

Birmingham Arts Journal

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Table of Contents

NOONSENSE	Frank Dawson	1
A PHOTOGRAPH ON GRADUATION DAY	Carey Link	4
ESCAPE #1	Kevin Whitman	5
OUT HIGHWAY 25 WEST	Errol Miller	6
THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA	Barbara Crane	8
LEAVES	Kim Hagar	15
THE MAGICIAN SURFACES	Graham Cotten	18
SONNET 88	Amy Trousdale	19
INSIDE THE BOX	Darren Casey Griffin	20
5:30 A.M. - OCTOBER 23, 2004	Elizabeth Hurst Downs	22
APPALACHIAN PUMPKIN PATCH	Walt Curlee	24-25
IN THE PICTURE	Barry Curtis	26
JEW'S OPTIONS	Geoff Langdon	27
THE WORLD'S GREATEST HARBOR	Jim Ferguson	32
HIS SHIRTS	Wynne Huddleston	33
VEGETABLE STAND	Tom Gordon	34
DRIVING MY MOTHER	Hannah Craig	35
ALOHA, RICKY LANKFORD	Marian Carcache	36
TYBEE SUNDAY	H.D. Whatley	39
THE SCARF OF MANY COLORS	Darlene Gray	40
DEAD MOCKINGBIRD	Teresa Thorne	42
BELINDA	Leslie Paige Nuby	44
THE MADHATTER'S TEAHOUSE, SAN ANTONIO	Cindy Tanquary Peavy	45
LANE DANCERS	Glenda Slater	47
JUNKER JUNKIE	Jim Reed	78

Front Cover: **MISS ELECTRA**, Digital Photograph

Stuart Frentz' photography is characterized by his lavish use of digitized color enhancement. During the day his job is tax partner with the Birmingham office of Bradley Arant Rose & White, the largest law firm in Alabama. At night and on weekends, he creates portraits of the Birmingham area.

http://jenniferharwellart.com/artists/Stuart_Frentz/ sfrantz@babc.com

"Miss Electra" is located atop the downtown Alabama Power building. The company commissioned sculptor Edward Field Sanford, Jr. of New York to design Miss Electra in 1925. At that time the idea of a sculpture --especially one of a nude woman--atop a public building was new and controversial. When Miss Electra was hoisted into place in 1926, she didn't have an official name. Newspapers were probably the first to call her "Miss Electra." The gleaming Miss Electra is visible from much of the downtown area and from area expressways. She was inspected, cleaned and regilded in 1996, her 70th birthday. Stats for "Miss Electra":

Cast in bronze, covered with gold leaf

Weight: 4,000 pounds

Height: 23 feet

Height above street: 200 feet

**Source APC website*

Back Cover: **ALCHEMICAL REACTION**, Mixed Media

Jesse Lindsay is a freelance artist, currently living in Portland, Oregon, after hitch hiking around the states for about 6 years, stopping in various cities and selling art to tattoo shops, galleries and anywhere else that worked at the time. Much of his work in the public sphere includes book illustrations, film projects and collaborations with various musicians and galleries around the world as well as a collected personal works project, which is to be released soon. www.jesselindsay.com sinslave@gmail.com

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NOONSENSE

Frank Dawson

“You probably didn’t notice, but there was a hair on the cheese plate. Next time--I mean, I appreciate your helping with the supper--but God! A hair. I hope Sally didn’t notice. I’m sure she did. I guess she thought that I was the rudest thing. I grabbed the plate from her hand and took the piece of cheese with the hair on it.”

“Yeah. Well, next time you can fix the supper.”

“I’m really grateful for your help. We’d never have gotten the patterns cut, and the time zipped by so fast. I appreciate it, Honey.”

“Do you think she saw it? I doubt if she noticed a hair. I didn’t see a hair. Are you sure?”

“You never see them. My lunch. Well, I won’t mention my lunch. Do you know that sometimes the celery is so dirty I have to hide it from the others at the table? The least you could do is wash it.”

“You wash it! Get it clean when you first open it.”

“You can’t see a thing! You can’t help it, I suppose, if you can’t see, but you could be more careful.”

“Don’t talk. I don’t want to hear you.”

I thought of these words later in the bathroom. It was bright and warm, although there was a biting winter wind whining at the window. Late rays of sun were flickering through the bony limbs of our finest dogwood and making crystal patterns on the curtains.

Then it caught my eye. As I leaned over to straighten the magazines on the parson’s table in the corner, I saw a rectangular piece of Scotch tape about two inches long. I hadn’t noticed it before. It had been only about a half hour since my last trip to the john. This particular weekend I had made it my unofficial headquarters. The tape had a strange luminous quality about it. A soft, velvety shine. It was stupid. There I sat staring at a piece of magic mending tape.

“Bring out the dirty clothes basket when you finish.”

I could smell the lunch. I could hear her calling. But I found myself unable to respond. I was watching the tape move across the floor toward me.

“Did you hear what I said? I swear! I don’t know which is worse, your hearing or your eyesight. I’ll do it when you come out--that is, if you ever do.”

It was near my foot. I rubbed my eyes. It touched the end of my sock, and I grabbed the edge of the sink as I slid limply to the floor.

Beneath my ear I could hear the water in the basement humidifier come on. In a moment the furnace would start. My face was over the register, my eyes glued open. The tape was somewhere in the room, crawling along slowly.

“Are you sick or something? Come on before this stuff gets cold.”

Maybe she would pull back the folding door. If she saw me curled around the commode with such a transfixed look on my face, she’d go into the chest-pounding, mouth-to-mouth routine without even noticing the tape.

I grabbed the bottom of the shower curtain and popped it loose. It fell softly over the commode and my legs.

“What are you doing? Don’t get any big project started. This is ready.”

Out of the corner of my right eye I could see something moving. It was edging between the bathmat and the baseboard. The furnace gushed hot air into my nostrils. My hair flopped across my forehead.

The softest, smoothest sensation now ran through the nerves of my right cheek and the area around my eye. I caught a glimpse of the tape moving ever so slightly. Its forward edge was sliding past the crow’s feet, and the entire piece was finding its way in front of my eye.

“You can come out when you want to, but I’m going to eat. This bulgar won’t keep warm forever.”

The edge of the tape began to curl itself under my upper right eyelid. Tears poured out and ran down the edge of my nose and were blown back into my face by the furnace wind.

“Ohh—Ohh,” I managed feebly.

“I’m eating! If you don’t mind!”

“Agggh,” I groaned as the trailing end of the tape grated underneath my eyelid. It had disappeared, but I could feel it traveling into the passage that connects the nose and eye. The pain! A sickening shudder enveloped my body.

I could close my eyes now. I rolled over slowly and pulled my chest up to the commode and leaned over it.

I was on my feet. My head was killing me. I opened the folding door, moved over to the table and plopped down in the chair. "I've got another headache. This one's a killer."

"Well, have you thought of taking something? I guess we're eating too late. What caused it? When are you going to do something about those things? You could call the doctor for a prescription."

"It's not one of my usual headaches this time."

"Well, what is it? Can you eat something? No, that never works."

"I've got a two-inch piece of magic mending tape up in one of those tubes that connect your eye and your nose."

"What? How on earth did it get there?"

"It was on the bathroom floor. It crawled up and went under my eyelid."

"I've got to take my sewing machine to Mr. Summers in a little while. Before I go I need to finish those clothes."

I watched her get up with plate and cup, deposit them in the sink and head to the bathroom for the dirty underwear.

"What on earth have you done to this shower curtain? Really!"

.....
Frank Dawson is an award-winning author and retired high school English teacher residing in Leeds, Alabama. bjoandawson@bellsouth.net
.....

***"I might as well be myself.
Everyone else is taken."***

--Oliver Stone

A PHOTOGRAPH ON GRADUATION DAY

Carey Link

They cheer my name—
the digital zooms—
an amalgamation
of colors slide—
water-like
because
I didn't stop...

.....
*Carey Link is employed at Redstone Arsenal. Her poetry has appeared in several
publications. She lives in Huntsville, Alabama.*
.....

*“The art of a thing is, first, its
aim, and next, its manner of
accomplishment.”*

--C.N. Bovee



ESCAPE #1

Kevin Whitman
Mixed Media on Canvas
30"x40"

Kevin Whitman is a self-taught artist who lives and works from his home studio in Sylacauga, Alabama. His "escape" series explores deep emotions and feelings usually suppressed; however, some escape the barriers which hold them within and become beautiful colors representing unwanted reminders of the past.

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OUT HIGHWAY 25 WEST

Errol Miller

Someday came & went,
passing through the bygone years
of yesterday. Mama died & several
friends departed for Odessa
for the last time.

I was born & bred in Dixie
in a simple house on Highway 25
close to the Creosote Plant where Papa
lost track of his mind. Yeah, I had some fun
& threw away all the money I made
selling Christmas cards & garden
seed door-to-door.

For Tex & Robert
& Kenny Farris & the rest of
the blue suede shoes crowd still listening
to "Get A Job" on the jukebox at
the Corner Café...

For all the bob-tailed semi-pretty girls
drowning in an ocean of rouge and red lipstick,
standing just outside the door of long-forgotten
Sock Hops at the National Guard Armory...

For True Hope & Barbara & other
female rays of sunshine who moved away
to Pell City & Thorsby & elsewhere in
my dreams before disappearing
like the Titanic...

You know who you are,
transplanted from That Half Acre,
wish I had the eyes to see, the time,
all I did was run away from home, maybe
it was in my blood, my bones.

If I'd only been, if I'd only done,
if I see you on the escalator at Some Big
Store in Birmingham, if I see you along
the way, if I see you clothed in pure
white linen, smiling...

The memory of remembrance, girls
from the Nineteen 50's & straight-arrow
friends knowing all those secrets
about first times & lost times

& last times.

.....

Errol Miller was born in Montevallo, grew up in Calera, lived in Birmingham, and now lives in Louisiana. A featured artist in the 2000 Poet's Market, his poetry has appeared in hundreds of journals since 1972 including Aura, Birmingham Poetry Review, Poem, and Southern Humanities Review in Alabama. He attended UAB and graduated from Livingston University in 1970.

.....

***“Under all speech that is good for
anything there lies a silence that
is better. Silence is deep as
eternity; speech is shallow as
time.”***

--Thomas Carlyle

THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA

Barbara Crane

I met a young Dutch boy in the Sinai, at a diving camp owned by Bedouins. The sun already scorched the common area that opened out from eight palm-thatched rooms. They weren't much, these rooms. Six square meters, enough for a mattress on a concrete slab, a small table, wall pegs instead of closets. They were perfect rooms, enough space to change from bathing suit to shorts, to sleep the few hours possible after all had been said at dinner, and the sun belonged to another spot on earth.

The young boy's room was next to mine. I saw him looking at me, and I said hello. He spoke perfect American English. I thought he was an American, but he wasn't. He was Dutch, he said. His father was a businessman. He and his family—mother, father, sister—lived in Cairo. I looked over at them. His father and mother were stepping outside their door into the semi-circle filled by tables and chairs outside our rooms. His father was lean and sturdy with large shoulders, his mother delicate and strong. A dancer, I thought. His parents wore the same look we all did in the morning. Tousled hair, squinting into the sun, only half-believing that light could be that bright. There was nothing to prepare you for a sea quite so blue, quite so close.

The boy's manner was compelling; I soon focused on him again. But not before I saw the girl who had tucked herself into a dark corner. I took it that this was his sister; no one else would have been standing there. Then I recalled seeing her the night before. She was sitting with her brother on a low wall outside the dining area, holding the same blanket she was now, a lifeless gray thing, although it may have been a different color when new. She clutched it to her face and sucked the thumb that held the blanket close to her.

"My mother rides horses across the Nile Valley," the boy volunteered, not realizing that to me, a writer, that simple sentence would make my head spin. Rides horses. I wanted to find out what kind of horse she rode. What did she see as she rode? Who rode with her, and what did she wear? Why did she ride? She was beautiful. How many men were in her life? And why did she need them? And what was the quality of love she gave her husband?

I wanted to know them. And because I couldn't—there wasn't time, they certainly didn't appear to want conversation—I made them up. I'd rather have known the true answers, but I took what I could. After all, who is to say we can know our own stories, each unique and complex, more clearly than can a stranger?

That's how it began. I was an American tourist at a diving camp in the Sinai with good friends I hadn't seen in ten years. I met Stefan, the Dutch boy who spoke English. I exchanged nods with his parents, Bart and Els. I considered trying to draw out Louki, the girl, but the wall she had built around herself was too formidable. Undoubtedly they thought, if they noticed me at all, that I was

occupied with my own friends. I must have looked that way as I cleared the rough hewn table for breakfast and drank coffee brewed in a propane demijohn. But the whole time I was watching them. I saw Els comb Louki's long blonde hair, pulling the comb carefully through the strands that resembled the faded remnants of her blanket. I watched for words they exchanged between each other, in Dutch, in English, but they said very little. I gave up watching and went down to the water where I gathered my courage and swam out over the coral.

When I returned, my skin beaded with cool water, I saw them a distance away. They sat on their blanket as if clinging to a raft, four survivors looking out to the Red Sea. What was each thinking? After all, we were too far away to see Saudi Arabia. There was nothing to look at except Tiran Island. In the morning no tour boats approached the small island and the few sea bathers weren't much to look at—clumps of tourists quietly paddling in the shallow water, not even a child who called out loudly; the seascape was as starkly barren as the land. At times like these, we are engaged in our private thoughts or in deliberately not thinking.

Bart: Quiet, good, love these people, my children, my wife, can't speak, cry, not here, wife, ankle, calf, thigh, stomach, nipple, need.

Stefan: One good fish, I want to see just one good fish, a flounder, a barracuda, big one, liked Tiran Island, only us, Dad's big, let's go swimming Dad, let's go now.

Els: Hot sun, want cool water, Bart never talks, what is he thinking? Shall we go now? Monday work, see Josef maybe, stop picking at your blanket Louki, please stop picking, oh Louki, I worry about you.

Louki: Help me, help me, help me, help me, mommy, daddy, Stefan, please.

I saw the four of them on their blanket in the hot sun, their silence. Perhaps they felt so comfortable with each other, they didn't need to speak. Perhaps it was so hot, they couldn't. But I saw tension in their bodies, how Louki bent over her blanket, how Bart paced the square of blue cotton. It almost seemed as if they were bending into the wind. Only Stefan moved unselfconsciously; his face displayed calm interest.

Louki is only seven, after all, how much does she need? Mothers are important at that age. More important than fathers, that's what Bart told himself, that's what he thought. He never saw his father pay any particular attention to his sisters. Yes, fathers should stay out of the picture, he was sure of that. What could he do anyhow? He couldn't change her diaper, he couldn't take her to the bathroom, he couldn't tell her about menstruation, he couldn't tell her about boys. He didn't even know about boys himself, hardly remembered being one. His life began when he met Els. Had he ever been a boy like Stefan? A boy without worries? Too much to think about. Not important.

Think about work. Don't think about Els. That's how he lived. Between a yes and a no.

++

It was still early when they returned to their rooms and gathered towels and swim fins, snorkels and masks. I moved closer to Stefan and asked where they were going.

"A little farther along the beach. The reef drops into deep water."

"Deeper than here?"

"Much. You can't see the ocean bottom at all. You're swimming and looking at fish and clams and coral. Very close to you. Then, you're on top of nothing, nothing at all. You can't see the bottom. Nothing."

I almost shivered with fear. I knew that he was as taken by the implicit danger as I. More than anything, I wanted to keep him talking. His hair was tan and prickly short, an exact replica of his father's. His body would resemble his father's one day also. I could already see the broad shoulders of a medium tall man. But where his father avoided looking at anyone outside his family, Stefan's blue green eyes searched my face. He was ten. I was fifty. I knew if I told him a secret he would never tell.

Louki stood nearby sucking her blanket-entwined fingers. Bart emerged from the room carrying a canvas bag, Els behind him. Els was gorgeous, I realized then. She wasn't glamorous as we Americans see movie stars, ambition-hardened stomachs and jaws. Her body was more sinuous, hard in muscle, yes, but rounded as coral coils. Curve of her calf, curve of her butt, curve of her upper arm. A person could write a poem about each one. Her husband had.

Oh, how he wanted to know his wife loved him (the children never doubted their mother's love). Often, all he could think about was Els. Last Monday morning, in a meeting. Leo's office. He saw his hand tremble as he reached for his coffee; he quickly clutched his cup. Had anyone noticed? The cup, its handle, the curve, his wife's ass. How could anyone feel this way about his own wife ten years after marriage? What if someone saw me tremble? Ten years ago I caught a cold, I'd say. A cold? Leo would raise his eyebrows. Ten years ago?

His disease was advancing. He desired her more than when he met her. Ten years. They had made love four thousand times. Ten thousand times he had wanted her. If he had been ill for so long, he'd be unable to work. Desire was asymptomatic. He might stay for years in this condition without anyone suspecting.

++

The family was ready to leave. I turned my attention to the beach again where sunbathers were already grabbing the small patches of shade created by a few stunted palm trees.

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"Josef, I'm leaving now. I have to go home and pack for the Sinai."

“Hmm?” Josef opened one eye and appraised Els who was fastening her skirt and pulling on her sandals in one quick movement. She raked her fingers through her red-brown hair and approached the bed.

“One more kiss,” he teased.

“No,” she glanced at the window high above the bed. The slow blue of twilight. Was it more than an hour ago she had heard the muezzin call for prayer? “Bart will be home soon. I was crazy to do this today.”

“Not crazy. Delicious, warm, exciting. Maybe a little crazy, in a good way.” His eyes crinkled at the corners.

“I can’t get caught in your word games now, Josef.” She opened the door. “I’ll call you next week.” She was using her blonde voice. The color of British women. Quiet authority. Self-confident. Different than an hour ago. yes, Josef, now, yes, the red-brown voice, round as her butt, muscle and warm.

Els left without looking back. Sinew and mane whirled out the door.

She plunged into the street outside Josef’s apartment building, competing for space on the narrow sidewalks with spindly-legged young boys racing home before dark, the faithful returning from prayer, old women dragging sacks of vegetables, and Arabs wearing traditional galabeya striding toward coffee houses. She wove through them, her mind racing faster than her feet. No, Josef, can’t stay with you, don’t want to stay with you, home, Stefan, Louki. Bart. After his name never any punctuation but a period. Louki was another matter. Louki stood alone, but different than Bart. Why, why, why are you so sad, my beauty, my Louki?

++

The beach grew even quieter towards noon. The sun scorched the sand. Later a mild breeze would be our relief; now, nothing stirred. Still, I had no thought of going anywhere else. I didn’t want to retreat to an air-conditioned dining room even if I had known where one was. The hours between noon and four dragged the first or second day. After that, an hour became like ten minutes. Before I knew it, we were talking about dinner.

Yesterday I was content. Today I was restless. Here was this family demanding that I write about them. I had to admit it was too hot to write, but I scribbled notes every time I felt overwhelmed with my imaginings, then put my journal down again. I gazed at the sea. Like Els and Louki, I was looking for something I couldn’t name.

++

An Egyptian secretary of state, an American businessman named Hal, a British Egyptologist. Josef was the lover closest to her world. A Dutch nurse in a Cairo hospital, like her. She was drawn to the government minister’s conversation, the American’s bold neckties, the Brit’s ass. She didn’t need these men but she took them nevertheless. Josef was another matter. Only he had seen her as the cool, dispassionate nurse, touching pillows and foreheads.

She had to be a mother. She didn't have to be a wife. She didn't want to do heroic, hard things. It was easier to be a mother if she were a wife. She didn't have affairs because she wanted to drive her husband crazy. She didn't want him crazy over her. She had affairs because she fell in love and when you fall in love, you make love. She didn't stay in love for long. She had too many other things to do.

Els ran home, her body a tuning fork to Josef's hands, her thoughts as tangled as her life.

Louki waited. She sat on her bed, holding her blanket tight against her chest. Daddy will come in soon. Maybe Daddy will sit here with me and ask me about school. I'll tell him, "Daddy, I rode a horse at school today. A horse. Just like Mommy." He'd like that because he loves Mommy. If I were as pretty as Mommy, he'd love me too.

That morning, Louki had passed their bedroom. Els was in the shower; Louki heard the water running. Bart was wearing slacks and a white cotton undershirt. In his palm, he held the small diamond earrings his wife wore every day. He studied them as if memorizing them. He had a funny look on his face, half mad, half sad. Louki wanted to tell her Daddy a story that would make him laugh. Stefan came up behind her and said, "Boo!" She jumped. Daddy came out and said in his angry voice, "Louki, Stefan, stop playing around. Go in and let Fatima give you breakfast." He shut the bedroom door. She stared at the closed door until Stefan touched her shoulder. Head bowed over her blanket, she followed him down the hall.

++

That day my friends and I skipped a formal lunch. We had shopped in Haifa's outdoor market the day before we left buying kilos of kibbutz-grown tomatoes, dates from Dead Sea orchards, Turkey's golden apricots, four varieties of olives. These and the more mundane carrots, celery and hard-boiled eggs were more than we needed. Five or six times a day we walked up the sand to buy cold bottled water. Those first mouthfuls of icy water held more pleasure than a five-star meal.

The resort drew Egyptians, Israelis but also Finns and Czechs, Italians, French. When I sat on the sand or in the open-air dining room, I understood how the Middle East came to be known as the crossroads of the world. I mused about this first hand knowledge my journey had given me.

Sometimes I let myself think about the marriage I left behind. Begun in sunlight, ending in shadow. Like Gericault's painting, "The Raft of the Medusa," a long distance voyage that was ending only after the strong had devoured the weak and the survivors were left clinging to one another, praying to be saved.

++

"I'm home," Els announced as she opened the door. Louki and Stefan ran down the hall and threw their arms around her. Els felt overwhelmed with guilt. Why had she spent the afternoon with Josef when she loved her children so? Bart

opened the door behind her. She turned toward him and saw he wore the look of an intense headache and relief at the same time. "Is anything wrong?" she asked.

Bart scowled. "No," he answered and walked past her into the apartment.

"Mommy, where are my flippers? Have you seen my blue T-shirt? See what I'm taking with me." O, Stefan, always the talker and so much fun. My little Louki, holding my hand. No questions, only me.

"Have you put your things together for the trip, Louki? No? OK, just let me put my things down, then I'll look in at Stefan and come to you." Louki nodded, her gaze fixed to the floor, but didn't let go.

Els freed her fingers and slipped into her room. She closed the door gently. "Bart. Will you get the diving gear from the closet?" Her husband sat on the bed taking off his shoes. "Bart. Did you hear me?"

"Of course. I know my job."

He sounded so bitter, Els blinked. Did he know why she was late?

She sat next to him and examined her hands. "I'm glad to get away, Bart. We've both been too busy for each other." That was her truth. What was his? A small bed in a small room, Els next to him. Love in the morning. Love at night. He wanted more, but he would be satisfied with that. He stood up. "I'll get started."

That night he dreamed he was making love to her. They were not in their beds. They were flying. Slow motion flight, he swimming toward her, she always just out of reach. He touched her toes with his fingertips, she propelled herself a distance beyond his hands; he flew beside her and kissed her belly, she gathered strength and kicked away, freeing herself from him. She lingered, elusive; he moved onto her, they tumbled through space, their bodies two parallel lines in simultaneous flight, their arms, hands and legs free in the void, their faces one in rapture.

"Oh," he moaned softly.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

"Nothing, nothing, I just had a dream, go back to sleep."

"Is it morning yet? Do we have to get up?"

Bart checked the clock. "No, it's only 4. We still have a few hours left."

Els turned over. Bart felt his cock stiffen. S____. Els would have none of him in the middle of the night. Maybe, he rationalized. They were on vacation. He turned toward her and began to stroke her belly and her breasts.

"Umm, not now Bart... tired." She spoke so softly he could hardly hear. She sighed heavily and was asleep again.

He rolled over on his back, letting his erection wilt and looking at the ceiling. The pose was not unfamiliar. He spent many nights like this, before lovemaking, after, and without, playing back scenes from work, conversations with Els, once in a while, trying to make sense of a dream. Nothing difficult to understand in this one. They were flying, a nice sensation, even though she had

resisted his touch. He savored the dream's ending. The only time he had her all to himself. And look how happy she was. As happy as he. Wasn't she? He turned away from her, and closed his eyes. Their bodies were positioned spine to spine, the reverse of their bodies in his dream. Fortunately for him, Bart fell asleep before he noticed.

++

Here were these people, complete strangers, and if someone were to say, "That's not how I see them," worse yet, if the Dutch family were to read this and laugh, "We're nothing like this, nothing at all," I'd have shouted them down. I was right; I knew I was. Or if not right, passionate. It pleased me to be passionate about this couple, and to explore their passion. I'm at an age now where passion isn't as important to me as it was when I was younger. For more than thirty years I was ruled by sexual passion. The only activity I might voluntarily forgo for that passion was writing. It's not like that now.

I don't want to be done with passion. I don't want to be done with curiosity, or intense feeling or even pain. All those feelings are part of me. I'm afraid that as I grow older my emotions, like my physical characteristics, will melt into an undistinguishable mass, my chin part of my chest, my eyes part of my cheeks, my curiosity part of my boredom, and passion a dream I remember but can't bring to life.

I thought about this as I stared out at the Red Sea and waited for the Dutch family to come back.

++

The Sinai was hot. They kept the windows rolled down. Soon, they were all covered in a fine dust. They had taken this drive before, visiting the diving club two or three times since arriving in Cairo, lured by its simplicity, the abundance of showy fish among the coral, the ease of diving there. Els never got used to the Sinai's mountains: huge, hulking creatures that hugged the road and rose on either side, red brown, devoid of vegetation. These were the most masculine mountains she had ever seen. No Swiss Alps of cottages and wild flowers, they were mountains to test the wills of prophets.

Stefan looked out his window. Last time I saw camels. And Bedouin. Daddy told me about them, how they live in the desert and move from place to place. They don't like big cities. I like the robes the men wear. I hope, I hope, I hope I see camels. He crossed his fingers and made a wish.

Louki sat huddled in the corner. She hugged her knees to her chest and rested her head on her knees, stroking her blanket against her face, sucking her thumb. Look at Mommy in the front seat next to Daddy. Mommy loves me. Stefan loves me. Mommy loves Daddy. Daddy loves Mommy. Louki repeated this equation to herself many times a day. Its familiarity gave it authority. It anchored her in the world. She didn't realize that the equation on which she based her life didn't add up. Bart was grateful the wind was too strong to make speaking easy. The children were quiet. Were they sleeping? He glanced at Stefan in his rear view mirror. In doing so, he caught a look at himself. He straightened his back allowing him to see his face beneath his sunglasses. The jaw he usually clenched was relaxed, even slack, making him look, he thought, a little stupid. The face he ordinarily showed the world was

LEAVES

Kim Hagar
Digital Photograph

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



stern. Some inner discipline was necessary to control his feelings. He couldn't hold his daughter without sobbing, he was sure.

The wind made Els think of the Nile Valley. The land along the river, a dark, rich brown. It was windy along the roads that crossed the Valley of Kings. Els boarded her horse there, in a farmer's stable. As often as she could get away, she took the train south, waiting with multitudes of tourists on the platform in Cairo and disembarking with them, ten hours later in Luxor. The tourists went by bus up the long road to the tombs of Rameses and Hatsheput. She had seen these once, but they didn't interest her. She took a rattletrap taxi ten minutes into the countryside to the farm where she boarded her horse, Juweel. There she changed into riding clothes, ate a quick lunch supplied by the farmer's wife, and hurried out to the stable. She saddled and mounted her horse. He was always skittish at first. She had to calm him

with soft words—goed, Juweel, daar, daar zachtjes maar meisje— patting his neck, walking him slowly out the gate and down the road when she saw he was ready.

He walked first, then trotted, then cantered, she holding her seat confidently, gripping the animal's muscular body between her legs. She didn't worry about the horse, its feelings, its hidden pains. The horse gave her nothing to feel guilty about. When they had been out an hour or so, and if the day was not too hot, Els gave the horse the touch that meant, "Gallop." The animal always responded as if he, like Els, had been waiting for that moment. He picked up his pace and lengthened his stride. The path fell away from his hoofs; he stretched out his neck, and without any urging from Els, he flew. Faster than the Cairo train, faster than the wind, Els let herself imagine. She bent over his neck, crooning, yes, my beauty, yes, you beautiful creature, go, go, go, my lovely animal. Her red brown hair streamed behind her like an anthem.

This was her pleasure and she never invited the children or Bart to join her.

++

It was early in the evening before the family returned. I was in my room, putting on shorts and shirt for dinner when I heard Stefan saying something in Dutch. I opened my door and saw Bart and Els going into their room. Stefan had his arms full of fins and masks, which he laid next to his parent's door. He headed toward his room, followed by Louki, who, as always, walked several paces behind, her chin resting on her chest, her arms clutching her blanket.

No time then for conversation. I was disappointed. After a few minutes, I went to dinner with my friends. That night we were a raucous group. My friends' children and their friends joined us. Age eighteen to twenty-three, all Israelis, they were young, strong and outspoken. Depending on their comfort with English they spoke to me a little or a lot. It didn't matter. I was dining al fresco in a Bedouin palace hung with rugs and multi-colored camel halters. I was on land's edge, at the tip of the Sinai Peninsula, twenty feet from the Red Sea, at the crossroads of the world, with friends I hadn't seen in many years. I was drunk with excitement at what I would discover next about the Dutch family, who were oblivious of any interest in them at all.

Much later, I stumbled back to my room and fell into bed. I had drunk too much wine, my euphoria was winding down. I wanted to sleep. The lights were out; the doors were closed in all the rooms in the semi-circle except for ours.

Sometime later, I heard a door open. I heard soft footfalls on concrete. Then, silence. Someone walking up to the bathroom? I wanted to know who it was. I slipped a shirt over my nightgown and stepped outside my room. The door to Els and Bart's room was slightly ajar. I tiptoed to the end of the common area and peered down to the sea. The moon was full, illuminating the beach. At various intervals, cocoons of rugs held sleeping vacationers lured to water's edge by the night's heat. I knew who had emerged from Els and Bart's room and where he was.

++

The day had not disappointed Bart, only the night. After leaving the diving club, they had snorkeled and swam in two dive spots Leo had recommended. When the sun began to set, they ate a quick dinner in Sharm al Sheikh and returned to the

diving club. He knew the children were worn out. Finally, he'd have time alone with Els. They were only in their room for a few minutes when Els said she was tired and was going to bed. He tried not to watch her while she took off her shorts and shirt and hung her bathing suit from a wall peg. She slid under the covers, her body so slim, she barely raised a lump in the blanket. He straightened out the snorkeling gear and readied the dive equipment for the morning. He sat outside, smoked a cigarette and watched the full moon rise, feeling its beauty like a smooth pebble in his throat. Opening the door to their room quietly, he pulled the covers away and lay down next to his wife. He put his arms around her and, like the night before, began to stroke her body. This night, she didn't say anything; she backed closer to the wall, out of his reach.

Finally, "I'm sorry, Bart."

"What's to be sorry?" He had said. "There's always tomorrow." This time, he turned his back to her first and fell asleep immediately.

He woke with a start. In his dream he held liquid in his cupped hands, marveling at the miracle of finding fresh water in the desert. Suddenly the water turned from clear to rust, trickling through his fingers so fast he was unable to staunch the flow. His eyes open, he was at first so frightened, he couldn't move. Slowly, his heart returned to its normal rhythm. Els slept on. She didn't move when he pulled on his shorts and opened the door.

He wandered down to the water's edge and turned his steps toward the stunted palm tree where they had placed their blanket that morning. He walked close to the tree and estimated the space the blanket would have taken. He closed his eyes and saw Els sitting on the blanket alone, without Stefan or Louki or him. He opened his eyes, and by moonlight, counted out the steps until he stood where she would have sat earlier that day. He was sure the sand still held her warmth.

Els heard Bart leave. She sat up in bed, tears streaming down her face. She held herself as she had often seen Louki do, her head hunched forward into her chest, clutching her blanket close to her face. She rocked back and forth. This life was ending. She didn't will it, but it was ending nevertheless. She searched for the reason she knew this to be true and saw Josef's smiling face. She knew the next time she rode Juweel, Josef would be riding beside her.

++

I turned away before Bart headed back to his room. I grieved for him hearing what I imagined Els would tell him tonight, tomorrow. I didn't think she'd wait long. This couple, so young, and at least in my imagination, so passionate. They were tortured. I could tell them that in twenty years, they wouldn't care. All this would be behind them. They either would have stayed together and wonder why they ever found one another so mysterious, or they would have split apart, crumbling Stefan and Louki's childhoods into pieces they would spend their lives trying to make whole.

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Barbara Crane lives in Long Beach, California. She has published and won awards for creative nonfiction, short story, and her first novel, The Oldest Things in the World. The above story won first place in the 2009 Hackney Literary Awards contest. barbara@b-crane.com

THE MAGICIAN SURFACES

Graham Cotten

It was a day of primary colors: reds red as Hi-C, blues like shooting marbles. Everyone was outside trying a day without their jackets, the daring in spaghetti straps and open toed shoes. Spring was here. The newspapers in the coffee shop looked bright. The economy shaping up, the war quiet. Leanne smiled.

“Maybe this is the first day,” she said. “Without them.”

Robert looked up from the paper.

“Maybe it is,” he said.

In the wintertime Leanne saw ghosts. Not white sheeted children asking for candy, or covered furniture in haunted houses. Real ghosts. She saw her grandfather every morning, standing in a bathrobe by the window when she woke. He never stayed longer than a second. That was fine. It was the ones who hung around, like bad news, like a never-ending contract dispute, that drove her crazy. Her childhood cat purred constantly under the couch. Her sister wanted to make hot chocolate every day, even when they had none left, even when they were just trying to eat a proper meal. Her mother pulled all her summer clothes out of her closet and laid them out on the bed.

The only one she didn’t see was her father. She had always taken this to mean that he was not dead yet. He was a shrimp fisher in the Gulf of Mexico, her mother said. Her sister told her that was a lie. He was captured in the Pacific by the Japanese while whaling, she said. Why do you think his messages are always so cryptic? They wouldn’t let him write just anything. His messages were often long allegorical pieces about fishing.

After her mother and sister died in the fire, she had found out who he really was, just a traveling magician run off with his assistant. There were pictures of him in the bank deposit box. Pictures of him with interlocking rings, with a bouquet of colorful scarves, with caged birds. He could make things disappear and then snap! they’re back. His assistant was a pretty, freckle-faced girl with a ponytail. There were the real post-cards he’d sent, from places far off like New Mexico or South Carolina. Her mother must have hidden these, mediating like a Christ, reshaping their father’s words into the allegories.

“Almost sad,” she said. “I think I actually missed him this morning.”

“It’s supposed to be wintry again later this week. I don’t know what the groundhog said,” he added.

“Where does it say that?”

He turned the paper towards her.

“I’m going to run to the restroom,” he said.

She saw her father’s name and picture in the obituaries. It was him all right, here all along, still something tricky in the smile. Something tickling him up his sleeve. Outside a man passed in a dark heavy jacket, someone caught in winter,

someone you would never notice a week ago, but now, in weather like this. He winked.

She got up, woozy like she was under water, the door pressurized and sealed, something that must be shouldered open. She burst out.

“Did you scare them off?” He didn’t turn. “It’s okay if you did,” she said, breathing in at last.

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Graham Cotten is a Birmingham, Alabama, native. His work has appeared in Evergreen Review. His story, Little Executioner, was runner up in the 2009 Playboy College Fiction Contest. tgcotten@gmail.com
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SONNET 88

Amy Trousdale

Alone you stand, your figure proud and strong
Everything else bows as you rule the room
How sweet your sound as you play your soft song
Music dances in the air as it blooms
The smooth wood of your breastplate is flawless
On it your signature is carved in gold
The ivory keys wearing a silk dress
The pedals showing off their own light bold
Your notes ring out like church bells, crisp and clear
Your voice is magnificent, not a blur
Filled with a deep tone, solemn and sincere
Weaving the strings of your tale together
The gods attack you with their fists of gust
I watch as the flames turn you into dust

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Amy Trousdale is a college student who lives in St. Florian, Alabama. She loves reading, writing, music, spending time outdoors, and photography. She teaches piano. She writes short stories and poems. This sonnet won 3rd place in the Alabama Renaissance Faire sonnet contest. www.shoesofamyjane.blogspot.com
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INSIDE THE BOX

Darren Casey Griffin

I look at the red dots, all blinking 12:00, 12:00, 12:00. My mind races for clues as to what the alarm clock should really be telling me. Sunlight is coming in through the closed blinds. I can hear the sound of birds chirping and the rustle of leaves, and dogs, unmistakably my own, playing and barking in the yard outside the window. I reach towards the nightstand to find my thick-framed prescription eyeglasses. I groggily put them on my face and roll over to view the clock on the VCR. It's blinking as well. I wearily pull myself out of bed and find my watch on the dresser hiding under the red Netflix mailers and various scattered DVDs that I never have time to watch. "Crap!" I think to myself when I see that it is 7:22 AM. I have exactly 8 minutes to shower, shave, get dressed and get out the door if I am going to make it to work on time. I run into the bathroom, mumbling "7:22, power went out" loudly so Maggie will hear me and get out of bed.

I stumble into the bathroom, turning the water on in the shower and putting toothpaste on my toothbrush at the same time. Maggie yawns and I hear her feet hit the hardwood floors. I rinse my teeth and jump in the shower. No words are spoken by either of us as we quickly get our clothes on. Maggie goes in the kitchen and grabs our lunches, which we prepared the night before. My watch tells me it is 7:32. I tell her, and she utters a profanity, and we both head quickly towards the door. We jump into our car, I crank the engine, and we back out of the driveway.

The clock inside the car says 7:43 as we pull into the parking lot of Maggie's work. She isn't late, for once. I pull up to the door of the building and stop. She grabs her lunch and mutters "bye." I ask, "Are you getting off at 5:15 today?" She thinks, then asks, "Is today Thursday?" I reply that it is, she says yes, and closes the door. I sit there with the car idling for a few seconds while she makes her way inside, then I pull into the street and head towards my office.

I turn the radio on, and hear the morning DJs blabbing about the same inane crap they've been harping on for months, if not years. Tiring of their chatter, I click the button marked CD on the radio, and The Pixies start singing "Here Comes Your Man" to me. I look out the windshield, and the blue sky has a few fluffy cumulus clouds intermingled. The mix CD was made by me a few years ago, and contains lots of songs I consider to be worthy of being listened to while on a road trip, no matter how short.

My cell phone starts vibrating in my pocket. I raise up my rear off the seat and contort my arm to fish it out of my front pocket. The display says it's my friend Olivia. I am only a block from my office building, so I decide to let it go to voice mail. I pull into the parking deck, drive to the 2nd level and park in my usual spot. I look at my watch and I have 3 minutes to spare. My phone vibrates again, to let me know I have a voice mail. I open the flip phone and press the button which lets me hear her sweet voice leaving the same message she leaves for everyone. "Hi, this is Olivia, please call me back." Her messages are never foul-sounding, and never give any information, just the generic, generally happy voice of a salesperson.

The elevator dings and I step in. There's no one else waiting this morning, no one else who gets to see my damp hair and unshaven face as I shuffle into the tiny enclosure and press the 5 button. A few seconds later, the door slides open and I walk out into the grey hallway, then make my way to my office. I open the grey door with my gold key, and push it open to reveal the faux-oak desk and grey office chair that is my life.

I turn on my computer, look at my desk phone to see if the red light is blinking to let me know if I have any messages. The light is dark today, which means no one is calling in sick. My computer screen flickers on, and the computer's clock reads 8:03. I open Outlook with a mouse click and glance at my e-mail. I delete the handful of usual overnight e-mails, then I open my e-mail's calendar to see if I have any meetings. None until 3:00, it tells me. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I glance up at my whiteboard on the wall which I face every work day. My red handwritten scrawls let me know that today is a regular day, no projects are due, no one's going to be breathing down my neck.

A few people pass by my open office door and mutter "good morning" or "Hi" or nothing at all. I wonder if they feel like robots, like I do? I sigh, and pull up a program on my computer to see how much work there is waiting to be done. With a click, I become a zombie. At least until I can force myself to walk down the hall to get a cup of coffee. Then I'll be a zombie again, at least until 5:00.

.....
Darren Casey Griffin resides in Center Point, Alabama, with his wife, Amy. He attended Jefferson State Community College and the University of Montevallo, then received his Bachelor of Science degree from Birmingham-Southern College. He is a motor scooter enthusiast. Darren.griffin@gmail.com
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5:30 A.M. - OCTOBER 23, 2004

Elizabeth Hurst Downs

As soon as I escape the overhang
of my front door, I see them
just above me, curving up
between The Hunter—brave Orion—
and Venus rising
in the east.

Between love

and search

Castor
Pollux

Saturn

Procyon

Sirius

stretch in sparkling arc
multiplying size and brilliance
from the zenith
till they pierce

my eyes.

Enthralled, I stand an hour
in pre-dawn chill
marveling at the stellar mathematics:
the space between these lights—
their separation—seems united
in the Golden Ratio's scheme.

On earth we clash:
Is there a cosmic love
in search of us,
a Golden Mean
that could resolve
our dissonance in harmony of light
like Saturn cycling through these pairs of stars
offering its wedding rings?

.....

Elizabeth Hurst Downs is a native of Virginia and a graduate of Duke University, who moved to Birmingham, Alabama, three years ago from the Washington Metropolitan Area where she had made her home for the past 40 years. She is an octogenarian who spent her life performing as a classically trained singer, having studied with Maria Kurenko at the Juilliard School. In later years she painted in the school of Illuminism, as the student of Leszek Forczek. Her poetry has been published in the Christian Science Monitor and Tower Poetry, Canada's oldest poetry journal. wsehdowns@charter.net

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“Ambiguity is invariant.”

--Hartz's Uncertainty Principle



APPALACHIAN PUMPKIN PATCH

Walt Curlee
Oil on Canvas
4" x 5"

Walt Curlee has been a freelance illustrator and artist for over 30 years. He has worked for a who's who of corporate America including Berol Pencils, Blockbuster Videos, Cirrus Logic, Coors, Diamond Shamrock, Duracell, Frito-Lay, Kellogg, Lucasarts, Mattel, MCI, Procter & Gamble and Orkin. Walt started drawing at an early age. After 4 years in the Marine Corps, he attended the Art Institutes of Fort Lauderdale and Atlanta. Walt works from his home studio and enjoys living the country life in rural Alabama, with wife Vicki and sons. Walt paints in oil and also works digitally. You may view more of Walt's work at www.WaltCurleeArt.com waltcurlee@bellsouth.net

IN THE PICTURE

Barry Curtis

I am in the picture and I am out of the picture
 I'm behind the door and I am moving westward
 I am close at hand, holding a nest
 full of birds
I am followed by rain, by clouds that know my name.

Touching your skin is like holding a curtain that opens
 the vistas the contours of time
 Just the shape of your wrist
 is enough to convince me
I must kiss your limbs, climb the tree of your hair.

I am walking, walking, walking
 but I am not really even moving
My body is formed and fused through tubes
 of color with brushstrokes of humor.

I am in the picture because I know that you are coming
 You are the true subject
 I am only the object
My hands are reached out towards yours, I am holding your form
 in its sway
 and you are naked
 and you are dancing.

.....

Barry Curtis was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and has lived in New Haven, Connecticut, and New Orleans, Louisiana, but has probably lived in Birmingham, Alabama, for a longer period of time than any other city in his life. He has a daughter who is attending Birmingham Southern. Wishes he could play the lyre, but sometimes settles for a beat-up nylon string guitar.

okiepoetcreek53@yahoo.com

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JEW'S OPTIONS

Geoff Langdon

He was not the type to carefully consider his options. 'The voyage of now' was how he journeyed through life. Jewell Boyd was my friend, he was a kind, complex, wonderful pain in my ass. For the twenty years I knew him he delighted, frustrated and puzzled me.

One day out of the blue he insisted on being called Jew, a sample of his perverse sense of fun. He was Catholic and I think he just enjoyed the awkwardness of people dealing with this version of his name, Jew Boyd.

"I refuse to call you that," said Paul Friedman who was Jewish and agitated with his friend.

"Paul, then don't."

"Fine," Paul replied.

"What do I call you?"

"Don't call me anything, you bastard, if you can't call me by my name."

Paul ironically countered "Jesus Christ, you are a jerk."

He would later comply with Jew's demand, but he was very careful who was around when he addressed him by his new moniker.

Jew, in my estimation, wore blinders on his journey. It wasn't that he ignored the rest of the world and the many options that most people considered prudent, he just didn't see them. And that suited him just fine.

++

One cold November evening he spotted a dog lying in the road with cars going by, barely missing the bloodied mutt. Jew stopped his car immediately upon seeing the distressed dog. Cars screeched to a stop. He got out of his car and put up his hand as a command to stop to the oncoming traffic coming from the opposite direction. When they blew their horns at him, he glared at them as he trotted to his charge.

The dog was hurt but alert. He inexplicably put his face into the dog's neck and whispered, "You are going to be okay, buddy, just hang on."

He picked up the dog who collapsed in his arms. Your face is in danger when placed in biting distance of a strange, hurt dog, some would say, but that was not an option he considered. As he walked back to his car, the pissed off, delayed drivers were yelling at him to get off the road.

Jew carefully put the animal on his back seat, took off his overcoat and placed it over the bleeding dog.

++

He sped off to get help for his new friend. A month later and \$3,000 poorer, Jew had a companion. Shaved of all its hair, the dog was quite a sight.

++

"What's that flea bitten creature's name?" asked Lou, the local tavern owner.

He was only half kidding as he suspiciously watched both Jew and his newly recovered friend sitting at his outside table. Lou was not a lover of animals and would rather not have them at his place but he didn't want a war with Jew.

"Well Lou, I was going to name him after you but I thought Asshole wasn't a proper name for this noble creature."

"Very funny, funny man. I want to know what name I should put on the citizen's arrest form; I guess Prick and his ugly dog will have to do." said Lou.

Jew laughed, he liked jawing with Lou.

"You have a point, Lou. And I have the perfect name for him. In fact, I have a personalized T-shirt for him to wear."

He reached for his shopping bag and started pulling out the items.

"I have a matching T-shirt for me as well." He took off the shirt he was wearing and put the new t-shirt on.

Lou looked on in horror as the new name was revealed to him. 'My Ugly Dog's Name Is LOU.'

Patrons came from inside to see what the hysterical laughter was all about.

"Okay, you fools, you all got nothing better to do than watch this idiot." Lou turned on his heel and walked back in with a pretend mad-on.

++

Jew and little Lou were inseparable.

C'est Fon was a local upscale meeting place that Jew infrequently visited. One day the two walked into the place, both adorned with dark sunglasses. They were not three feet inside before the bartender shouted at him.

"You can't bring a mutt in here, no animals are allowed."

Jew, smiling and doing Stevie Wonder head moves, softly said, "He's a seeing-eye dog."

"A little scarred up, ugly, bald mutt is a seeing-eye dog?" The bartender sarcastically asked.

"They didn't give me a Golden Retriever?" Jew answered incredulously.

A couple of patrons, who had been imbibing for a while, insisted that this poor man deserves to be here with the rest of them.

"Let me buy him a drink and how about some water for his dog," said a glassy eyed welled dressed young fellow.

"How long have you been blind?" he asked with his face a little too near Jew's face.

"Oh, I'm not blind, my dog is blind."

The young fellow slapped over the glass of wine he bought Jew and shoved the dog out his way with his foot as he left the barstool. Jew got up to leave, leading Lou with his leash and the young man by his tie. As they reached the door, he stood him up against the doorframe and told him to apologize to Lou.

The young man thought about retaliating but since he could not move Jew's hand from his tie knot with both his hands, he thought better of it and said.

"I am sorry."

"I am sorry, Lou," Jew said

"I am sorry, Lou," the young man said.

Jew smiled, took off his sunglasses, folded them and placed them in the boy's jacket, breast pocket.

"A souvenir for a valuable lesson you have learned."

The boy had influence with the local politicians and Jew was arrested that evening.

The police were very rough with him and Little Lou attacked one of them and was shot.

Jew was not without friends and we got him out of jail immediately. On the way to the car with Paul and me, Jew was afraid to ask but finally did. His face was ashen as he asked about his buddy. Paul told him that it did not look good.

"The vet recommends that he be put down. He needs a very expensive operation and there was no guarantee that would work."

Atypically, Jew was speechless, he had no capital reserve, and his small savings went to repairing Lou the first time.

"I, I've got to save him. Guys, if I promise to pay ..."

"Oh, shut-up." Paul said.

"Little Lou is our friend too, we've got it covered. You ain't the only one who loves that dog, you grumpy bastart."

Jew lowered his head as he put his hand on Paul's shoulder and then squeezed my elbow with his other hand.

++

"Good God, now you've got a flea bitten, scraggly, THREE legged dog," said Lou. And to the surprise of all he bent over and scratched his namesake's ear.

\$5,000 later and one leg less, Lou the miracle dog was happy and loved, even by Lou, or as Jew would say when he visited the pub, "Say hello to your Daddy, you've got his looks."

As it turned out, Big Lou financed a large portion of the medical bills for his new friend. The money was never mentioned and once when Jew brought it up, Lou grabbed Jew by his shirt collar and told him not to bring it up again or he would kick his ass.

Jew shook his head and smiled. But he was in his debt and he never forgot his debts.

++

Little Lou lived to the ripe old age of, we guessed, about eighteen. One day as they were walking in their favorite park, Jew decided to stop and sit on a bench. He picked up his old friend and put him beside him with Lou's head on his lap. Suddenly Lou let out a yelp, sat up and gave Jew a little lick to his face, he then lay back down. At that moment he died.

Jew obviously was devastated but we knew there would be no pity party.

We did have a nice farewell party for Little Lou at the Pub.

Jew sprinkled his friend's ashes over the white azalea bushes that butted up against the pub's black railing. We would think about Jew and little Lou each year the azaleas were in full bloom.

Jew was seen less and less over the next few years, keeping to himself. We thought he would get another dog but he never did.

Exactly two years after little Lou's wake, Big Lou was held up as he was closing at three in the morning. The thug, high on meth, was cruel and seemed to enjoy pistol-whipping Lou as he insisted on Lou's getting the "big money out of the safe."

There were rumors for years that he had a fortune kept somewhere in the bar. The thug was startled at the sight of a man running full speed through the glass door from outside. He had Lou by his shirt and was beating him; he looked up and smiled.

"Good, good, another old man who needs his head cracked."

He pointed the gun at Jew and said. "You are a dead man."

"Maybe so," said Jew, "maybe both of us are." The thug laughed hysterically, and pulled the trigger.

At the same instant Jew rushed him. He grabbed the smoking gun and delivered a life ending punch to the man's throat. The man would be dead before the police and ambulance arrived.

So would Jew.

"You stupid bastard, why didn't you just call the police when you saw what they were doing," Lou cried out through his tears.

"Didn't think it was an option" he answered. Those were his last words.

After the funeral Lou, Paul and I sprinkled our friend Jewel's ashes on the azaleas at the Pub. And each Spring when the white azaleas bloom we toast our pals.

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Geoff Langdon is an award-winning author and poet in Birmingham, Alabama.

Tgeoff123@aol.com

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THE WORLD'S GREATEST HARBOR

Jim Ferguson

'Dives' my dad called them
When I asked from the back seat
About the colored neon signs
That beckoned with a shimmy or a shake.
Slowly we drove near the wharf on Sunday
While the sailors in their white caps
Wandered the streets, looking for Jesus
Inside each darkened door
Where happiness could not be found,
The promised enticement giving
Only a shore leave's lull.

Our car sailed through the city
Its doors locked but windows rolled down
Filling our heads with Norfolk,
The smell of the salt marsh and the Elizabeth River
Invading our shores and our senses.
I wondered about those poor tars in the bars
Losing their money and hope.
For a boy there was so much else to do
Like visit the Mariner's Museum
Climb on the ancient anchor,
Or over the scrimshaw mull.

Today I am lost. Today I am found
In a public house that smells
No better than that bracken black water;
Neon art looks much simpler now
But the barmaid's tattoos are more mysterious
Than the eagles and gunboats I marveled at then.
Sometimes we talk of Jesus
Inside the darkened door.
And other times I hear the bells of St. Paul's:
Chiming, chiming, and chiming again,
Lapping like waves against the barnacled hull.

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Jim Ferguson grew up in Norfolk, Virginia; Redondo Beach, California; and Huntsville, Alabama. He currently lives and works in the Birmingham, Alabama, area.

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HIS SHIRTS

Wynne Huddleston

Dress shirts, size 17.
I bought this one for him,
deliciously soft,
the expensive kind
of cotton, blue and white stripe,

athletic fit. I pick it up,
breathe in his cologne,
his deodorant...his scent.
I check the pocket,

nothing there. I wear it naked,
roll up the cuffs, don't button,
wrap it around, hug myself,
dance about...I'm here.

Reluctantly, I take it off,
wash it, dry it, iron it carefully—
with steam, no starch.
I hang it facing left, button
the top two, skip to the fourth,
put it in the closet and wait for him;
to wear him once more.

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Wynne Huddleston is a poet and music teacher with a Master of Music Education degree. A board member of the Mississippi Writers Guild, Huddleston's poetry has been, or will be published in Emerald Tales: Winter Solstice; Waterways: Poetry in the Mainstream; Gemini Magazine; Enchanted Conversation; The Shine Journal; and others.

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VEGETABLE STAND VILLA FRANCHES

Tom Gordon
Digital Photograph

Tom Gordon is a state reporter for The Birmingham News, where he has worked for 22 years. He holds degrees in political science and journalism and has spent time in Europe and West Africa. tgordon@bhamnews.com

DRIVING MY MOTHER

Hannah Craig

Her reflex is to speak—
always, always. *Div-vorce*, she says
again and again, as we round
into the Susquehanna Tunnel.

Between us just this empty rehash
of occupations, obligations,
neighbors dying, cousins hitching up.

I've heard that in our middle years,
we adapt to care for them instead,
our parents brought low
by the slow progress of aches and pains,
mistakes regarding property or love.

Still there are also some small regrets,
condemnation like a grey cloud
dozing close to the ground, so that
we move always into nothing,
the tunnel's maw gaping wide,
until, by the grace of the late-dying sun,
we are revealed.

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*Hannah Craig lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her work has recently appeared or
is forthcoming in Fence, Post Road, and Redivider.*

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ALOHA, RICKY LANKFORD

Marian Carcache

“The only news I know,” my mother tells me during our nightly telephone conversation, “is that according to Shirley at the beauty shop, your old piano teacher Martha Bland is dating that new oral surgeon. They say you wouldn’t recognize her. She’s let that hair down and gotten contact lenses the color of Liz Taylor’s eyes.”

On the windowsill in Martha Bland’s kitchen there was a planter that was the bust of a Chinaman. A sweet potato, left standing on end in water, sprouted vines and leaves out of the Chinaman’s head. He looked perfectly complacent Thursday after Thursday, sitting there over the sink with his painted-on smile and slanted eyes, a potato flowering out of his head while I was miserable, playing my scales, holding my fingers curved, distracted by a metronome I couldn’t follow.

Martha Bland was my third piano teacher. My mother was determined that I had long, slender “piano-playing” fingers and wouldn’t give up on the idea that I was “gifted” musically. Even when I had tantrums and banged on the yellowed ivory piano keys with my fists and tore pages from my music books and said curse words I had learned from the MacDaniel boys in the back of the school bus, she’d ignore my histrionics and say, “I’d give anything to have fingers like yours. It just takes practice. Go cut your fingernails. They’re clicking on the keys. That’s why you can’t play. They look like daggers. Cut ‘em.”

Mrs. Bland, though probably only in her thirties at the time, had “fixed” hair. It is only now, looking back all these years later, that I realize she could have been an attractive woman. I never thought about the name “Bland” back then either, but I realize now that it was perfect for the image she created. Sadly, she seemed to be just that---bland. We started my lesson on time, went methodically through what she called “the pieces,” and stopped on the hour. We never wasted time discussing the fact that Wagner had an affair with Liszt’s daughter, Cosima, or that Chopin’s lover was novelist George Sand, herself many years older than the composer, and a cigar smoker. With one exception I never saw Mrs. Bland any way but efficient, methodical, and bland.

On the Thursday that Ricky Lankford moved away with his Air Force family to Hawaii, Mrs. Bland taught me to play “Aloha, O” and let her pale

blue parakeet Pretty Boy fly loose the whole hour I was there. I had told her that Ricky was my boyfriend and that I would never see him again. I made tears well up in my eyes, and she left the metronome off. She even let me play chords instead of notes for the left hand.

The truth of the matter was that Ricky had told me one day during recess that a man could put his “thing” against a woman’s “thing” and it was called “to funk.” I went straight home that afternoon and asked Mama, who was entertaining ladies on the patio, if there was really such a thing as “to funk,” and repeated what Ricky had told me. She said, “no,” that Ricky had made it up and that I shouldn’t associate with him if he told stories like that. She and her friends giggled nervously, as though they were more embarrassed than amused by the whole situation. From that day on, I was fascinated by Ricky and his forbidden imagination. I let him copy my homework and we sat together at lunch until the day he left.

Ricky wrote to me once from Hawaii, a long letter on thin, blue Air Mail stationery, the same color as Mrs. Bland’s parakeet, and promised to send me a grass skirt and a lei made of live orchids. He signed the letter “Aloha, Ricky.” He didn’t need to tell me that “Aloha” meant “love” and “hell-o” and “goodbye.” I had read all about Hawaii in the World Book. It wasn’t until I realized that the gifts would never arrive and I wasn’t going to hear from Ricky again that I figured out that his “aloha” just meant “goodbye.”

Mama tried to make me feel better by saying that he might have written, that the airmail plane could have crashed. A few weeks later, seeing my continued disappointment that I still had not received a package from Hawaii, she said, “For all you know he could be dead. Volcanoes go off over there all the time. Forget him. He’s forgotten you. Besides, it’s silly for a ten-year-old to act like this.” Then I would imagine myself Ricky’s widow, left to face life alone after my true love was killed by a volcano. I would sit and play “Aloha, O,” leaning forward so that my face would be closer to the keyboard so that as the tears ran down my cheeks and dripped off my chin, I could feel them hit the backs of my hands as I played the song that said both “goodbye” and “I love you” to Ricky Lankford. Imagining myself Ricky’s widow was much better than torturing myself with the knowledge that was just below the surface: that it hadn’t taken him but two weeks to forget me in spite of all those homework papers and shared lunches.

The next year, Kennedy was shot, the Beatles debuted on Ed Sullivan, and I played a beginner's version of Chopin's Minute Waltz in Mrs. Bland's spring recital. I made my first B in school that year. It was in penmanship, and I got it because I was determined to make my G's like George Harrison did and to dot my i's like Ringo Starr. I also got my first kiss, from another Air Force "brat" named Timothy Hale who was eleven and had lived in Europe and knew more than Ricky Lankford anyhow.

And now it seems that Martha Bland has met someone. I hope the oral surgeon will set fire to all those beginner books she's had to listen to school children play from; it must have been torture for her. I hope he'll ask her to play Chopin by candlelight while he waltzes around with Pretty Boy II on his head, and the Chinaman on the windowsill smiles.

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Marian Carcache's work has appeared in various journals and anthologies including Shenandoah, Belles Lettres, Crossroads: Stories of the Southern Literary Fantastic, and Climbing Mt. Cheaha: Emerging Alabama Writers. Under the Arbor, an opera made from her short story by the same name, premiered in Birmingham and appeared on PBS stations nationwide. Marian grew up in rural Russell County, Alabama, and now lives in Auburn. carcamm@auburn.edu
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***“Society is now one polished horde,
Form'd of two mighty tribes, the
Bores and Bored.”***

--Lord Byron

TYBEE SUNDAY

H.D. Whatley

Momma kept filling the pail with sand.
She dumped it out to build a castle.
Junior took some reeds and broke them up.
He stuck them into the castle towers
And they looked like flagpoles.
Daddy sat in his chair making sure we were safe.
The radio played a song and I danced with the wind.
Momma laughed at me and shook her shoulders.
She encouraged me to dance without shame.
The sea gulls hovered above us in a circle.
They hoped to eat our leftover potato chips.
Junior put his last reed into one of the castle towers.
He stood tall and bravely saluted it.
Tomorrow is Memorial Day.
Daddy is going to wear his dress uniform.
The one with the shiny buttons and medals.
He is going back to the desert again.
There he can build his own sandcastles.

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A native of north Louisiana, H.D. Whatley graduated from Loyola College Preparatory in Shreveport, received his Bachelor of Art in English from the College of Charleston and his Masters of Fine Art in Integrated Media Arts from Hunter College of the City University of New York. He currently resides in Savannah, Georgia, where he teaches creative writing to young people at the Deep Center. His poetry has been published in Heavy Hands Ink and Poets for Living Waters.

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THE SCARF OF MANY COLORS

Darlene Gray

It was a cool, fall day in October and I was driving down a residential street in Ensley, Alabama, a subsection of Birmingham. This neighborhood had fallen on hard times. The once pristine houses showed signs of flaking paint and exposed, decaying wood. Fall leaves in red, orange, and brown were scattered over dry, burnt lawns from the summer's drought. I drove through a shower of falling leaves and slowed for the approaching STOP sign. That was when I saw him. Although it was slightly cool outside, he was dressed for much colder weather. His once beige coat was buttoned to his throat. He wore a blue skull cap pulled low over his ears and a multi-colored scarf was wound around his neck. He wore the perpetual look of glee that is often the mark of a much simpler mind and trusting attitude about the world.

I would not have paid him much attention, just standing there on the sidewalk in front of a single-family home, except that he had one gloved hand up in the air, waving at the passing cars. It wasn't so much a wave of greeting as it was a wave of ultimate joy. His whole face was at rapt attention with his present task. I slowed for the STOP sign but kept going, swishing past him as he stood there, waving frantically. I went on my way thinking that it was dangerous to even drive on a city street because you never knew who was out there. What if he was mentally ill or worse, a thief just waiting for you to stop so a rush of brigands could overtake your car? You could end up on the 6:00 news. Hastily, I made my visit to the neighborhood school and, later, quickly drove down the same street, eager to leave its inhabitants behind.

It was several weeks before I made the same trek to Ensley. By now, it was almost Thanksgiving. The air was considerably colder but not unbearable. Now, the majority of the leaves had fallen from the trees and most were scattered on sidewalks and lawns. Some leaves had been raked up and put in clear, plastic bags and placed on the street for the trash crew. I passed one lone, female dog, black fur matted and dirty, looking for a drink of water or a scrap of forgotten food.

As I braked at the traffic light, which was a block from the school, I saw him once again. This time, I had to stop for a longer period of time and I observed his behavior. He was wearing that worn winter coat over denim jeans. I could not see the color of his shirt, but he had that blue skull cap on, pulled low over his ears and the "scarf of many colors" around his neck. This time I looked at his facial features. He must have been in his mid-to-late twenties, and his skin was the color of hot chocolate on a cold winter's day. Heavy lids covered his eyes and his face was free of beard or stubble. The more I observed, the more I noticed. His coat, while old, was clean and his jeans did not sag, as was the style of the

day. I also noticed that he did not single out certain people to whom he waved. He was waving at any and all cars that passed. I realized he was manifesting that beatific smile you read about in paintings of the saints. He was not a diversion for robbery. He was creating his own joy with this simple act.

I noticed that other cars swept by him as if he was not even there. Perhaps they knew him or recognized him as the guy who waved at passing cars. The thought entered my mind that it must be disappointing to expend such energy and emotion and not have it returned. I made a decision in that moment that changed my life.

As I drove past that young man, his hand moving frenetically, I actually slowed down. Then, I smiled my best smile and waved back. Oh, the absolute joy that filled his simple face! He was ecstatic and, if possible, waved that much more enthusiastically. I continued on my journey and saw him become smaller and smaller in my rear view mirror. I realized in that moment of providing him with a small measure of joy, I had received a blessing. I had momentarily forgotten about my recent divorce and the fact that I was alone for the first time in my forty-six years. I had forfeited my feelings of sadness and concentration on myself and had given something to someone else. What a small deed. It was not like I had donated an organ, relinquished all my worldly possessions, or expended any energy. I had simply made someone else's day. What he did not know, and could never imagine, was that he had lightened my burden. I found myself smiling the rest of the day.

Over the next several months, I made periodic visits to Ensley. I traveled that same street through the cold, bitter, winter winds and the warm, spring days when the streets were covered in blankets of yellow pollen. There were times that we waved to each other and other times that I missed my friendly stranger. It was those days that I went away saddened. It was not because I was doing him a favor; it was because he had helped me forget about myself and to focus on another human being. I rejoiced in his placement on that street.

It has been almost a year since I last saw him. I never pass that particular portion of the street that I do not think about that young man and hope he is somewhere safe and that he is still waving.

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Darlene Gray is a mathematics support teacher for Birmingham City Schools and an adjunct instructor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She writes from everyday life experiences. tidefan8@charter.net

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DEAD MOCKINGBIRD

Teresa Thorne

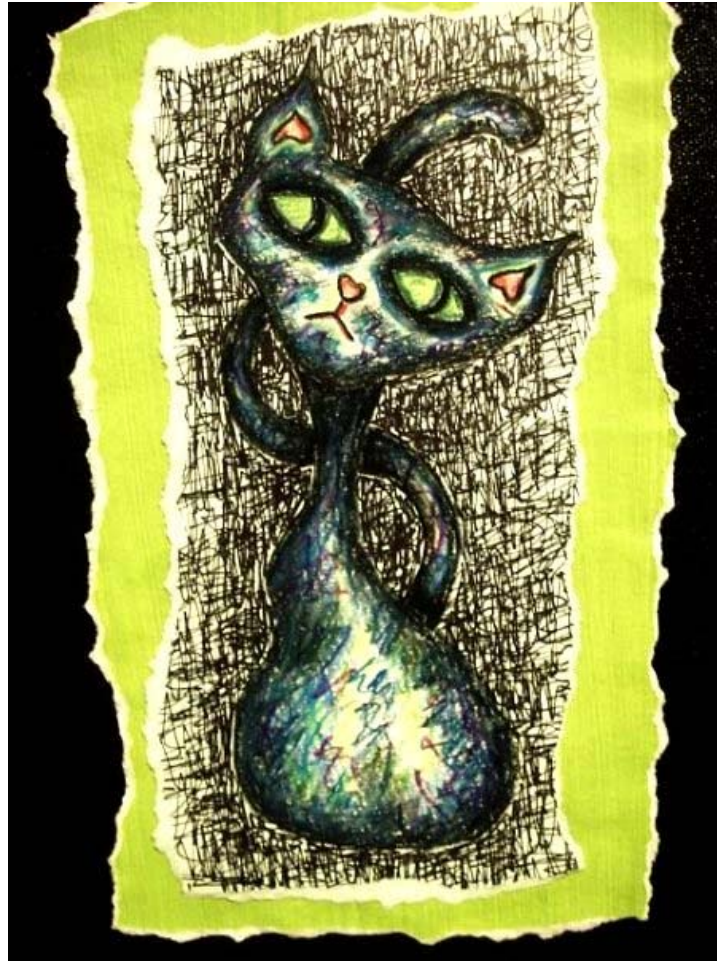
My Pa is dead.
They say he fell on his knife.
No.
That Boo boy kilt him.
The kids told it true.
My Pa is dead.
Tom Robinson's dead too,
hanged hisself.
But I couldn't get the smell of either off me.
I head to the woods,
to the cold creek.
To walk in with all my clothes clinging to me like sin
and look up through the water,
drowning my eyes with stars.
They stare back like all those glances
that flitch flesh
when I pass.
There goes that Claire Mae--their silent stares say.
She tried to seduce a Negro,
a dead Negro now,
hanged hisself.
But still.
"Rape," they declare
to each other.
They will never understand
the black, deep pit of my desiring--
my need
to have something 'cause I wanted it
'cause *I* said
I need.
It was always what Pa wanted.
What he said
he needed
I was a worm squirming in the dark soil,
yanked out,
hooked,
fed

to the hungry fish.
My Pa is dead.
Tom Robinson's dead, my Negro
that I desired.
My world I shattered
into pieces.
Like the stars,
they stare back at me.

.....
Teresa writes in Springville, Alabama. www.tkthorne.com
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*“It is not too much to ask of
Americans that they not be
censors, that they run the risk of
being deeply wounded by ideas so
that we may all be free. If we are
wounded by an ugly idea, we must
count it as part of the cost of
freedom and, like American heroes
in days gone by, bravely carry on.”*

--Kurt Vonnegut



BELINDA

Leslie Paige Nuby

Mixed Media

8" x 10"

Leslie Paige Nuby, a native of Birmingham, Alabama, primarily focuses on figurative drawings, paintings, and unusual cats. Most of her works are created with colored pencils, acrylic paint, and Sharpies on canvas, paper, or wood. Her work has previously been featured in Birmingham Arts Journal. Nuby lives in the Southside area of Birmingham. lpaign@hotmail.com

THE MADHATTER'S TEAHOUSE, SAN ANTONIO

Cindy Tanquary Peavy

The body builder in black stilettos
and black leotard cut high on her thighs
hangs from still rings,
muscles bulging as she lifts her body,
a contradiction—or a blend perhaps—
of the masculine and feminine.

I stare at the poster as I wash my hands
and try to make it fit the theme, the place—
San Antonio, MadHatter's Teahouse,
women's restroom. Wasn't the Mad Hatter
from *Alice in Wonderland*?

The crazy tilt of the shelves lined with teacups,
the unexpected dips and rises of the hardwood floor,
and the clink of spoons against porcelain
seem to confirm and stir up a swirl of memories
like cream in black coffee.

Time had been murdered, as I recall,
so it was always tea—they simply changed places
so they would never have to wash the dishes—
and the Dormouse snoozed
while the Hatter and the March Hare insulted Alice,
asked riddles with no answers,
and sung nonsensical rhymes: *Twinkle, twinkle,*
little bat, how I wonder what you're at.

It was the mercury that did it, that made the hatters mad.
They breathed in the fumes of their trade
which poisoned their minds with confabulations.
What was the March Hare's excuse?

Back at the table, I take a bite
of breakfast burrito—eggs scrambled with Pico de Gallo,
topped with melted feta—sip my coffee with half and half,
and think, undisturbed by muffled morning conversations
that drift to me from crowded tables.
I rehash old questions—clichés really,
but mid-life struggles nonetheless—
who am I without a child at home
and what should I do in the waning of my life?
I realize these are my own riddles with no answers
and feel suddenly that I am Alice,
changing places only to endure
the unending tea party where cups are always full
but conversations empty;
we have nothing left to say.

I'm tempted to return to the restroom.
It's the stilettos, I think,
their incongruence that drew me into the painting
and into thought. Perhaps if I return to the beginning
I'll find the answers. Only this time,
I'll stop and wash the dirty dishes.

.....

*Cindy Peavy teaches writing to 5th graders at Birmingham's Mountain Brook
Elementary, where she encourages her students to submit their work to contests and
publications—something she herself finally did last year to avoid being a hypocrite.
One of her stories for children was recently published in alalit.com.
cindypeavy08@gmail.com*

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LANE DANCERS

Glenda Slater

In Kunming, China, 2002,
bicycle riders in black, unencumbered,
interweave gracefully with
black-clad pedaling vendors:
water-bearing,
vegetable-sprouting,
hay-heaped,
who sway toward market,
with top-heavy wares umbrella-ing
their rhythmically bending bodies.

All move silently on whirling wheels.
They are lane dancers,
removed from the minuet of buses, trucks, cars and cabs,
by invisible lines.

Walkers, also in black,
await their turn.

Unchoreographed, in white, I step back
and feel the whoosh
of a rider gliding by behind,
within a breath.

Now, I hear that in Kunming, China
cars proliferate,
supplanting cycles.
But still I picture whirling wheels
and feel the dancing air
upon my back.

.....

*Glenda Slater has published poems for children and adults, articles on
communication, and a children's play, "The Junk Food King." She lives in
Fairhope, Alabama.*

JUNKER JUNKIE

Jim Reed

Well, she's struggling to get that big junker of a belching-fume car into a parallel parking space in front of Tony's Terrific Hot Dogs up on Second Avenue North in the tattered remains of Downtown Birmingham and the kid beside her is screaming its head off and she's trying to shut it up and at the same time keep the lit cigarette from falling of the hand she's using to guide the big power-steeringless vehicle into some crooked semblance of a resting position and it's hot and muggy and steamy already and it's only 9:30 on a Saturday morning for God's sake and the car's air conditioning system died about ten years ago and was never resuscitated and her bangs are beginning to mat to her forehead and she's hoping that the drug store across the street from Tony's is open on Saturdays because she has to get some Preparation H for her invalid mother and her absentee husband is three years behind on the child-support payments and her sleazeball lawyer keeps sending bills to get her to pay for the work he's done to try and get the guy to make his child-support payments and the lawyer sure managed to generate a lot of paperwork that never quite caused the fictitious payments to start appearing in the mailbox but he expects to get his attorney's fees anyhow which means that she is basically supposed to start paying the child-support fees she isn't getting from her estranged husband to this attorney so that even if the support money started coming in it wouldn't do her any good because she'd have to turn around and pay it to the lawyer and how did she get herself into this mess in the first place?

Well, she guessed it had all started one adolescent evening at a Roebuck park when she decided that intimacy and marriage would have to be better than living with broken parents in a broken home within a broken neighborhood in the broken city of Birmingham so she stopped saying no after the hundredth time and said yes just one time and that about wrapped up her date with fate and determined the course of the next fifty-odd years of her life unless some miracle occurred to change all that and since being a Baptist hadn't seemed to help much about all she could hope for now was a UFO abduction or the Lottery or a good horoscope to change her life and she could not imagine what else might change her life except maybe if she stopped worrying about her no-good husband and no-good lawyer and decided to say yes just one time to that good-looking beeraholic neighbor with the relatively new pickup truck who kept asking her out just maybe if she said yes to him he might save her and change her life and help her get this goddamned junker fixed and sweaty screaming kid made happy and her invalid mother the correct kind of medical care and then life would be just about complete wouldn't it

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Prolific author Jim Reed writes "even when I don't appear to be writing," in Birmingham, Alabama. www.jimreedbooks.com



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