 till 1935 and was known for his scripting of many of the original Amos 'n' Andy radio shows. The above story is being published as an example of his mainstream writing.*

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*Commentary from Birmingham Archivist Jim Baggett:*

*Octavus Roy Cohen is a writer with a troubled legacy. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, to Jewish parents in 1891, Cohen graduated from Clemson College and came to Birmingham around 1909 to work as an engineer at Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company. He also worked for the sports department of the Birmingham Ledger. Cohen drifted for a few years, writing for newspapers in South Carolina and New Jersey, before returning to Birmingham. From about 1917 to 1935 he lived on Southside with his wife Inez and worked as a full time writer, reportedly suffering more than 130 rejections before one of his stories was accepted by The Saturday Evening Post. Cohen was a remarkably prolific writer and the most successful Birmingham author of his time. With several other newspaper men and writers he formed a literary club, jokingly named "The Loafers." The group included Jack Bethea, probably Birmingham's best novelist of the era, and James Saxon Childers, who became a widely known writer of fiction and nonfiction who is still read today. The club provided a place in industrial Birmingham for men with literary talent or just literary pretensions to gather and share their writing and ideas. After leaving Birmingham, Cohen lived in New York and California and died in Los Angeles in 1959.*

*Cohen produced dozens of detective novels and short story collections. He wrote radio plays, movie scripts and stage productions. But he is most remembered as the author of comic short stories featuring docile and dimwitted black characters living in Birmingham. It was a type of fiction popular at the time in stories, movies and on radio. Reminiscent of minstrel shows, these stories by Cohen and others portrayed African Americans as alternately obtuse and conniving, speaking in thick dialect that white readers found amusing. Cohen invented one of literature's first African American private detectives, Florian Slappey. But the Slappey stories are out of favor today because they contain the same exaggerated dialect and buffoonery found in other Cohen race tales.*

*Aside from his racial fiction, Cohen is an interesting and somewhat accomplished author. But discussing Cohen today requires a light touch, lest interest be misinterpreted as approval. And Birmingham, a community that tries to claim any celebrity no matter how tenuous the connection, dares not embrace him.*

## **STILLWATER**

Peter Gray

Close your eyes, and reflections mean nothing.  
Glass is just glass, water just water, and there are no duplicates of anything.  
There is just darkness.  
Pinpricks of light jostle your perfect blackness.  
Ignore them.  
They will fade away in the end.  
When the moon rises, everything will be still and calm,  
and you could not see anything anyway.  
You are surrounded in pristine, unmoving night, and the crickets moan around you. Splash the water, and vision echoes. Your eyes were vacant.  
You do not see the ripples you've created.

.....

*Peter Gray is a 17-year-old creative writer at the Alabama School of Fine Arts in Birmingham, Alabama. He spends most of his spare time observing water, refrigerators, windows, and other things people don't tend to write about. Then, he writes about them.*

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## **CITYSCAPE**

Joe Ceraso

Acrylic on Illustration Board, 14" x 11"

*Joe Ceraso grew up in Alabama, trained as a commercial artist, and now lives and paints "outsider art" in Dallas, North Carolina. More of his work may be seen at [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com); [ceraso5@yahoo.com](mailto:ceraso5@yahoo.com)*

## THE ETERNAL FLAME

Rowland Scherman

Now they were clearly seen, and all knew: they were not of this world. We were being visited from beyond the stars.

The Visitors approached us in the grey dawn. We had sensed their presence for a long time before we saw them. We had heard the thunder of their levitation device. As there were only two of them, our ranks held them in scant fear, but of course the interest among us could not have been more intense. The entire colony had emerged, and was straining for a view, but the Wise One ordered that the young and the females be protected by us, the Warriors. We numbered, full strength, forty score and nine. As I was Captain of the Warriors, I stood immediately to the right of the Wise One, and had a perfect, unobstructed view of the unfolding pageant. I instinctively moved forward and to the right of our leader, ready to ward off, with my armor, any hostile thrust to his security. I ordered the other Warriors to stand ready. Closer still came the strange pair, until they had reached the edge of our home camp.

The alien Visitors were about our size, a little larger perhaps, but they seemed denser, heavier. They moved with difficulty. Their breathing was audible, quite different. Their gait was ungainly, odd, and a bit comical, as they seemed to barely plod along, almost toppling at every step. Yet on they came, straight toward us. The slowest of us could outrun them with pitiful ease should this strange encounter become dangerous. Yet they never did lose their balance, nor did they make any gestures that threatened. On their backs were canisters of two different sizes, connected to their heads with tubing. But it was their beautiful white metallic armor, and their visors gleaming in the now-warming light that most fascinated us. The females especially were giddy with pleasure, whispering among themselves and giggling about how sex could be performed and whether the metallic substance of the strangers' bodies could be imparted to their own during the act. The Wise One grumbled some words of discouragement for this banter, benign as it was. All fell silent instantly.

The Visitors halted, after having approached us several meters closer than made me quite comfortable for the safety of the Wise One. Then, remarkably, they sounded. They spoke with us. The communication was low and garbled at first, and totally unclear. Then, as they manipulated a device attached to the chest of the second Visitor, their words gained



clarity. They raised their arms in an approximation of our sign of peace, and said the following words:

-- We bring you greeting from our planet, which is far from here. We do not wish any harm to you.

"Thank you," said the Wise One. "You are welcome." The confidence of our leader was inspiring. To me he turned and whispered that he didn't believe they could harm us even if they wanted to.

Our visitors had obviously not foreseen that our confidence would be so high as not to be astounded by their arrival. We wanted to know what they wanted. They wanted to know how our lives differed from theirs. They asked about what we ate, how we lived, everything. The Wise One answered all, graciously. Then the visitor spoke again.

-- Tell me of your faith, said the Visitor.

"Somehow I knew, dear Visitor, or perhaps we all knew, that our colony would be the ones to find the tower. We are the chosen ones, as your presence here indicates. My function, as was true of all Searchers, was merely to locate the Source of Life, as was foretold. The meaning of our existence would then be revealed. I was young and strong, as were we all. We had the skill and the training. We had survived in places where none had ventured before, and from where none save us had returned. There were poisons, lethal gases, some said. We had no idea how long the Search had progressed in other quadrants. Some said the fabled tower had already yielded its secrets ...

-- the tower? Asked the Visitor.

"Yes. A place of reverence. I shall explain. The Holy Ones had told us of the Creator's wisdom: the basic needs were provided as a Gift. The Gift. And It must be uncovered--by us--in order for the colony--our race--to survive and prosper. The Tower is the Source, they said. Yes. The Tower is the Source of All Life."

The Wise One, I noticed, warmed to the telling of the Tale, as did we all.

"In the beginning, or, what we thought was the beginning, we were simply there. We didn't know where to seek this ... thing, or even what it was we were seeking. And even beyond, we didn't know it really ever existed. But we believed, because we were taught to believe, that in the tower, if it could be found, lay the answer. One must believe in Something, is it not so? It is the font of our salvation, as the evidence of history has proclaimed. And now revealed. The Tower is the gift of the Creator."

-- Could you tell us more of this ... tower? asked the Visitors.

"Certainly. I will tell all. When I was young, it was said that many, or at least several, of the primeval relics had been uncovered. Yet they, like all the others revealed since I had become a Searcher, had proved inaccessible or incomplete, thereby rendering them unworthy of consideration by the Holy Ones, whose task it was to activate the towers for the benefit of the colony--those of us who survived. All evidence, all history, was unquestionably rooted in the belief that in the tower lay the answer. If it could be found.

"And there were others, whose faith was already suspect, who disavowed the very existence of what we had been told was the Source of Life. That our searches had been unsuccessful was not the only strength of the doubting ones, because, although their numbers were depleted--I myself had dispatched nine of the wretches with lethal thrusts--they appeared to be a colony far richer than ours. They had more time to gather while we scattered. We searched. Many of us died from hardship and exposure. But our faith gave us strength. So we continued to be the Searchers, they, the gatherers. In the end, only we survived. You know why, now."

-- Because you found it? The tower?

"Yes! But let me continue ... In our quest, we came upon the remains of giant fallen monsters who roamed this land before us ... We studied their bone structure, for theirs was of such a girth as no other. Their giant size told of massive strength. Their weight must have been such that the earth trembled when they walked. Here we remembered the words of the Holy Ones: physical power alone shall not lead them to prevail. From what age these behemoths had come, no one could tell. Nor could it ever be known how they had failed. Had they, too, fallen in the search? Or was all existence and the search for meaning merely a joke on the part of the Creator?" The Wise One turned to the Visitors, adding weight to this deeper question with his expression. He was in fullness of his certainty and power. "Was life itself to be merely a vain struggle to find a non-existent tower? Obviously, dear Visitors, because they had expired, they had not found the secret of life.

"And nor, at that time, had we. But we were stronger. We persevered. There were those who had seen it in this very quadrant ... or so it was told. And then, 4 moons ago, here in the land of Ƴpø?øp, our search finally met with success. There IS a Tower, complete, working, magnificent. There IS the Holy Water inside, to be seen by all. It is like a miracle. You must have seen it, hence your arrival here. Perhaps it was the heat? The warmth?"

The Visitors gave no answer.

-- will you show us the tower? asks the visitor.

"Of course. Follow our group, if you will. It is not so far from here.

Can you levitate?" responded the wise one.

-- with my jetpac, yes. Without it none of us can. But ... why? Can you levitate without added mechanical devices?

"Of course," said the Wise One.

-- Show us, please, said the visitor.

The Wise One moved away from the guard ranks and sat for a moment, as if thinking about something other than showing these silver oafs something so simple as levitation. Then he lifted off the surface, quite slowly and deliberately, turned around twice and landed softly. No one had ever used the levitation technique so gracefully. The Wise One's demonstration was art. Sometimes levitation was used for getting out of danger or to cross passages when the trail wouldn't allow normal traversing. It was quick and exhausting, and few could achieve it. It was said that Those that could, were blessed with the ancient ways, and usually survived.

The visitors were duly and decidedly impressed.

The Wise One concluded: "We know so much more since the tower is found. We know all there all that we need to know. Perhaps all there is to know. It has taken us to the very gate of realizing the meaning of existence ... and so, let us therefore go to it. "

Our colony, happy that the Wise One had proclaimed a Holy Day, banded together and moved in the direction of our wondrous discovery. The Visitors boarded a ridiculous-looking small craft, which, instead of legs, had discs that turned. It made a whirring sound and seemed to hobble along behind us, straining over the hills. It was almost as slow as the visitors themselves, but the journey progressed. We arrived in darkness.

Finally there it was, gleaming in the moonlight: silent, austere, elegant and yet ... secretive--barely hinting at the power that lay within. At its peak, a shining crown which completed the perfection of its cosmic form, so simple, yet so beyond any duplication. From where could this sublime thing, this technology, have come? Certainly not from here. The burnished icons showed in stark relief--etched forever into its metallic crown.

We crowded around our beloved tower, each to his assigned post. At a nod from the Wise One we began to chant our Liturgy based on the Ancient Principles:

PLUS IS FOR THE HOLY DAYS! MINUS FOR THE OTHER  
TIMES! PLUS IS GOOD ... BIG ---! MINUS IS SMALL ... BLESSED IS  
THE SMALL...!.....AHHHHHHH.

The Wise One, his eyes moist with reverence, turned to the Visitors and said: "Of course, all has not been revealed, and yet we must forevermore need to have faith in the tower--we are still studying the fuller meanings, it's true relevance ... Perhaps you have arrived to help us with the meaning ... ?" He waited for the Visitors to answer, but the Visitors reaction was strangely cold. "Look," explained the Wise One, "we have deciphered its holy Name, after careful burnishing. Its Name is ... "

The visitors seemed almost amused. They turned to each other and made indecipherable sounds and turned back to the Wise One. To him they said nothing. At that moment, the ingenious contrivance that allowed the tower to light was employed, and for us the world changed. In the glow, the wonderful warmth, our whole colony basked in beatitude and we began to dance. Yes, dance we did, more spirited than I can remember. No one, except myself, noticed the visitors climbing back into their ridiculous machine to roll clumsily away to the larger craft that brought them. No one noticed because at that moment our religious fervor had truly begun.

"TOWER IS LIGHTED! LET US SING!" We were once again caught in the wondrous ecstasy of adoration. We swayed. We beamed. We were in awe. Then the colony, as one insect, clasped each others' primary antennae.

And we sang: "BIC ... BIC ... BIC ... !"

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*Rowland Scherman studied fine arts at Oberlin College and in 1957 became an apprentice at Life Magazine. He was the first photographer for the newly-formed Peace Corps in 1961 and shot editorial, fashion, and covers for such magazines as Life, Look, Time, National Geographic, Paris Match and Playboy. In 1968 he won a Grammy Award for that year's Best Album Cover, as well as the Washington DC Art Director's Award for Photographer of the Year. His work appears in several published books and he has lived in Wales, England, Alabama and Cape Cod. Scherman has now returned to his first love, portraiture, and is continually inspired, as so many artists are, by the majestic Cape light.*  
*photomoto@comcast.net*

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## DESTINATIONS

Julie Yi

Digital Photograph

*Julie Yi is currently a student residing in Birmingham, Alabama. She dedicates her time to poetry and photography. Her work has appeared in numerous literary and art magazines. [jy3849@gmail.com](mailto:jy3849@gmail.com)*

## PROVINCETOWN SPRING

Jeannette Angell

There was another suicide yesterday on the beach, by the sea: the dunes  
behind him, the ocean in front, on the second day of April, I

couldn't help but wonder: if he managed to hang in through the hard  
winter, could he not see the promise of spring? Out here, they give  
themselves to the ocean,

the voluntary dead, jumping off the pier, swinging over the harbor,  
swimming out to sea, bodies kissed by the waves, their last thoughts of  
tides and currents and fish, or perhaps

of calm nothingness, of grayness, of peace that it is all finally over:  
Whatever it was that caused them such pain. That is the way I imagine it;  
but I am also a child of the sea,

I know how to feel safe in its darkness. I know, too, what they forget, the  
suicides of April, that the sea is not your friend: it can turn on you at any  
time and rip

you to shreds. The fishermen know, and they do not number among those  
who choose to die this way; drowning is too real to them, too close, too  
many times boats leave

this harbor, gay bright paint chipping off their bows but the call of the fish  
out there pulling them toward the horizon until they try too hard, or for  
too long, or maybe it's not

their fault: she takes even those who do not wish to be taken, even those  
who don't make a mistake. She pounds them onto the shoreline, bits of  
bright flotsam and

ghost nets, and away down the beach, the one choosing to stop, the one  
choosing to stop loving the sea that he surfs and loving it instead as he dies,  
that one may even pause

before he acts to see the terrible strength of the one to which he gives  
himself, pause and sigh if he looks around him, if he wonders at the end of  
the day which of them it is ... who has won.

.....

*Jeannette Angell is a novelist, playwright, and sometime poet who lives and works  
in an old sea captain's house on the tip of Cape Cod. More at  
[www.jeannetteangell.com](http://www.jeannetteangell.com).*

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## **MUSKMELON MYSTIC**

Meagan McDaniel

Summer brings  
the phrenology of melons,  
wrinkled fingers honed to read  
the dips, the pocks, the ridges.

Eyes closed, pursed lips blow  
silent incantation  
over sweet-scented orbs.

Cantaloupe, the Madame's table  
has an opening for you.

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*See bio page 48.*

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## NIGHTSONG IN THE GEORGIAN HIGHLANDS

Ramsey Archibald

The old south, where the bullfrogs sing choruses to the sleepy youth, where chirping crickets add their ground-up fiddles to the mix, and the Australian outback, didgeridoo and all, bleeds its forgotten notes into that same Georgia night, and the sounds swirl, not as if stirred, but as if blended, with rocks and diamonds tossed among the metal blades and deep, low-pitched warbles of that nightsong, and all there is is gentle, eccentric clatter, bright lights that penetrate the soul in the dark of the fair grounds, and hurried breaths of tall destriers, fogging the spring air, lips curled in what, to them, must be the most devilish smile possible. There's no saddle to mount, though, and he runs riderless into the night, clippity-cloppity and dirt rains behind him. There is such a thing as a child lost in that night, adding his tired-hungry cries, the vane search for his mother, to that nightsong, and the motors of the too-far-away cars, and the hum of those motors, and how they quiver and click, and how the changing of gears lurches the whole damn thing considerably, and how I can't help but jump when a loud blast, like a car backfire or a gun wakes the whole camp, and the nightsong dies into nothing, and there is a silence for a moment, and then, somewhere off in the night, human voices: "what was that?" and things just like it. Eventually those fade, too, and I am left alone in the deep south, and then come the bullfrogs, and then come the crickets, chirping or grinding on their ancient, godmade fiddles, and then the strangers in the night, spiders and scorpions and the far off cry of a siren, too distant to be of concern, but still promising chaos. Three storms converge upon the mountain, adding whistling wind to the pure dark, notes so high pitched that the king in the night only squints and listens, aware that his dog can hear, but he can't, and mad because of it, because he is the composer of this song, and these storms have no right. This, apparently, is why we hold our ground. Go figure. In the end, I guess we are all the same, all men with a collective unconscious, if Carl Jung can be believed. The secret is, though, that he can't, and the only thing that unites us under this big banner of humanity is this sound, the throat singing of the thousands, the heavy mating moans of bullfrogs, and the symphony of the crickets, chirping too loud.

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*Ramsey Archibald is a rising senior at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. He has attended that school since seventh grade. He was born and raised in Birmingham, living much of his life in Roebuck and later Mountain Brook. Both of his parents work for the Birmingham News, and it was they who inspired him to start writing.*

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## FLY

Laura Sobbott Ross

1.

There were starlings at my grandmother's house,  
nesting in the empty chimney flue of the spare bedroom  
where my mother and I stayed every other June.  
We heard their hunger rise in the morning  
the way the summer heat crept through  
dark flood nourished soil, and palmetto roots  
and still lace curtains, like a fire.

The horizon beyond was so flat you were sure  
your neighbors on the other side of it could hear you think.

2.

My grandmother plucked long silver strands  
from her brush and wrapped them in an oblong knot  
my brothers found one morning  
and put into an empty mayonnaise jar,  
mistaking it for the cocoon of something more exotic  
than June bugs or fireflies.  
A creature that would awaken  
to lunge its papery wings at the perforated sky  
and the moons of their eyeballs.

3.

My mother never liked her collarbone,  
and even in summer was always careful  
beneath her sleeveless turtlenecks  
to hide what I grew to believe  
was the one of the most beautiful parts  
of a woman's body—  
where the clavicle splayed out  
from the delicate ligaments of the throat  
like the wings of a bird in flight.

4.

I was so timid that I used to think  
my own heart was a hummingbird.  
I was sure that people could see it—  
bright frantic wings beating  
their way out of my placid flesh.  
Its ruby throat a splotch of red heat  
that had begun to spread outward  
through lace and ligaments  
and jar lids and rooftops and inquisitive moons,  
until consuming every flat mile  
that ached, thirsty as tinder,  
far beyond the scorched horizon.

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*Laura Sobbott Ross has been nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize in the past two years, and her poetry appears or is forthcoming in The Columbia Review, Natural Bridge, Tar River Poetry, Slow Trains, and The Caribbean Writer, among many others. She was recently named a finalist in the Creekwalker Poetry Prize, and a semi-finalist in the Black Lawrence Press Chapbook Contest.*

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**“Imitation is the sincerest form of  
insult.”**

**--Elbert Hubbard**

## RITA'S

Jackson Ellis

The only light on after midnight could be found at Rita's Tavern. It was a biker hangout, a tourist trap, a locals' pub, an old man bar, and where the kids drank, because there was no place else to go.

It was late July. The air conditioner had been broken since Memorial Day when it shorted out and sent a stream of fumes and sparks into the ladies' room, so I sat by the open window, trying to stay cool. Moths fluttered in all around me, and the bartender, Stan, was wiping down the countertop with one hand and waving a flyswatter with the other. I'd never seen anyone else behind the bar, and I admired his efficiency until he brought the swatter down on my head. He grinned and threw the towel over his left shoulder. I pulled moth wings from my hair.

"Hey, Stan, why do they call this place Rita's?"

"Some woman who worked here about thirty years ago, I don't know--she was here for only one summer. She left, but her name stayed."

"That's an odd legacy, if you ask me."

"Probably more than I'll ever leave behind. And I've been here a long time now," he said, stacking clean pint glasses at the base of the gantry. "I left Jersey over a decade ago, when I was about your age. I thought I'd stay a few months but I can't seem to get out."

I didn't pursue conversation. While Stan's back was turned toward me I took a peanut bowl and went to the pool table to play solo before the tiny bar got too crowded.

Nearly every person I met in Whitehorse was from someplace else, far away. I met people who'd traveled to the small Montana town from New England and Ohio, Alaska and California, Hawaii and Florida, Colorado and Ontario. They arrived here as I, alone, lured by wild dreams in the Big Sky. We forged forgetful friendships, as our transient lives would allow little more. I immersed myself, like the others at Rita's, in a large pond with few fish--which is why, I suppose, we schooled together in the evenings in our shallow pool.

I played two quick games and was racking the billiards for a third.

"Hey buddy, you gonna let anyone else play tonight?" slurred a park ranger who came straight to the bar each night after work. "I've been waiting for hours!" He stumbled over and tried to take the rack out of my

hand. I willfully relinquished it and stepped out of the teeming bar onto the patio.

Several couples sat with their arms around each other. A few others stood on the porch steps, scratching the ears of a couple neighborhood mongrels that wandered over, sloshing their drinks onto the paved parking lot.

It was always peaceful out in front of Rita's; a slight breeze shivered the Douglas fir and beargrass, carrying with it the scent of lupines in full bloom, and in the distance the Flathead River coursed with bubbling white noise. I had my hands in my jeans pockets and kicked a stone, and let out a gentle sigh.

I looked up to gaze at the stars and dream. Instead, I was shocked by the sight of the sky glowing crimson--a distant forest fire, perhaps, breaking out finally as so many had predicted? No. The red swelled and faded and the navy canvas of space looked as if it would burst apart, twisting, rippling, pulsating with iridescent waves of magnetism. Streams of solar winds, striations rolling across the heavens in oceanic waves of color, hues of purple and green.

I stood looking up, alone in the parking lot in front of Rita's, until a leather-clad biker couple stepped off the porch and joined me. Others lounging against the railing realized what we were witnessing. They crushed their cigarettes and lowered their bottles and pint glasses, leaped up the steps and into the bar to retrieve their friends. Soon the whole tavern had emptied, even Stan, with his apron tied to his waist, dishrag in hand.

The galaxy stormed. We stood in silence, bunched together in the little lot, heads tipped back, mouths agape, eyes and faces reflecting the fluorescent patterns of the northern lights. We stood in silence for an immeasurable time, lost in the corona, until someone in the crowd dropped a beer bottle and it shattered on the blacktop in a startling clatter, breaking our trance and bringing us back.

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*Jackson Ellis is editor and publisher of Verbicide Magazine. His work has appeared in The Vermont Literary Review, Broken Pencil, and Zisk, as well as online publications The Heron's Nest and Chinmusic. He lives in Ludlow, Vermont. [jackson@scissorpress.com](mailto:jackson@scissorpress.com)*

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## ALL FOR JUST FIFTY BAHT

Joel Willans

Sincee crouches down next to an old woman sitting beside cages packed with sparrows, swallows and weavers. The birds bounce around, chittering and flapping and eyeing Sincee while she undoes her pink heels. Even though it's morning, the pavement outside Wat Ratchapradit is busy. In Bangkok every hour is rush hour, but inside the temple she knows it will be cool and peaceful. It's beautiful, too, and difficult to find. Maybe her farang will get lost. Maybe she won't have to answer his question after all.

"Want to get rid of your sorrows, child? Only fifty baht for a swallow, seventy-five for a pair." The old woman flaps her hands. "They fly so high they touch the heavens."

"First I have to think, and the quiet in Buddha's house is good for that."

The old woman grins. "Why not a bird first? One now, one after you speak with Lord Buddha. Think of all the good it will do for your karma. Give life to another creature, all for just fifty baht."

Sincee smiles. Though the old woman talks like a street hustler, she reminds her of her grandmother. Sincee counts on her fingers. Nearly eight months since she left Chiang Mai. It feels longer.

"If Grandmother is to get better, we need money. There is no other choice," her mother said. "You must go south."

What else could she do? She didn't mean to end up in Patpong, but the treatments were expensive and the wages were so much better in the bar. The men were mostly okay and some, like her farang, were even friendly.

Tiptoeing down the steps, Sincee realises she has forgotten to remove her silver nail varnish. She feels exposed but carries on in, head bowed towards the golden Buddha sitting cross-legged inside. Kneeling in front of him, she breathes in the sandalwood and jasmine until her throat tastes sweet. Two monks, boy apprentices in mustard robes, sit at the side chanting soft words. Flowers, yellow roses and violet lotuses, lie at Buddha's feet. Some still beautiful, other wilted and old.

She tries to clear her mind but finds herself looking at the monks. Each wears a frown on his smooth, round face. They know what she is. When her farang comes and speaks with his strange voice, she is sure the

monks will smirk at each other. Despite their glares, the temple calms her. She stares at the garlands. They make her think of herself in ten, twenty years. Only Buddha's smile comforts her and she realises that her farang often looks at her with the same expression. Feeling a little better, she lights a stick of incense.

She hears her farang's voice before she sees him. It sounds like a cat yawning.

"Hey Sinee, it's me! Sorry I'm late, baby, it's been a hell of a place to find. Goddamn Tuk Tuk driver didn't speak a word of English. You want me to wait outside while you do your thing?" She nearly nods, but he might touch her before he leaves and she doesn't want that. Not here. Not in front of the boy monks. She gets up, bows and goes to him.

"This place is amazing, and you look great. You don't know how much I've missed you. You'd never think I'd just seen you just yesterday." His grin stretches his chubby, shiny features. He dabs his head with a blue handkerchief. She tries to smile at him, feeling sorry that he has to lumber around the sopping city in his bloated body.

"I got you this." He hands her a necklace with a jade S. "I hope you like it. I thought it'd go great with your eyes."

She thanks him and slips it in her pocket.

"Have you made up your mind yet?"

"I tell you outside."

The monks' gazes flitter around her like startled moths. She ignores them. Her farang tries to take her hand in his damp paw but she pulls it away. Outside, the sun has cleared a path through the tin-coloured sky. There has been no monsoon today, but the world still smells like an old sponge. Sinee puts her shoes back on and listens to her farang's soft smokers wheeze.

"I haven't been anywhere 'round here before. I've been to that big old temple. Wat Po. That's pretty damn impressive, but this is somehow nicer. I can't put my finger on it. It's almost like it's sprouted right out the earth. Do you know what I mean?"

He talks too much, even more when he is nervous. She wonders if she'll ever be able to handle his constant noise.

He nods at the old woman. "They didn't have any birds in cages at Wat Po, though."

"They aren't for tourists," Sinee says.

He grins and stares as Sinee, walks towards the old woman and hands her a new note. "I'll take two swallows, please."

The old woman snatches the money and reaches inside the nearest cage. With two quick jerks she grabs the birds and hands them over. Cupped in her hands, Sinee can feel their little hearts beating faster and faster.

"What will you do with them? Careful of their beaks, baby." He puts his arm around her and she flinches.

"Will you be happy in Chicago without all this?" he asks.

Sinee holds the birds tighter, and pictures the faces of her family in the haze of her mind. Then she remembers the way the monks looked at her, her grandmother's sickness and the flowers around Buddha, beauty gone, wilting. She sighs, kisses the swallows, whispers a few words and throws them as high as she can into the sky. When they are nothing more than swirling specks of black, she turns to her farang and answers his question.

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

*joel.willans@konsepti.fi. NOTE: Farang means "non-Asian foreigner, [usually] Caucasian."*

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**"All bad art is the result of good intentions."**

**--Oscar Wilde**

## I AM FROM CLAY

Meagan McDaniel

I am from clay  
clay that is red and slides through fingers  
like worms  
clay that worms into the crevices of boots  
and weighs them down

I am from graves  
from dirt thrown on graves  
from pencil-rubbings of gravestones  
from ashes to ashes  
and dust to dust

I am from starlings on power lines  
I am from flightless  
voiceless birds  
I am from silhouettes like music notes  
I am from birds

I am from hedgehog husks of chestnuts  
from walking barefoot on green pinecones  
from throwing sweet gum balls  
from the helicopter spin of maple seeds  
and their dry snap when I break them

I am from worms on Catalpa trees  
I am from shoulders as tall as trees  
I am from the knobs and ropey bark  
of cedar trunks  
and bent arms of crape myrtles



I am from red red dust and pine needles  
from frogs at night  
and lightning bugs  
I am from June bugs on strings  
from the thin pink spines of bottle rockets

I am from dead dogs and armadillos  
I am from cattails by the side of the road  
I am from crows and turkey vultures  
scratching at the dirt  
I am from clay

.....

*Meagan McDaniel is a recent graduate of the University of South Alabama currently residing in Leeds, Alabama. She is a winner of the Steve and Angelia Stokes and Shelley Memorial Undergraduate poetry scholarships and a regional coordinator in the Poetry Out Loud recitation competition for high school students. Her poetry has been published in the Oracle Fine Arts Review.*

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## **RAINGAZING**

Peter Gray

hazel eyes sip dew,  
then bloom like drunk hummingbirds  
on tomorrow's cusp.

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*See bio on page 28.*

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