Birmingham Arts Journal

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Birmingham Arts Journal

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Front Cover: **PIECES OF ME,** *Ceramic Sculpture*

Alan Burch is a ceramic artist living in Florence, Alabama. His work focuses on wheel-thrown traditional forms with a modern approach to surface decoration and construction. Alan earned a Bachelor's of Fine Art degree from University of North Alabama in ceramics, and though he has lived most of his life in Texas he considers himself an Alabamian because of the formative years spent here. abnxs@bellsouth.net

Back Cover: **NEW DAWN**, *Colored Pencil, 21" x 25"*

Andrew Tyson is an award-winning, self-taught photographer and artist in Birmingham, Alabama, 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

SOME LONESOME BLUES KEEP HANGING ROUND

Joe Whitten

-for Nathan Whitten

Since we were never introduced, I didn't know
how to speak of you. So, I call you Nathan.
Father sounds too formal for a mountain man

and Daddy too familiar for a stranger.
For a long time I felt deserted, angry
that you left me to stumble through step-childhood.

My aunts and uncles me told of you. Mother didn't.
But when I turned fifteen, she gave me a snapshot
of you smiling at your guitar. And she told

that the night before Bob Gentry
shot you down, you played for her to sing
I dreamed I searched Heaven for you.

Tonight I want to give you my guitar.
I never learned to play it well,
and Uncle Newell said you were Grand-ol'-Opry-good.

I was clumsy with fingering chords, but music
throbs low cadence through my blood as it did yours,
and if you'll come back a ghost some night to Odenville,

I'll play some lonesome country songs
on my piano—I'll start with "Born to Lose"
or maybe "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain."

……

Joseph Whitten, a retired educator, lives in Odenville, Alabama. He is president of the Alabama State Poetry Society and a member of Alabama Writers' Conclave, the Pennsylvania Poetry Society, and the Georgia Poetry Society.

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WHAT'S IN A NAME

Randall DeVallance

His name was Jimmy Hansom.

"A handsome name for a handsome boy," people used to say, but they had misheard him. It wasn't 'handsome," it was "hansom." Like the cab.

Later, because of a typo at the Social Security Administration, his name became Jimmy Hamson. *Hamson*, like the famous writer. The spellings were different, though. Jimmy spelled his last name with an *o*. The famous writer spelled his with a *u*. Not that any of it mattered anyway, because people didn't go for hansom cab rides anymore, nor did they read books. Not a single person had ever said to Jimmy: "Hamson? Like the author?" When they learned his name they just nodded and smiled, tight-lipped, and said, "Nice to meet you, Mr. Hamson."

That *Hamson* was a Norwegian name was another thing most people didn't know. That is to say, *Hamsun* was Norwegian; *Hamson* was a typo, and so didn't come from anywhere besides the Social Security Administration. It was invented whole cloth, a happy accident, like the mutations that surfaced every thousand generations and gradually turned a bunch of slimy, primordial sea ooze into giraffes and elephants and sea lions and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Jimmy used to be Hansom, and now he was Hamson, and soon would be something else altogether.

Before he was Hansom, he had been something else too. But that part of his life was lost to Jimmy. Jimmy knew he existed and therefore had been born and – cogito ergo sum – must have parents somewhere. But Jimmy had never known his real parents. He had been adopted by a couple from Maine at a very young age. They had never hidden the fact that he was an adopted child. His earliest memory was of his adoptive parents peering down at him in his crib and repeating over and over, like a mantra: "You are adopted. You are adopted. You…are…adopted." Though twenty-five years had passed since then, it was still the way he pictured them – Ken and Barbara were their names, Ken and Barbara Hansom – when he bothered to think about them at all. Barbara, with her frowzy, rust-colored hair that seemed to explode from the top of her skull like gag snakes from a can of nuts and fall limply across her scalp with all the elegance and panache of a pile of corpses. Ken, with his wooden manner and somewhat bulbous head, so that any attempt to mentally

reconstruct him inevitably left one picturing a mushroom impaled on a kebab skewer.

Jimmy often dreamt of running away. The way he imagined it, he was on a plane, thirty-five thousand feet above the ocean, gazing out the window. The scene outside looked very much like Heaven. It was how Jimmy imagined Heaven, anyway. Just below window-level, in every direction, stretched an undulating bed of cumulus into which their plane seemed to nestle like a cat into a down comforter. Far off on the horizon the sun blazed a glorious yellow, its rays skipping and splashing along the tops of the clouds like dolphins along the ocean's waves, so that the entire sky around him glowed soft and warm. An ethereal calm washed over him. It felt as though he had returned to the womb, as if the universe itself were swaddling him, cradling him in its arms. He took a deep breath and felt the tension seep from his body like air from an old tire. A perfect peace settled over the cabin like snowflakes over a meadow, drowning out the drone of the engines until it became a hum, and then a whisper, and finally nothing more than the tinkle of a pin-drop on the edge of consciousness.

For his eighteenth birthday, Ken and Barbara threw him a surprise party. They were waiting for him in the kitchen when he came home from school, wearing conical, paper hats on their heads. Across the length of the ceiling, two red-and-blue streamers sagged like a pair of downed power lines. In the center of the kitchen table, a white-frosted cake rested on a plastic serving stand. Written on the cake, in orange frosting, were the words: "Happy Birthday Your Name Here!" It was the cake from the display case, they told Jimmy. The bakery had given them a twenty percent discount.

……

Randall DeVallance is a writer living in Queens, New York. His work has appeared in numerous publications, including McSweeney's Internet Tendency, Eyeshot, Pindeldyboz, *and* Word Riot. *He is also the author of the novella and short story collection,* The Absent Traveller, *published in December 2010 by Atticus Books. devallance@hotmail.com*

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BATH TIME

Lowell Jaeger

Mom called into empty fields
surrounding our house. Day had fallen
so dim my brothers and I lost sight
of fly balls in the twilight, and reluctantly
we filed from far corners of play
toward our once-a-week bath
where Mom kneeled beside the tub and scrubbed us
with sudsy gusto, same as kettles and pans.

One fill of hot water for four boys
meant the water faded darker grey
the longer the last of us waited. Cleanliness,
Mom said, is next to godliness. We were blessed
with a glorious lack of both,

except for our Saturday night soap extravaganzas
and a forced march to Sunday School
next sunrise, where the sermon suffocated us
in our buttoned collars and stiff shoes.
All of us soiled with sin from first breath,
the preacher scolded. Dirty as worms in the Lord's eyes.
None of us felt much joy till we drove home

and our hearts lifted to slip back into
yesterday's ragged jeans and smelly sneakers.
Mom laughed. Said she'd need to scrape the film
off the porcelain with a putty knife. Said
now get out of her hair and don't track dirt
in the house. Hard to believe

Jehovah frowning down, while Mom
swiped pass after pass over our stains
and scuff marks on the linoleum. Jehovah scowling
as we dog-paddled in mud and pond scum
where we bathed naked as angels,
and later let the sun wash over us
as we tore leeches off one another's backs.

……

As editor of Many Voices Press, Lowell Jaeger compiled New Poets of the American West, *an anthology of poets from eleven Western states. He is author of four collections of poems, including* Suddenly Out of a Long Sleep *(Arctos Press 2009) and* WE *(Main Street Rag Press 2010). Most recently Jaeger was awarded the Montana Governor's Humanities Award for his work in promoting thoughtful civic discourse.*

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GOSSIP

George Sawaya

a pair of ears,
a pair of lips;
a pair of silver
scissors.

……

George Sawaya is a Birmingham, Alabama, resident, student, poet, and librarian. He is currently pursuing his Master's Degree in English with a focus on Creative Writing at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, in addition to working on his first poetry collection. Argus68@gmail.com

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FOR SYLVIA

Tabitha Carlson Bozeman

Silent work except for
The clock tracking drafts:
Lack. . . Lack. . . Lack.

Frantic look back.
Intractable panic
Forward push spring back clack—

Doubt surges in
Violent purging—
Red rage in that blue room.

Blue hour. Kill hour.
The clock keeps a catalog as
Keys click through thoughts.

Vengeful crafting,
Time-sand sifting.
Weighing words, images.

Psyche culling truth from
Seeds of doubt,
Racing the hourglass as

Black glass grays,
Birds wake past the pane,
And the past parades as poetry.

Words loud in her head,
Silent on her lips, fingertips
Poisoned darts target-locked—

As the children in her bed
Sleep on.

……

Tabitha Carlson Bozeman lives in Rainbow City, Alabama, with her husband and three children. She has degrees from Jacksonville State University and the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and taught English at the university level for 6 years. She is now the director of the children's department at the Gadsden Public Library.

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BLUE HUMMINGBIRD

Kay Williams

Acrylic Mixed Media

9" x 12"

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

WAITING FOR JULY

Mira Desai

Sub-Inspector V Gaekwad swore and spat out a plume of red betel juice on the heated tar road.

Damn. Like some beat constable. Standing in the blazing heat that scorched his skin. He could feel a headache developing, a staccato beat beginning to build. What a lousy, thankless job….Untangling traffic jams, diverting traffic so that civil servants at the secretariat and well-heeled Nariman Point types could get home to their wives and cricket-playing brats five minutes sooner.

What a climb-down for someone of his caliber. An officer, one who'd worked plum postings, reduced to this—this nonsense!

He whacked his baton on the hood of a beaten-up taxi. "Get a move on, idiot! Think you're here for a wedding procession?"

Such uncouth people, the public. Things were so much easier when he was posted in the Police HQ. Detective, special squad, of course. Place Plum postings, an air conditioned office, a constant stream of visitors … there were so many ways a man could progress, use information. Everything was set.

And then the darned terrorist attack burst upon them, like an explosion. Damn those fellows, they'd walked in like they'd come sightseeing- shopping in Crawford Market. Questions had been asked, nasty questions! In the newspapers, assembly, parliament. You know how chatter builds up. Intelligence failure, people said. The Americans had made scathing remarks in their reports.

To cut a long story short here he was. A punishment posting for the department, the papers called it.

But not for long.

For he had a plan. Colossal in scale, of course. Not for nothing was he known as Geekwad the shana, the street smart.

Gamdevi was his area. No matter that this old part of the city was overrun with winding lanes and bylanes, where shiny glass towers nestled by dilapidated buildings.

He knew the area like the back of his hand. He'd grown up here, in these tightly packed lanes, he'd played gulley cricket with a stub of a bat in tight alleys, as a scruffy kid, he'd scrambled playing hide and seek in the warren of lanes and courtyards. He knew what lane and crouching space

led where. So what if in pockets, shiny, sky-touching concrete blocks had replaced those maze-like chawls? The underlying blueprint didn't change, just like a flimsy woman didn't stop being one if she dolled up in pearls. A pulsating network of capillaries, of nerve endings, held this place together, kept it from crumbling apart like an atom in fission, and this capillary structure did not change, no matter what happened at the surface.

The city's old sewerage system was archaic, possibly of British vintage, possibly older, Dutch, people said. Those wavering lines had crisscrossed the map of the metropolis for well over a century, and then had been replaced by a new, home-designed system in the 1950's, a system which worked in fits and starts, piecemeal.

In his family they'd always worked for the sarkaar, the government. His father had put in long years as a cartographer in the Mumbai Municipal Corporation. For long years, bless his soul, he'd mapped out the lines, plotted detailed gridlines on blue graph paper, patient work that had taken months to put together, bit by bit. Work that was buried in dusty files in the cavernous warehouse where old municipal files are stored till they crumble away or termites get to them.

Of course he had a copy. The old man considered this work to be his masterpiece and bequeathed him a complete set of drawings, for sentiment and possibly antique value some day. All that was fine, everyone knew that antiques were good money, much liked by those red-skinned foreigners who thronged the winding lanes of Chor Bazaar with their cameras.

But thanks to those maps, he knew how exactly to get into the vault of the DCICI Bank at Gamdevi. There were air pockets in those old lines, and a torchlight and bravado was all a man needed to find his way through the tunnels. Under the clamor and fury of the July monsoons, hell, he could get into the Government Mint if he wanted to.

High time he got his dues.

Of course he'd bide his time, and he'd work alone, he wasn't a fool to go around trusting some loud-mouthed idiot shootin' off his story, drunk on home brewn tadi. The way it had happened for that last time? All of them wanted to be heroes, all of them wanted their mugs in the newspapers. Such a close call. One couldn't trust anyone to keep their trap shut.

The monsoon was not too far. Three months of nonstop, maddening rain. Sheets of water that were tipped directly from the heavens. With

four high-tide days of danger that the authorities had been shouting about, building up a near panic. He'd pick the worst of these days, when the deluge was like a sheet of steel from the skies, and move in for the finale. In all the rolling thunder and clamor, high wind and the drumming from the curtain of rain crashing on concrete, asbestos and tin, no one would notice a few muffled blasts.

He'd take the money home and park it in his attic.

Then he'd return to duty, man the traffic post, guide citizens and waterlogged traffic on to safety.

After a month or two, he'd put in his papers for voluntary retirement. Quietly withdraw to his ancestral mango orchard in his off-the-map village in Ratnagiri.

Those geniuses on the force would never get to him.

There were some advantages to a forgotten legacy, the detailed maps marking the lanes only a local would know.

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Mira Desai writes in Bombay, India. Her translations have been featured in international publications Words without Borders*,* Massachusetts Review*, and* 91st Meridian*. She has contributed fiction to* Reading Hour *and* Birmingham Arts Journal*. She is a member of the IWW, the internet writing workshop. miradesai@gmail.com*

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"It's ill-becoming for an old broad to sing about how bad she wants it. But occasionally we do."

-- Lena Horne

CAROLINE

Seth Tanner

Caroline,

You never stopped reaching to take hold of me.

Your eyes never stopped seeing that I was just beneath the surface, even when the waters grew dim with brine.

You visited me in dreams speaking in a tongue so ancient I understood without knowing.

You told me, "There is no drowning, grow gills if you wish it so."

I opened my eyes and swam through the Bay under its Golden Gate into the frigid Pacific.

I grew a fin in the Panama Canal. My feet webbed off the coast of Belize.

I scavenged for food, eating what Great Whites and Hammerheads left floating in the water.

I could hear you off the western coast of Florida, calling out my name, telling the story of a Merman you set wild and free.

When I reached the shores of Alabama, I could feel the tug of home. I emerged beneath the blazing sun and walked toward sugar white beaches.

I collapsed on the sand.

My gills dried like figs left too long on the branch.

The webbing between my toes dissolved in the heat.

I wheezed and coughed as my lungs expanded.

You sat beside me, said we are brother and sister from a world away.

When I woke you weren't there but I knew what you would tell me, "Grow wings if you need to. You're not far now."

……

Seth Tanner lives and writes in Talladega, Alabama. He is a member of Birmingham's Big Table Poets. His poetry has been published in Birmingham Arts Journal, Whatever Remembers Us: An Anthology of Alabama Poetry, Poem, and Einstein at the Odeon Café. *Seth was also a mixed media artist in Birmingham Artwalk 2010 where many one-of-a-kind poems were crafted on the backs of panels covered with melted crayon, digital photography, and acrylic paint.*

OVER EXPOSURE

A.J. Huffman

The body is burning before the sunset,
which should equate
misappropriated
heat. But the steam is
missing, and the smoke is misguided
by my own displacement
of disparity.
Which leaves me wondering if
any picture I am part of can ever be
construed
as whole.

……

A.J. Huffman is a poet and freelance writer in Daytona Beach, Florida. She has previously published six collections of poetry, all available on Amazon.com. She has also published her work in numerous national and international literary journals. Most recently, she has accepted the position as editor for four online poetry journals for Kind of a Hurricane Press www.kindofahurricanepress.com

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WINDOW

Irene Latham

A poem is a sheet of glass
Tucked between wood frames.
Your world will be transformed
When you peek through the panes.

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See bio on page 36.

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PEARSON, AGE SEVEN

Ginger Rue

You see things I can't see,
Think thoughts only a little boy can think.

You're a poem—

Sublime, fleeting, and realer than real.

Something beautiful we reach out our hands to capture,

Like the face of an angel that greets us when we first wake up,

But when our eyes adjust—

Gone--

Too much for this world.

Where you go, I cannot come,

And someday, even you will look back at photographs--

With your little boy face cast in shadow,

Full of innocence and knowing--

And even you will be unable to return to that magical place

Where the boy, without a sound, took dominion

As the sun set behind him.

……

Ginger Rue is the author of two novels for young adults, Brand New Emily *and* Jump. *She lives in Northport, Alabama.*

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PALMATE HEART

Charles Hastings

heart is hand
paled lines folding to meet either side
stemming creases lost
trailing into swirls of prints in the shade of your ribs

lines are stories
stems are loves
prints are the lonely time between

it's all about where you start
where your eyes lead you
and how tenderness is your vessel or your basement
for every boring black bit you keep in your socks beneath your sole

metaphors aside
palmate hearts
either
clinch like fists
define themselves with shadows like a crescent moon
or hold onto everything till the sky becomes six feet of soil
and last thoughts rest on your patio
the mausoleum
point B to all point A's

……

Charles Hastings is a native of Scottsboro, Alabama. For the last seven years he's been involved in the southern punk rock community. As a musician he's recorded and performed throughout the USA. Last year he released a book of poetry entitled Our Gorgeous Hell Raiser *through his label, TS Records.*

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WOMAN AT THE WELL

Robert Goler

Oil on Canvas

24" x 36"

Robert Goler lives and paints in Birmingham, Alabama.

JIMBO BAGGYPANTS SAVES THE DAY

Jim Reed

Elmo Riley calls me Jimbo, and I call him Bo. We don't know why. Tex Ritter's next cowboy action film is being previewed on the patched screen of the ratty Ritz Theatre in Downtown Tuscaloosa. Tex is firing both pistols at the bad guys while backing toward his trusty steed. Suddenly, he twists in the air, is astride in a split second, and gallops away to safety. "See it at a theatre near you!" the excited, dulcet voice of the announcer shouts, which is what my pal Bo Riley and I firmly intend to do this time next Saturday. Meanwhile, it's time to splurge our two nickels for some popcorn and soft drink, before the chapter starts, the chapter being an episode of an extended serial, featuring Batman and his pal, Robin, the Boy Wonder.

While a preview of one of those disgustingly smoochy Barbara Stanwyck romance movies is running, we both run to the shabby concession stand, lay down our coins, grab some grub and rush back to the torn and rickety seats.

Scrunching down in anticipation of unknown horrors and victories to come, we brace ourselves to see whether our heroes will survive diabolical schemes of the villains of the day.

Back then, the Batmobile is just a black Ford, but we don't know any better. We don't know about high-tech and million-dollar movie prop design. Low-budget Batman and Robin are all we have. But one thing Batman possesses that surpasses all the low- and high-tech gadgets you could possibly imagine, is…the utility belt! Inside that thick black leather belt is anything you could ever need to escape an impossible situation.

In one tense episode, Batman and Robin are thrown into a jail cell while the criminals make their get-away. The cell is solidly built and the situation seems hopeless. Suddenly, Batman remembers that his utility belt holds the solution to any problem. He whips out a blowtorch, lights it up with a batmatch, and handily cuts the bars, long before anybody dreams up a batlaser or an atomic-ray knife. The day is saved!

We hardly remember the bus ride home, because we are re-playing the serial scenes in our minds—long before instant replay and slo-mo are invented.

Back in the day, small movie fans still play in yards, unaware of the eventual onslaught of videos and television and ipods and texting and a dozen other indoor distractions. The yards are made for play and adventure, and they become whatever we desire—today, simply an outdoor batcave where we can come up with a slew of gadgets like Batman would use.

Taping together some old belt and suspender parts, I dye them black with liquid shoe polish, fashion a bat insignia out of felt, glue it over a buckle, staple some cloth pockets to the inside of the makeshift belt, then look around for emergency tools with which to stuff them.

Let's see…what would come in handy for Batman? A small pocket knife (who doesn't need one on hand?), a tiny file (can't find a blowtorch), nail clippers (might need to snip my way out of a gypsy's burlap bag), matches (for warming my hands during an arctic escapade), three quarters (could use them to bribe a henchman), two bandages (wound prevention), a small slingshot (silent weapons are always in vogue), four marbles (could throw them behind me while being chased by buffoons who would in all likelihood slip on them), and so on and so forth.

Pretty soon, that utility belt is loaded, my pants are becoming baggy and weighted down, and I'm beginning to lope along like a wounded buffalo. But I'm prepared!

Within minutes, I learn the pitfalls of wearing a utility belt. When under threat, you need to remember exactly where you placed the needed tool…not only that, you have to whip it out before the bad guys can overwhelm you!

It just doesn't work. You feel like a jerk, asking the desperadoes to hold on while you draw your weapon. You wind up abandoning the project in order to keep your playmates from rolling on the lawn, laughing.

It's enough to make you retreat back into your solitary books and movies, where you can always find what you need in that utility belt…because fulfilling your fantasy does not require reality.

I can lick any bully on the playground, as long as it happens inside my head. This does become a somewhat effective strategy…the bullies are puzzled because I seem so confident and because they don't know why I have that quiet smile on my face—maybe they're afraid I have a secret

plan that might make them laughingstocks. Better leave the dreaming nerd kid alone and go pick on someone who seems afraid and clueless.

Jimbo Baggypants once again saves the day

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Jim Reed lives in Birmingham, Alabama, where he curates the Museum of Fond Memories at Reed Books and writes about his time on Earth.
http://www.jimreedbooks.com

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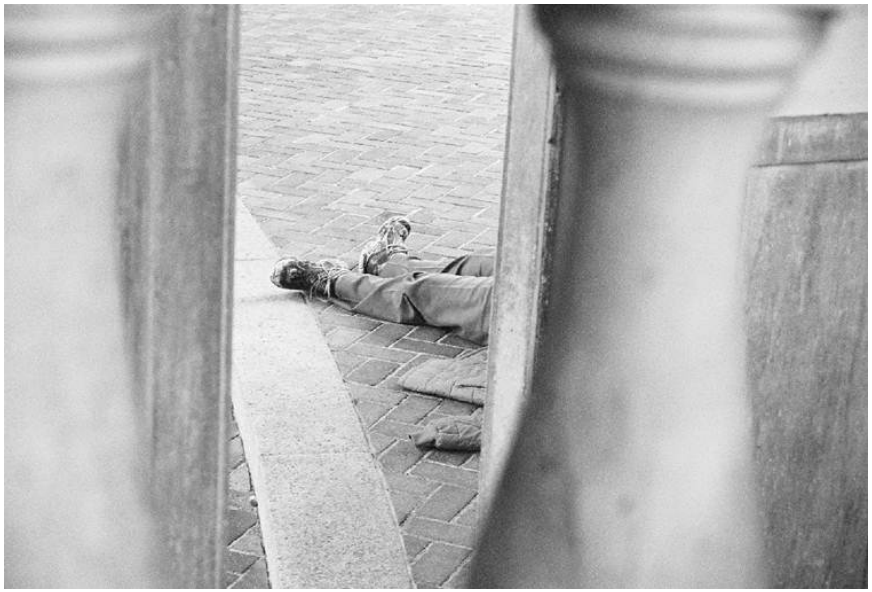

DENVER HOMELESS
Thomas Neil Dennis
Digital Photograph

Thomas N. Dennis lives and writes near Lovick, Alabama. He is the author of two memoirs, Beautiful Illusions *(2004) and* Consolations of Loss *(2010), as well as a collection of short stories,* Magic Sweat *(2007). One possible title for an upcoming novel is* Never Snicker at a Snake on a Stick. *He is also a practicing yogi. mfiction@charter.net &http://merefiction.com*

POOR MAMA

Tony Wayne Brown

The destroyer Samuel F. Jones is rockin' and rollin' as the top sergeant motions forward and screams, "Hit the nets and give'em hell, boys! It's show-time!"

I toss my foldin' money overboard so I can double-cross bad luck, but watchin' it flutter down to the deep blue sea makes me realize that only means I'll be stone-broke if'n I should happen to survive this day. My stomach was already tied up in knots enough, what with the impending assault on a strongly-fortified hunk of rock we're about to make. The crash of the big guns is deafening, punishing our objective. Right now, I'm more'n happy to be here, rather than on the receivin' end of that endless stream of shellfire. Got a feelin' when the enemy opens fire on the fleet, my idea on that subject will change mighty fast.

In one well-rehearsed motion, we make our way starboard and start descending the cargo net like a bunch of hypnotized green ants led by the Pied Piper hisself.

"'Bout time we got off this bucket of bolts!" my buddy Harper yells to me over the crescendo of cannon fire.

The pitching of the Jones is such that even the toughest salts amongst us are feeling woozy. It won't nuthin' like this in our training exercises back in Hawaii, that's for dang sure! Just as I reach the bottom of the netting and stretch my foot out for the landing ship, two guys who have just gone over the railing above let loose. The barf that cascades on Harper and me like rotten oatmeal is the final straw. Both of us upchuck, but at least we have the decency to do it without covering our fellow Marines with that load of manufactured eggs they called our "final" meal.

The LST we're assigned to has a small tank aboard. Harper and me are happy to have that piece of De-troit-made machinery in front of us. We've both heard the stories from those souls amongst us who went ashore at Tarawa; so, we ain't gonna hesitate to hide behind that hunk of iron until the bullets quit flyin', believe you me. LST 1205 is catching up to us. We wave and them guys wave back, giving us the "thumbs up." They get the "OK" sign in return.

"How's your daddy?" one smartass yells at us.

"Dunno," Harper yells back. "Ask your ma an' she'll be letting' you know, Bub!"

The boys on the 1205 howl.

So far, everything's as calm as it could be, under the circumstances. In fact, it's eerily quiet, even with the guns of the U.S. Navy blazin' away at the fastest rate possible from the five-inchers of the destroyers all the way up to the 16-inch shells fired from the battleship North Carolina, God love 'er.

The beach is as still as it can be, except for where our shells are landing. Not even a peep so far from the Japs. Maybe they've already flown the coop like they done in the Aleutians. Surely they'd-a let loose by now if they was on that God-forsaken chunk of atoll over there, all covered with volcanic ash from Mount Shomanki. Wouldn't give ya a plugged nickel for the whole dang thing.

On we go; still no response. They must have bugged out. Surely nothin' could survive the battering that island's bein' given. So many palm fronds have been knocked loose that they cover the water all along the shore. The coconuts bobbing amongst them look way too much like human heads to suit me, but it seems that the day of my death for which I made out my last will and testament seems to have been postponed. The prospect of livin' through another day is mighty pleasin'. The odor of fried barf is the only problem Harper and me seem to face, that and the ever-blazin' sun which is making it stink so bad even a damn turkey vulture wouldn't come within a mile of it.

The landing ship that was next to us has taken a two-boat lead now and it looks like them fellers is gonna be eatin' coconuts and easin' under the shade of the few palm trees that remain standin' near the beach long before we get some relief from this a-cursed sun that never seems to find a cloud to hide behind.

A huge swell comes up as we're wavin' and laughin' with them fellers on the 1205, then all of a dang sudden, the bottom drops out of the ocean and our stomachs. Our LST dips so far it seems certain we're done for. I'm thrown to the deck, but up she pops like a cork out of a fancy-pants' champagne bottle on New Year's Eve.

"That won't good," Harper says, getting no argument from me as I check my arm bones.

I nod, green as a row of Carolina collards back home in Pitt County.

"Yeah, man. What a rollercoaster ride! That woulda cost ya two bits in New York City."

Harper throws out that silly laugh of his and looks to port. His head cocks back.

"Hey, Roy!" he says. "Where's the 1205?"

I grab a handhold on the rear of the tank and pull myself to my feet. Looking aport, I begin to point. "Right," I start to say, but the word "there" don't never leave my lips.

The 1205 is gone.

Not a single bullet yet fired in our direction and already the casualties have begun. Harper and me scan the crashin' waves, but no sign of the 1205—or any of them fellers we was waving at comes to sight. The eager hubbub of small-talk stops.

My God! How quickly death comes, and for no reason a'tall.

One minute them fellers was as happy as clams and a-talkin' like us; the next minute, they was deader'n a doornail. Are we next? A shiver runs through me as I ponder how I'm gonna die this day, and what it'll do to my poor mama.

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Tony Brown is an East Carolina University graduate who's won Union Writer and Art Forum contests and received honorable mentions in Writer's Digest *and* Writer's Journal. *His work has appeared in* Foliate Oak, Vapid Kitten *(UK),* Whortleberry Press, The Storyteller, Gemini, Down in the Dirt *and* Midwest Literary Review, *among others. twbrown1020@yahoo.com*

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"Without poets, without artists, men would soon weary of nature's monotony."

-- Guillaume Apollinaire

JEOPARDY

Ginger Rue

"Ginger is a mother of two," Alex Trebek would say.
"She enjoys poetry and water skiing."

The water skiing part I made up, of course—
I never tried it, even once,
But it lends a balance to my profile,
A depth I am lacking;
It hides the truth
That I am about only words and nothing more.

"'Poetry Potpourri' for 200, Alex," I say,
Chuckling at the alliteration.
"Who was Eliot?" I say
When the blue screen references Crazy Vivian;
"Who was Wordsworth?" in response
To one about a sister with unnatural erotic leanings.

I miss the one in early American,
All those Puritans tangled together from my college days.
The poor botanist to my right swoops in,
Gleefully asking, "What are 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'?"
Is, I think. But the judges let it slide.

"Contemporary Prose" is a tough one:
My bookshelves think it's not yet 1950.
The CPA to my left gets all the Cormac McCarthy and Joan Didion.

But after a sweeping comeback, in which I dominate
The category on Billy Collins,
It's time for Final Jeopardy.

I know this one.
I am finished even before the music ends.

The CPA shakes her head, having drawn a blank.
The confident botanist smiles.
Who was Hemingway?
Alex is sorry, but that is incorrect,
And the botanist's wager puts him in zeroes.
I try not to look smug,
Which I find unattractive in a contestant.

Who was John Donne?
Yes, that is correct. Ginger Rue is our new champion!

After the show, I shake hands
With the CPA, and I pat the botanist's shoulder.

Don't sweat it,
I tell him—
The bell tolled for them both.
We are all derivative.

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See bio on page 21.
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APPLES AND GABLE

Irene Latham

- after the photograph by Alfred Steiglitz

shuttered heart shingled
by expectation
envies those that dangle
their dew-dropped
freedom
to fall

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See bio on page 36.
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HONEYSUCKLE POND

Bethanne Hill
48" x 72"
Acrylic on Canvas

Bethanne Hill, painter and illustrator, is a graduate of the Alabama School of Fine Arts and Birmingham-Southern College. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama. Honeysuckle Pond is in the Alabama Artists Collection of Alabama Power Company. www.bethannehill.com

WHO ARE YOUR PEOPLE?

Robert Inman

I am driving along a narrow two-lane rural road somewhere in the South. My front-seat passenger is from another part of the country. As we pass other vehicles, the drivers, without fail, wave to us.

My passenger is perplexed. "Why are they doing that?"

I explain that they wave for one of three reasons:

1. they assume that if you're on this road in the first place, you must be from around here or know somebody who is;

2. they assume that you're lost and they sympathize;

3. they assume that you're neither lost nor from around here, but they feel compelled to play The Game.

And by that, I mean the southerner's favorite social game: WHO ARE YOUR PEOPLE? By "people," the southerner means:

1. the vast array of relatives, friends and acquaintances that make up a person's human universe;

2. all of their relatives, friends and acquaintances;

3. and anyone else that you or they may be remotely aware of, especially through gossip.

It is the southerner's primary objective in life--beyond food, shelter and football--to establish some sort of connection with other human beings. It is not enough that I meet you, shake your hand, and engage in conversation both trivial and profound. I must find out who you are. And that encompasses where you came from and who you know. In other words, WHO ARE YOUR PEOPLE? Assemble any group of southerners, especially people coming together for the first time, and you will observe this joyous game-playing in its full-blown glory.

Some of it, of course, amounts to snobbery: unless you came from the finest stock, you're not worth knowing. But for most southerners, it's quite the opposite--an attempt to reach out to another human being on the most elemental level.

Southerners will play the game almost to the point of desperation, grasping at the tiniest glimmer of a connection. Let's say, for instance, that you are from Minnesota, have never been south of Chicago until today, and don't know anyone else who has. I will gnaw at you like a dog worrying a bone until I finally establish that your great-great-grandfather fought with a Minnesota infantry brigade at the Second Battle of Bull Run and may have exchanged shots with my great-great-grandfather, who was

one of Stonewall Jackson's infantrymen. There, now. We've established connection. I know WHO YOUR PEOPLE ARE. I will not be defeated in this.

I have a friend who takes this business almost to the extreme. His hobby is going to funerals. If he is driving along and happens upon a church where a funeral is in progress, he will stop, enter, take a seat in the rear, and sit quietly through the service (even, on occasion, shedding a circumspect tear for the deceased). He will accompany the mourners to graveside for the interment. And then he will mingle with the crowd, playing WHO ARE YOUR PEOPLE? He will work like the dickens to establish some kinship or acquaintance, however remote. He's usually quick at making genuine connection in his own area, where everybody seems to know everybody else and half the folks are kin to each other. But he has wandered across the border into neighboring states and enjoyed similar results. If all else fails, he will make up something. As he departs, I can just hear one of the mourners: "Oh, you know, that's the boy that went to the Citadel with second-cousin Irene's neighbor's sister's youngest child."

When I tell people who are not from the south about my funeral-attending friend, I get odd looks and comments like, "That's truly strange." But my friend is simply the fringe expression of a basic, native southern impulse: I am prepared to like you and would be honored to be your friend, but first we must establish some basis upon which to take that leap of faith upon which all friendships depend.

Novelist Reynolds Price says that in the south, our families are our entertainment. As a lifelong southerner, Mr. Price knows that we stretch the concept of "family" to its utter limits when we play WHO ARE YOUR PEOPLE? We are all each other's people here.

And that holds true--in spades I believe--for writers. When characters in our stories bubble up from our imagination and take on a life of their own, they are OUR PEOPLE.

I won't presume to tell you how to write your stories, but I do want to tell you how I do it and what works for me – at least, so far.

I've really had to think about this over the past several weeks, since a friend who runs a theatre company asked me to lead a summer camp for high school students. It was called, "Writing for Stage and Screen." I thought it would be fun and energizing, being around bright and creative young folks, so I said yes. And then I got to thinking about it, and I panicked. He wants me to tell 'em how I do what I do, I thought to

myself. And I don't know how I do what I do. I just do it. But it was too late to back out, so I had to think long and hard about how I do what I do. I decided that what I do is, simply speaking, tell stories. And to me, all stories are about people.

That holds true no matter what form you we use to tell the story– book, short story, stage, screen, fiction, non-fiction, newspaper column, sermon, whatever. I think it also holds true for things like mathematics. Remember those problems we used to solve in our elementary math workbooks? If Tom has ten dollars and Mary has five dollars, how long will it take Mary to convince Tom to spend his ten dollars on her? Give me a fact or an equation, and I'll deal with it the best I can. Give me a story, and I'll remember it.

I once worked for an educator who gave eloquent speeches that nobody could remember once he finished. He asked me how to go about making his speeches more memorable. "Give 'em some for-instances," I said. But he was not much of a people person, and I don't think he ever got it. He's probably still giving eloquent speeches that nobody remembers.

Likewise with people who stop you and me in the grocery store and say, "I've got a terrific idea for a book." If you can't get away, they go on at great length to describe this plot idea they have. Invariably, it's mostly plot. When they finally wind down, I say, "But the important thing is not what it's about, it's who it's about." That's the thing. Who? Who are your people? At this point, they usually give me a blank look and wander off toward the turnips.

So…back to those high school students at summer camp. I spent the first day talking about story-telling in general, and putting people at the center of the stories. Let your imagination put the spark of life in a character, know as much as you can starting out about that character, and then give the character a dilemma. You've got the launching pad for a story. It's not the whole story, but it's a darn good start. Surround that central character with some other characters you're interested in, then let them bump up against each other and the dilemma and make sparks. And the story unfolds, often in ways you never suspected it would.

When I was on TV in North Carolina, I would occasionally be asked to speak to an elementary school class. I guess teachers thought that someone who was on TV and also could write was unusual, so they would ask me to talk to the kids about writing. Invariably, the teacher would pull me off to the side before class and ask, "Do you outline?" I would

answer, "No, I don't." And the teacher would say, "Don't admit that to the children."

Outlining, of course, is a good way to get children started writing. It's thought organization, and that's what writing really is, anyway. But once I got through the sixth grade, I began to think of outlining as onerous work. Just let 'er rip, I thought. And that's what I do now. Character, dilemma, and let 'er rip.

It's a pretty scary way of doing things if you're telling book-length stories like I do. You have to really believe in your characters, you have to trust 'em, and you have to go visit 'em every day. You don't have to like 'em, but you do have to believe in them and stay with them, so that once the story starts getting up its own head of steam, you can keep the momentum and hang on for the ride.

In our class, the students and I talked about starting with a central character, and then letting all of those other storytelling elements proceed from there–setting, plot, secondary characters, style, voice, all that stuff.

Voice. We get stuff in the mail all the time about this conference or that workshop or this class called "Finding Your Own Voice." Well, I don't have a voice, I have my characters' voices. I'm supposed to be transparent. If you hear me, I've failed. You're supposed to hear them. Each character's voice is unique and special. If he's a 16-year-old boy, his voice is much different from that of a 70-year-old woman. But it's his voice, or her voice, not mine. And I don't mean just when he or she speaks. The voice of the whole story is that of the central character, whether I'm writing it in first person or third person. If I'm seeing it through their eyes, I want to hear their way of expressing their "take" on things. Their voice.

What I said to my high school campers must have made sense. Their assignment for the second day was to come in with a character sketch – a paragraph or so that told us just enough about the person to get started. I picked a character at random and we began, as a group, to launch a story with that character at the center. We found out some personal details about the character, where the character lived and when. We imagined some other characters. We gave the central character a dilemma. And then the plot began to unfold under its own power. The creative juices were flowing, the sparks were flying, the room was filled with electricity. Suddenly, we had a story. There's nothing quite like the excitement we all felt. The act of creation. We were god-like.

For the rest of the week, the campers divided into groups, took their own characters, and went through the process again. They made stories, and then they turned their stories into stage plays and screenplays. But it all started with people. Their people.

I'm asked occasionally if my novels are autobiographical. "Of course," I say. I don't have any consciousness to draw from but my own. As a writer, I'm a product of all I've done, seen, heard, all the people I've met, all the places I've been, all the books I've read. I'm sure there's something of me in every character I've ever imagined, even the ones who aggravate me or embarrass me.

Sometimes, they start straight out of life, from a real person. And I'll give you an example – my grandmother, Nell Cooper, who lived in Elba. Alabama. When I was growing up, she was my best friend.

Mama Cooper was a feisty, independent soul, left with four young children when my grandfather died in the early Thirties. She raised and educated them all, using up the family treasury in the process, then supported herself in her later years as a piano teacher. She loved her extensive covey of grandchildren, but she put up with no foolishness. "Nasty stinking young'uns," she would say, "if you don't get out of my flower bed, I'm gonna pinch your heads off." We knew she wouldn't. Or would she?

Mama Cooper had a rather cavalier attitude toward time, and that is probably what allowed her to live a long and mostly happy life. Whatever age she was, she seemed to enjoy it and make peace with it.

Take for instance the great Daylight Saving Time controversy back in the Sixties. The legislature debated fiercely about whether to observe Daylight Saving Time. The Farm Bureau opposed it. A spokesman said with a straight face, "It will confuse the farm animals." A lot of folks were confused about the concept of losing or gaining an hour. But Mama Cooper had a simple solution. During the months when Daylight Saving Time was in effect, she slept an hour later every morning. During the summer, she rose at eight. During the winter, at seven. It worked for her, and she was able to concentrate her mental energies on the truly important things, such as whether to have sweet milk or buttermilk with her supper biscuits.

Mama Cooper also had an accommodating attitude about the course of human events, large and small. Whatever came along, she seemed to make a place for it in her life. And that, too is probably what enabled her to live so long. Take, for instance, the great Piggly Wiggly caper.

When I was a boy, there were two gracious older homes across the street from Mama Cooper's house on Buford Street in Elba. At the time, the community's housewives did their grocery shopping at two small mom-and-pop stores on the courthouse square several blocks away. The selection was limited and the walk downtown, especially on a blistering summer day, could be a chore.

Then, in the mid-50's, came the Piggly Wiggly. The supermarket chain announced that it would build a gleaming, modern store in Elba. Folks got excited about what they considered a hallmark of economic and cultural progress. That is, until Piggly Wiggly announced its location: right across Buford Street from Mama Cooper's house. The Piggly Wiggly folks bought those two gracious old homes, bulldozed them, and built the supermarket. Most folks in Elba viewed the matter with ambivalent alarm. Progress, yes. But not at the expense of two pieces of the town's history.

Mama Cooper had no qualms at all. She was a pragmatist, and she viewed the Piggly Wiggly as convenience, pure and simple. It was marvelous to be able to walk a hundred yards from your front door into the air-conditioned comfort of a well-stocked supermarket. Other folks, she said in so many words, should get a grip.

Piggly Wiggly, aware of the controversy, announced that the opening would be accompanied by a prize give-away. Whenever you made a purchase, you would receive a prize card. If you could match the numbers on two cards, you would win anything from a small grocery item to a $1,000 grand prize.

On one warm June morning shortly after the store opened, Mama Cooper checked her pantry and discovered that she was out of peanut butter. So she put on her hat, picked up her purse, and marched smartly to the Piggly Wiggly where she purchased one small jar of peanut butter. She got a prize card.

Late that same afternoon, Mama Cooper decided on her supper menu: a glass of buttermilk and a peanut butter and banana sandwich. But she found that she was out of bananas. So she armed herself again with hat and purse and returned to the Piggly Wiggly. She got another prize card. She compared it with the one she had received that morning, still in her purse, and calmly announced, "I've just won the grand prize."

You can imagine the commotion. Townsfolk were delighted and envious over what Elba in the mid-50's considered a huge windfall. And

the way she had won it evoked the kind of awe and wonder previously reserved for the Great Flood of '29.

Everybody asked Mama Cooper what she planned to do with the money. Members of her immediate family were especially interested. Every one of us had a great idea for helping her spend it. But to one and all, she was maddeningly noncommittal. In fact, she went to the grave years later without telling a single soul how she spent her winnings. The only purchase we noticed was when she turned up in church wearing a new red hat. There was no new roof on the house, no new car, no gift to charity that any of us knew anything about. Just the red hat.

We did know one thing she didn't spend it on. My mother, after several months of family speculation, got up the nerve to ask, "Did you pay taxes on the money?"

"Of course not," Mama Cooper shot back. "What are they going to do to an old lady? Put me in jail?"

"Well, they might," said mother.

But they never did. As far as any of us knew, the tax man never questioned Mama Cooper about her Piggly Wiggly grand prize. If he had, I imagine he would have gotten the same kind of reaction my mother did. I'm sure Mama Cooper faithfully paid taxes on her limited income. But she probably considered the prize money a gift, a reward perhaps for good behavior – something between her and the Lord and Piggly Wiggly.

Mama Cooper lived proudly alone until she was ninety-two years old, and then called my mother one day to announce that it was time to go to the nursing home. The last visit I had with her, before her death at age ninety-four, she was bedridden and barely aware--or so I thought. I sat with her through a long afternoon and held her hand. Then suddenly she turned and looked at me with absolute clarity and said, "Bobby, I've give out, but I haven't give up."

I thought that I should write a book about someone like my grandmother, and so she became the inspiration for a character named Bright Birdsong in Old Dogs and Children. Bright's biography and her story are much different from my grandmother's, but there are similar traits of character. All her life, Bright has been surrounded by powerful and famous men, but she has managed to make her own mark and leave her own legacy. She is feisty and independent. In my story, she is nearing seventy. I suspect Bright will live to be ninety-four, and at the end, she will give out, but she will not give up.

I even made use of Mama Cooper's great Piggly Wiggly caper. I gave Bright Birdsong a grand prize at the Dixie Vittles supermarket across the street from her house -- in this case, fifty thousand dollars just to liven things up. And I peopled the story with lots of other folks who want to help her spend her money.

Old Dogs and Children is a story about how a singular woman makes choices and faces consequences. She takes charge of her life and gives account of herself in the same manner my grandmother did. If you ask me how I came to know Bright Birdsong, I say that I found her in my grandmother's home in Elba. But she didn't become a real, living character until I turned her loose and let her become her own person–her own, singular woman. When I did that, and gave her a dilemma and a supporting cast, she set off on her own. I just followed along and set down what happened. She was my people, in a way quite different from what my grandmother was.

I don't have an agenda when I tell a story. I'm not trying to tell you anything, just show you the lives of some people who interest me, and maybe together, we can learn something by how they face life and their dilemmas, deal with their demons and archangels. If they become real to me, chances are they will become real to you. They will become our people.

I do believe that what we do, you and I, is important work. Stories are how we pass along our knowledge and wisdom, our history and hopes, our legends and myths. When we tell stories and put them on paper or stage or screen, we are working as preservationists. And I think that's worthwhile in a society that seems intent on dumbing-down.

Paulette is a wise and sometimes profound person. Years ago, we were in the stands at a Sugar Bowl football game in the New Orleans Superdome. Paulette looked around at that vast space, crammed to the rafters with rabid fans from Alabama and Ohio, and she said, "Centuries from now, when they dig up our civilization, they'll say this is where we worshiped." I'm afraid she's right. I'd much rather it be a library that they find.

But we don't have to feel like we're on a sacred mission to save the society. We just tell our stories, as honestly as we can, and hope we all learn something from the process and the result.

We writers struggle, and fire and fall back, and stumble on in our work, just like everybody else–thrashing around in the underbrush and

hoping to find the path. We never get it exactly right. But we keep trying because we can't not.

If there's one thing that can help our sanity–ours and everybody else's--it's the notion that we are all each other's people. And that's the way it should be.

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Novelist Robert Inman is a native of Elba, Alabama, where he began his writing career in junior high school with his hometown weekly newspaper. He left a 31-year career in television journalism in 1996 to devote full time to fiction writing and has since published four successful novels and a non-fiction collection. He has written many stage and screen plays. Inman and his wife, Paulette, live in North Carolina.

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BOTANICALS
Laura Alvord
35" x 27"
Watercolor

Laura Alvord is an art teacher in Shelby County, Alabama.

FLUTE SONG

Mary Van Antwerp

Like a bamboo shoot
I shot skyward.
Instead of growth rings,
ankle bone
and knobby knee
measured my years upward.
Poured into
hollow spaces
of my bamboo self
were myriad yearnings
that echoed
the bamboo flute's
wistful sound.
Strong roots grounded
my willful years.
Time and bruisings
toughened my bamboo shell.

Where life whittled holes
in my seasoned sides,
now the weathering wind
whistles a melody
through my soul.

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Mary Van Antwerp has been a resident of Mobile, Alabama, and the Eastern Shore of the bay for all of her ninety-three years. Photography has been her favorite creative outlet, but she also has written many poems, both serious and light. This is the first time she has submitted any of her work for publication.

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DON'T FEED THE BOY (an excerpt from the novel)
Irene Latham

"So if all that hadn't happened—" Whit couldn't bring himself to say the more specific words. "Then you never would have come to the zoo. We never would have met."

Her eyes brightened. "Mama would say 'no hay mal que por bien no venga.' It means 'good always comes from bad.' You know, like a silver lining."

He grinned. No one had ever called him a silver lining before. Until another thought crossed his mind. "Does he still have the gun?"

She nodded. "He keeps it under his chair."

Whit stood up. The room seemed to close in on him as he pictured the gun. All Phil had to do was reach down and grab it.

He paced in front of the bed, fighting the urge to flee. He didn't feel safe, but he didn't want to leave Stella.

She grabbed his arm. "So now you know. And that's why you can't complain about your parents. Because what you have is so much better than this."

Whit stared at her.

What she said was true.

And it wasn't.

Yes, it was an awful situation. Clearly Stella's family needed help. But that didn't make Whit's problems any less important. Stella telling him that he couldn't complain was like saying you can't complain when you have a sore throat because there are people in the world who have cancer.

Oh, he could complain all right. Stella didn't have the corner of the market on unhappiness. It was just different, that's all. Their situations were completely different.

"Stella, you get out of here every day. You draw birds. You do what you want." He looked from one bare wall to the next. "I'm stuck in the zoo every single day. I don't have any real friends. My parents would rather care for a Komodo dragon than me." Whit ran his hands through his hair. "And that's a reptile, you know? It's not like you can cozy up with them."

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Irene Latham is wife, mother of three, poet, novelist, speaker, teacher and blogger, not necessarily in that order. Her latest book, Don't Feed the Boy*, was published in 2012 by Roaring Brook/Macmillan. Irenelatham.com*

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FRIEND OF A FRIEND

Chris Haven

Last night, friend of a friend, I clicked your profile on Facebook. I don't know you well but I've noticed you, your name like currency and this window was open and I looked through. Your pictures, you in your wedding dress, your groom with pie plate eyeglasses and all that hair piled and waving. Every smile a ridiculous smile. Our faces figure we're every moment ready.

Your teenage children at the zoo. Their smiles ads for keeping secrets. Unlike your younger self, they know this will be seen. They know about copies and what they share. They invented this book. It runs on puff and ruthless cheer.

You at twelve. The spattering of an old sun. Arms bony, in the yellow light more than your teeth seem braced. Your friends comment how lovely. Yes. Still, friend of a friend, I doubt you think so.

You will never know me. I don't really want to touch you but I do this, see through the cracks of your life. Up close and far away and behind a screen. There is just enough of me and no more. This seems to be the world we've been given.

You wonder is this why god made eyes if this is how he sees our lives
if he sees only what we post
if this is perfect love
if he knew all along
we weren't made
for touching

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Chris Haven's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in a number of journals including Blackbird, Smartish Pace, Poet Lore, Crab Orchard Review, Slice Magazine *and* Seneca Review. *He teaches creative writing at Grand Valley State University in Michigan and edits the journal* Wake: Great Lakes Thought & Culture.

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¡VETE!

Emily Cutler

ACT I

Scene 1

A woman in her late twenties.

This is what happens with languages. I swear it always happens. I know Spanish. I don't just know the grammar and vocabulary--I know the language, the culture, the entity. I've spent three years living with its subjunctive, diminutives, its jota….I've lived three years without saying any pronouns!

Well, that's not all. There's the culture—the siestas, eating three hours later than usual, the esperar--waiting, hoping, expecting--if I may tell you a well-known secret, Spaniards never arrive on time. I swear, falling in love with a translator is not easy. Here I am, a writer, a fairly successful writer if I may say so myself, completely sure of myself, and all of a sudden when I meet the translator of my latest book, my life takes this huge turn. Can you imagine? So I spend three whole years going out with him, learning with him--his language, his culture, his…mannerisms. I spend three years getting to know this guy, really know him. And then, when he left to go back to Spain, well…he left. And me, well, I stayed.

Anyways, when I woke up this morning, I decided to forget about Spanish. Forever. I was so happy. Finally I'd be free! For once and for all, free. Free from the way Spanish reminds me of him. Free from how Spanish is his green pens, the knee-high socks he always wears under his khakis, the way he taps his fingers together when he's bored, his crooked teeth. Spanish is him. Spanish smells like the dough he makes--it tastes like him. And when I woke up this morning, I knew that today would be the day that I'd finally be free from all that.

A long pause.

But…here I am. I just can't lose it. (dramatically)

Go away, Spanish! Leave, you stupid language! You're smothering me. ¡Vete!

Pause.

See? It's what happens with languages. You just can't forget them--they…stalk you. They join the wires in your brain. Once you know one, it doesn't let you go. It stays. In your bed, in the bathroom, inside your hair. I swear. I swear, they become a part of you. I mean, Spanish is a part of

me. Sometimes I'm going to dream in Spanish and sometimes I'm going to think in it. It stays in your blood.

I guess, when I really think about it, I realize there's a reason. If Spanish really left for good, I'd miss it.

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Emily Cutler currently resides in Birmingham, Alabama. Her work has been published in literary magazines including Able Muse Review*,* Aura Literary Arts Revie*w and* Cicada Magazine. *Her short play* Going for the Laughs *was produced at Indian Springs School, and others recognized by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, the Alabama Writers' Forum and Young Playwrights, Inc. emilyscutler@gmail.com*

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THE KIDS THESE DAYS

Anoop Mishra

I opened up savings accounts at the bank for Annikah & Adesh; they came with me to meet with the representative.

Bank Rep: So how much would you like to start your account with?

Adesh: 10 billion dollars…and 75 cents please

Annikah: Actually $150 is good - but can you tell me when I get my ATM card and PIN number?

Bank Rep: Do you want the savings plan where they have to be 18 to access the money?

Me: Do you have a plan where they have to be 35? If not, 18 is fine.

Annikah: Wait, so that means I DON'T get an ATM card today?

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Anoop Mishra is Chief Operating Officer of EDPM, Inc. in Birmingham, Alabama. He and his wife, Manisha, are parents to Annikah and Adesh. They live in Homewood. mishra1@gmail.com

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LEARNING TO DRIVE

(An excerpt from *Nothing is Easy* by Linda Ann (Annie) Loring, Blue Rooster Press, 2010)

Annie Loring

After I came home from vocational rehab classes I began to think about what my Grandpa had said many years before when he told my Grandmother, "Of course she will learn to drive." I knew that task would not come easily, but I knew I had to try. Mother knew that Daddy would not approve so we did not tell him about it. Mother asked all the professionals, medical doctors, psychologists, beginning teachers and rehabilitation specialists, their opinions. None of them would give her a direct answer. We decided to give it a try anyway.

We practiced in our driveway and the Liberty Supermarket parking lot. I must have shown some promise because Mother decided to take me to AAA (Alabama Automobile Association). She told the man that I had Cerebral Palsy and that she needed an opinion as to whether to pursue this or not. I was sitting in a chair afraid to say anything and he took one look at me and asked, "Can she ride a bicycle?" Mother quickly answered, "Yes, and I have the battle scars to prove it!" The man smiled and told us I would have to learn on an automatic shift. Mother then told him I would have to practice on a straight shift. It did not seem to make any difference to him and he probably thought, “More power to them!”

The next day, Mother took me downtown to begin AAA driving lessons. I felt secure because the teacher had a brake and steering wheel on his side of the car. I knew if I got in trouble, he would be able to help me by using his controls. On the first lesson he took me on a one-way street and I drove the length of it, about two miles. I thought to myself "No problem." Toward the end of the hour the man said, "Now Ann, you are going to drive me back to the office." I thought to myself, "That could be a problem,” because it was lunch time and the traffic was heavy. I listened to him very carefully and did everything he told me to do. Safely arrived back at the AAA office I felt relieved. I had not hit anybody!

When I got in Mother's car she said, "You looked good driving but I nearly had a heart attack when I saw your Daddy drive past on the same street you were on. Daddy must have been going back to work after attending a meeting downtown.” We had a good laugh over that. She continued by saying we would practice the next morning after Daddy left for work.

I had to learn to shift the gears, feed the gas, and steer all at the same time. Talk about coordination, that really was a challenge. Mother took me to the supermarket parking lot and said, "Just make a big circle, start off easy and then slowly pick up speed." The first time I came close to the building, mother yelled, "Turn, turn, damn it, turn before we hit that building!" That was a phrase I would hear many, many times as we spent two hours a day practicing.

After six lessons with AAA and many days of practice with Mother I got my driver's license. I joyfully presented my license to Daddy one night at supper. I waited until he had his beer before I showed him the license. He looked at it and turned red, white, blue and purple and said, "Does this mean what I think it means?" I told him it did mean I had my driver's license. After thinking about it through supper, Daddy said, "Well, let me see for myself." Yes, I was nervous but I drove well; Daddy was very pleased and convinced that I would be a good driver.

I did have a restriction on my license which required that I have a knob on my steering wheel. The knob on the wheel enabled me to turn more easily than just trying to hold the thin steering wheel and turn it, because the knob could swivel. I could grab the knob with my right hand and hold on to it to turn the steering wheel without having to move my hand. The knob gave me the ability to turn either direction, particularly to the left that was still a problem for me. My family did not like the knob because they did not use it. The knob got in their way and their arms were full of bruises. The knob would hit the forearm coming back to its position after the turn was made. By using the knob all of their pain could have be prevented! Today there is no need for a knob because most cars have power steering.

Words can hardly describe how great I felt with my driver's license in hand. I could now tackle my next adventure on my own. Learning a new task is never easy for a person with disabilities because of the repetition necessary to make it stick. Remember, nothing is easy. Today I love to drive because it gives me independence and freedom.

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Born with Cerebral Palsy, Birmingham, Alabama, resident Annie Loring overrides her disability time and again, employing a ready wit and an intelligent, no-nonsense approach to life. She has a master's degree in special education and a driver's license as further proof of her successes. loringlinda@bellsouth.net

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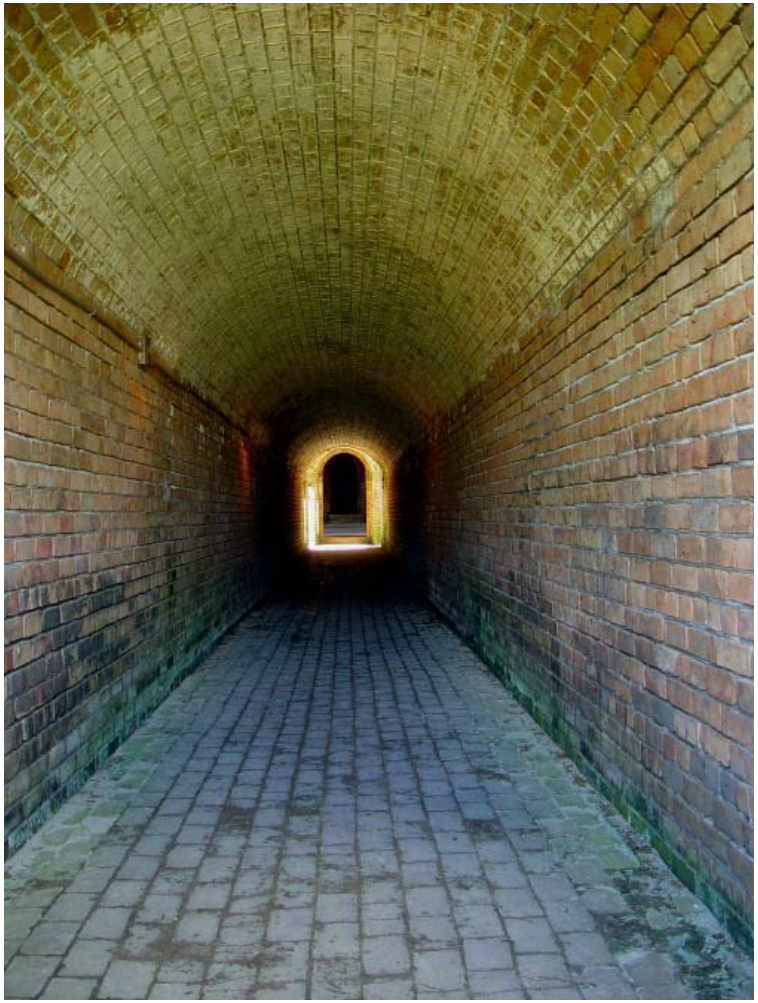

FORT MORGAN TUNNEL

Dan Deem

Digital Photograph

Indiana native and current Birmingham, Alabama, resident, Dan Deem is a self-taught photographer whose roots lie in photojournalism. His work has been displayed in such venues as The Saturday Evening Post, NBC's Today Show, *and the* Jimmy Carter Library *in Atlanta. Deem's work is well represented in many private collections throughout the U.S.*

THE LAST PEG LEG

Alan L. Samry

The first time I saw him, I was stopped at the traffic light at the crossroads of Fairhope Avenue and Section Street in Fairhope, Alabama. The man, in his early 60s, rail thin, and with a full white beard, walked towards the landmark clock. I was in a car, stopped for the red light, as he walked in front of my hood. This guy wore shorts and walked with a wooden peg leg. He walked deliberately but quickly. He glanced in my direction with steely blue eyes and I gave a nod. It was not just the sight of him passing in front of my car, but the distinct sound that peg leg made on pavement. The tapping of a baseball bat on a hard surface quickly came to mind, but the peg had a much deeper and richer ring to it. He moved very swiftly to the brick sidewalk on the corner with the clock, and I drove toward the pier. I had moved here from Cape Cod just before Hurricane Katrina in 2005, but now I began to wonder whether the time on the clock, and in this town, had stood still.

A few months later I saw him at Walgreen's. He had a steady, deliberate short-legged pace, but it was awkward because the man's frame was not centered over his legs. I suspected it was difficult to walk on tile, a smooth surface that provided no grip, with a peg that was only one or two inches in diameter, and that he was adapting with a different stride. Being the curious type, I left the store to go talk to him.

We introduced ourselves to each other. His name was Bob. We began looking at each other's below-knee prosthetic legs. They could not have looked more different. His leg was something from what I thought was a bygone era. The last time I'd seen a wooden peg leg in action was 1983. In the middle of the lot with the foot of my prosthetic leg on the bumper of his 1980s Jeep Comanche we started talking about our prosthetic legs. The conversation didn't begin with the typical "What happened?"

"What kind of set-up is that," Bob asked, looking at my prosthesis carefully.

"This is a carbon fiber post and socket with a College Park Trustep foot with a multi-axial ankle. I wear a gel liner over my stump that fits into the carbon fiber socket." My limb was attached with a neoprene suspension sleeve. His peg had no moving parts except for the strap which secured his below knee prosthesis above his knee.

"I made the peg myself," Bob said in a soft yet distinctly southern voice. The leg was smooth, not adorned with anything and the light brown wood had a clear coat of varnish or stain over it, glistening in the spring Alabama sun. The peg tapered as it extended past the calf area to the ankle. He unbuckled the strap, leaned on his truck, and doffed the peg. His stump ended just before mid-calf, and his residual leg was the shape of a normal leg. He wore two thin socks and it amazed me that he didn't have any sores on his stump after all day in a wooden boat of a socket.

Swapping details of legs reminded me of the scene from Jaws when Quint and Hooper tell shark stories, and they decide "to drink to our legs." Bob was proud of the leg he made. As a hobby, he said he was building a car from the frame up. I didn't doubt him, and in some ways I admired his know-how. I rolled down my suspension sleeve and lifted my stump from the socket.

"Despite all this new gel technology my bony stump still causes fitting problems for prosthetics." Here I was, a product of the era of machines and technology, standing on a two year old leg that cost about $10,000 that somebody else made, while in front of me stood a slightly hunched-over man in T-shirt, cutoff jeans, and paint-spattered white canvas shoes who began telling me he made his own leg and said it cost him about fifty bucks.

I'm looking for a new strap," he bragged, dropping his jaw awkwardly, "that costs less than two dollars."

A few months later, I began looking for the man with the peg leg in Fairhope. A few people referred to him as Ahab, the whale-ivory peg-legged captain in Moby Dick. At first, I thought this was an insult. Then I read Moby Dick and began craving a peg of my own. I immediately appreciated and identified with Melville's character. Ahab is a tragic hero: a mythical character that I admire. I rooted for Ahab, brooding on the deck with his peg cradled in its auger hole. His monologue to the crew in the chapter "The Quarter-Deck" was the stuff of legend. "Aye Starbuck, aye, my hearties all around," I didn't just say the lines, I felt them: my leg was "half-revolving in his pivot hole."

I was too late to interview Robert M. "Bob" Youens. He died on November 6, 2007, from diabetes complications. Bob was only 62, according to the obituary in the Fairhope Courier. He was from Chickasaw, Alabama, which is just outside of Mobile, and had served in the Navy.

The obituary said Youens was "known for his mechanical ingenuity" and even held a patent for an auto part he developed. Youens had installed hand levers between the front seats of his British car that allowed him to drive a standard shift without having to use his peg.

When I think back on our brief encounters I will always know that in a carbon fiber world, Youens chose wood. His peg leg was made of teak. He wouldn't have minded being referred to as the infamous captain of the Pequod. I can almost hear Youens say, "Call me Ahab."

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Alan Samry earned his Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Nonfiction from Spalding University. His essays have appeared in Disability Studies Quarterly, *and* Obsession, *an Online Literary Magazine. Two poems have been accepted for Issue 68 of* Kaleidoscope Magazine. *He lives in Fairhope, Alabama, with his wife Susan. asamryfhpl@gmail.com*

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AL TAFAR, IRAQ, 2004

Irene Latham

By winter the war feasted on fear:
It chewed through dusty, low-slung hills,
gobbled apricot orchards,
rubbed its ribs against scrub.
Eyes, red and searing,
it was patient,
not picky;
wanted
more.

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See bio on page 36.

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THE LAST CHRISTMAS TREE IN PINELLAS COUNTY

Liz Reed

It was the year we remodeled the house and because the contractors worked until the last possible minute, we waited until Christmas Eve to buy a tree. Not usually a problem. But the year before, merchants had over-bought, and this year, they over-compensated.

Our father fared forth in high hopes of finding the perfect tree. First he went to the lots in our hometown, then in the next town, then on down the road a piece, then nearly to the county line. He finally found a tree, at this point settling for any tree remotely shaped like Christmas. As he was paying for the last Christmas tree in Pinellas County, a distraught man came running into the nursery. With tears in his eyes, he explained he was visiting from Michigan, his little girl was three years old and this would be the first Christmas she'd remember and there wasn't a tree anywhere to be found.

"Here," Daddy said as he handed over the last Christmas tree in Pinellas County. "Merry Christmas." The grateful visitor bustled the tree into his car, shouting his gratitude and wishing Daddy, his family, the nursery worker and anyone within earshot a very happy holiday indeed.

Now what to do? Daddy turned back to the nurseryman and scratched his head. All the cut trees were gone, all the burlap-balled living trees were gone. "Well," said the nurseryman, "how about a podacarpus?" And so Daddy bought a small, green sort-of-conical-shaped tree in a ten gallon can. The can was bigger than the tree. We decorated it with one strand of lights and selected the smallest ornaments. We wrapped the can in red foil paper and set our tree in the middle of the dining room table. After Christmas, we planted the tree at 513 Scotland Street where it still grows, some 45 years later.

When I think back on all the Christmas trees in all the years, that's the tree I remember best.

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FOR THE LOVE OF RED

Anne Skalitza

I always wanted a red coat.

Not one of those puffy kinds that make a person look like a giant colored marshmallow, but the kind that are so soft--maybe a blend of cashmere and silk. The kind where I would put my hands deep into its pockets, and when I would finally walk away from him, the front panels near the hem would open in time to my hasty steps, showing a bit of upper leg.

But I didn't get a red coat. Oh, it was cashmere and silk all right, and it had wonderfully warm pockets. But instead he presented me with an oversized box that contained a white coat. Actually it was more of a winter white, he said, a broad grin on his face as he cut the tags from the sleeve. He watched (in amusement perhaps?) as I slowly put it on in front of the floor length mirror in our bedroom. I kept my face as emotionless as possible. I couldn't let him see a bit of a frown or a slightly turned down mouth. If I did, that mouth would be bloodied so fast or my eyes blackened just under the eyebrows. And then I'd be a prisoner in my own home until I healed enough to not wince when I applied opaque makeup. But then even afterwards, after the bruising was gone and before the next round, I couldn't leave. How could I leave when he'd follow me, even though I'm always so careful online. I don't post on any social networks; I only hide in the background and lurk, like a frightened tiger cub, waiting to grow up and get strong, waiting for my turn. Oh, he'd find me all right. He'd turn on his charm and get anyone to help him track down his wife whom he claims happens to be paranoid schizophrenic.

I understand most men are more careful than my husband when it comes to making their significant others submissive. At least that's what I've read. They'll twist an arm just so, leaving not a bruise or a welt or--God forbid--a broken bone that must be set. Or if they do accidently hurt their partner in life, stories are made up for the good of all. "Doc, I told her and told her not to go climbing up on the chair to reach the top cabinet! What could I do?" (Here the man would sagely shake his head and shrug.) To be fair, I also understand that women can be abusive too, but their way is more verbal usually. Or they'll do something that's psychologically intimidating. Too messy otherwise.

As I turned from the mirror to face him, my insides were screaming, "I hate this white coat! I hate you!" but I just said, "Thank you," and started unbuttoning the large red buttons. At least something was red.

"Wait." That one word wait and I froze like someone suddenly caught doing something terribly bad, something that made a person feel like their bladder was going to let go. My fingers were on the second to the top button, grasping it like a mini life preserver to save me from whatever wrong I did.

"I want to take a picture," he said, removing my hand and rebuttoning the coat. He even buttoned the very top one, the one at the neck, making it a stand-up collar that pressed against my Adam's Apple, making it hard to swallow my dread. I stood very still while he got the camera and started clicking, but the first nine photos were not right. By the time he was ready to snap the tenth, I could feel the sweat under my armpits and my face felt like the blood was boiling up a storm. I silently begged for the photo to turn out good enough for him.

"Smile more! You like that coat, right? Sure you do! Come on, babe, smile!" By this time his anger was welling up and his voice got that hard-as-stone tone to it, the kind where he's talking through gritted teeth, the kind that makes me terribly afraid. So I smiled. I smiled the biggest grin I could muster, sure that that the many pearly white caps on my teeth gleamed. Caps that covered all sins. But part of that smile was the tiger cub growing fangs that could cut deep.

"Okay! I think we have it. See? See how nice you look when you smile? Now that wasn't so difficult, right?"

I nodded and as I slowly unbuttoned the coat, the ice inside of me becoming steel and taking over my muscles and my nerves, turning me into a cunning tiger. I stopped and said, "Hon, could you please hand me that scissor? There seems to be part of a tag inside the sleeve."

My husband's mind was focused on the camera and deleting the first nine photos as he handed me the silvery-sharp scissors. One quick stab at the temple and he didn't even have time to say "What the--." He just slumped right there on the floor at my feet, but not before the iron-rich blood spurted like a dam backed up for too long, all over my front. I knew I'd traded one prison for another, but being free of him was exhilarating.

I always wanted a red coat. And I guess in a way, he finally gave it me. I noticed how the newly-dyed red flaps opened at the hem as I walked away, calling 911 from my phone.

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Anne Skalitza is a freelance writer in Spring Lake, New Jersey. She has published many short stories and essays and writes light verse when the mood strikes (usually when she has writer's block). Her blog is www.anneskal.wordpress.com

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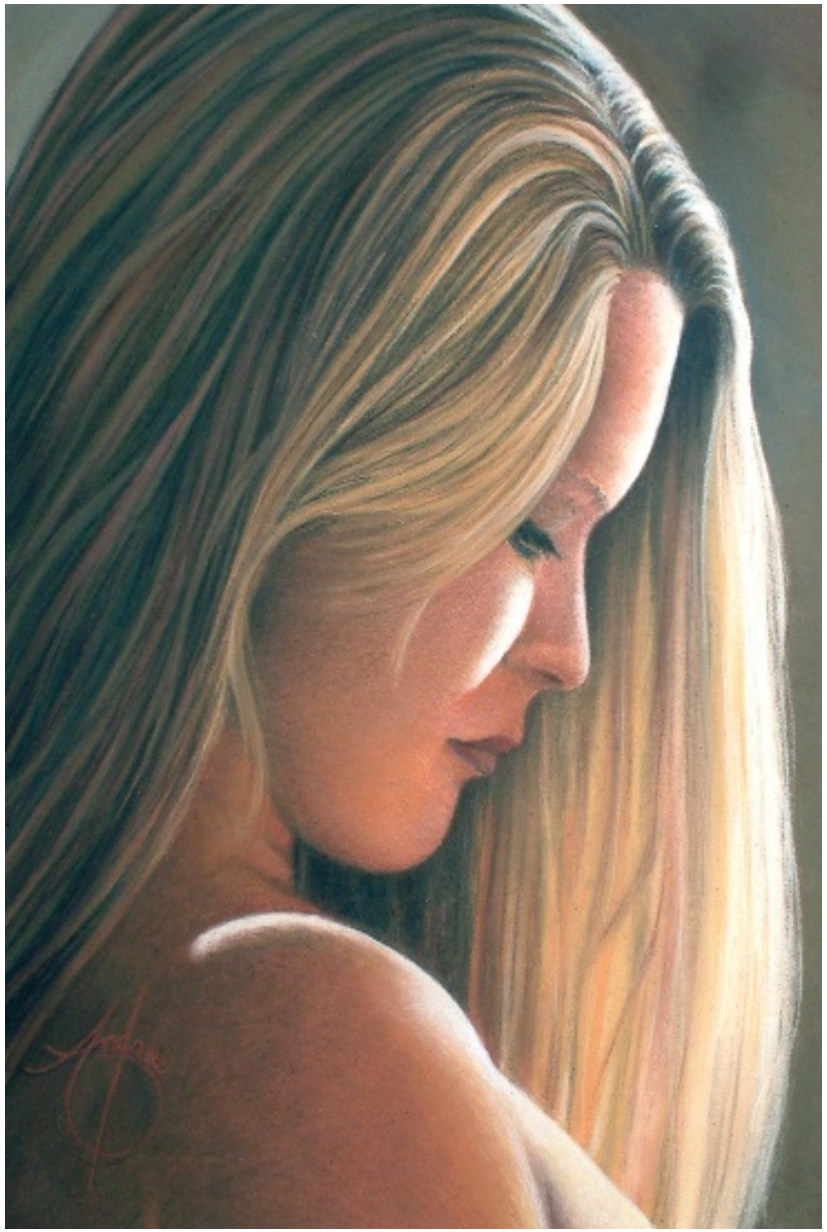

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